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Vries, Lotje De; Mangarella, Joseph

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Workshop Report: Tracing Legacies of Violence in French Equatorial Africa

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Lotje de Vries¹ and Joseph Mangarella^{2,3}

Abstract

This report offers an account of an international workshop held at the Omar Bongo University in Libreville, Gabon, from 23 November to 27 November 2018. Bringing together specialists on and from Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon, participants reflected on the ways in which different forms of violence have historically had – and continue to have – an impact on social fabrics and several dimensions of politics. The workshop also sought to relate these legacies of violence to the region's economies of extraction. The region is confronted with social and political turmoil that receives little international attention. The combination of simmering and open instability and the relatively marginal position of the region vis-à-vis the wider continent risks propelling several countries into outright political strife with regional repercussions. The debates concluded that further thinking on how violence permeates every aspect of social and political life is much needed.

Keywords

French Equatorial Africa, violence, history, instability, marginality

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¹ Sociology of Development and Change Group, Wageningen University & Research, Wageningen, The Netherlands

² African Studies Centre Leiden, Leiden, The Netherlands

³ Institut Français de Géopolitique, Université Paris 8, Paris, France

Corresponding author:

Lotje de Vries, Sociology of Development and Change Group, Wageningen University & Research, PO Box 8130, 6700EW Wageningen, The Netherlands

Email: lotje.devries@wur.nl



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The Rationale for the Workshop

The former *Afrique Equatoriale Française* (AEF) – what we have chosen to call Francophone Equatorial Africa – is perhaps the least researched region in Africa. Compared to its colonial equivalent of the *Afrique Occidentale Française*, which has enjoyed a degree of democratic consolidation, Francophone Equatorial Africa remains a bastion of autocracy and personalised regimes (Mehler, 2005–2018, 2019). Today’s former AEF has roughly 50 million inhabitants and routinely suffers underdevelopment, despite boasting a rich concentration of natural resources such as petroleum and other minerals (Gaskell et al., 2018). The region is marked by various and systemic forms of violence and civil strife, which remain largely unaddressed by political elites as well as the international community. The variety and episodic nature of this violence requires the ever-urgent need to understand and historicise its roots and its consequences on politics and society (Bayart, 1993; Birmingham and Martin, 1983, 1998; see also Cooper, 2002 for an overview of the continent since 1940). Furthermore, it raises the question as to whether these remarked forms of violence are in any way specific to the region or simply a set of geographical coincidences. Historically tracing the various forms of violence and their implications formed the core theme broached and discussed by a unique gathering of academics in Libreville from 23 November to 27 November 2018. Over the course of this pioneering workshop, entitled “The Long Term: Tracing Legacies of Violence in Francophone Equatorial Africa,” twenty-four experts on the Central African Republic (CAR), Chad, Cameroon, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon addressed this theme from the complementary perspectives of history, political science, sociology, and anthropology and reached some intriguing yet tentative conclusions which deserve to be revisited and revised with further research.

Beyond Immediacy

Large parts of former French Equatorial Africa having been confronted with seemingly perennial strife as well as with autocratic regimes that manage to outwardly project some level of stability. A few recent examples of strife include the fall out of the crisis in the CAR (Glawion and de Vries, 2018), the transnational repercussions of the Boko Haram conflict in northern Nigeria for parts of Chad and Cameroon (Thurston, 2017), the secessionist conflict in Anglophone Cameroon (Konings and Nyamnjoh, 2019), the attempted coups in Gabon (2019) and Equatorial Guinea (2018), piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, and the French bombing of armed rebels in northern Chad in February 2019. The minimal international attention that the region attracts is usually focused on *immediate* and *open* forms of violence, leaving the historical antecedents to such violent occurrences and the more covert forms of violence, inequalities, and exclusions largely unaddressed.

As an example, the *New York Times* Africa section featured 245 articles and videos in the first half of 2019, only two of which covered events in this subregion: a February 7 article on the reduction of US military aid to Cameroon due to human rights violations related to the Anglophone rebellion and a January 7 article reporting the thwarted coup

attempt in Gabon. Analyses in both reports are perhaps necessarily restricted in time and depth. At the same time, the section is dominated by follow-ups to the political crises in Sudan and South Sudan, the cyclone in Mozambique, the fate of kidnapped girls in Nigeria, Algerian unrest, ethnic violence in the DRC, Ebola in Uganda, as well as by features such as pollution in Dakar or the confiscation of skin-bleaching cosmetics in Rwanda (*The New York Times*, n.d.). While our subregion comprises 4 per cent–5 per cent of the continent's total population, it was given less than 1 per cent of the section's news coverage. Secondly, the year 2018 saw fifty-three United Nations Security Council resolutions, thirty of which related to Africa directly. Only three focused on our sub-region and dealt exclusively with the conflict in CAR (United Nations Security Council, n.d.).

In fact, historical backgrounds in studies of contemporary strife in Equatorial Africa rarely discuss regional events that predate the independence era, although the works of historians like Denis Cordell (1983, 1985), Cathérine Coquery-Vidrovitch (1993, 2017) and Jan Vansina (1990) are important exceptions. More recently, authors like Joseph Tonda (2005), Douglas Yates (1996, 2018), Florence Bernault (1996), Debos (2008) and Louisa Lombard (2016) seek to draw out the implications of a violent past for the present. The colonial power and the institutions that came in its wake – missionary institutions, unilateral demand for export commodities, trading monopolies, and security dependencies on the former metropole – left deep traces on how different forms of authority developed in the region and the ways in which people relate to its various manifestations (Davidson, 1992; Mamdani, 1996; Rodney, 1972). But others have contended that the impact of wider African colonial legacy has been overstated, whether in its ability to shape traditions, impact economic structures, or determine political trajectories (Englebert, 2000; Médard, 1991; Spear, 2003). The workshop set out to debate the precise courses and impacts of these traces through a critical review of various forms of violence that accompanied social, political, and economic developments in the region, with the aim to further a research agenda that puts these considerations at the centre of analysis.

Long before the onset of European rule, various regions of Francophone Equatorial Africa were subject to the violence of slave-raiding which destroyed or dislocated entire social-cultural communities, resulting in flight and semi-permanent mobility (Cordell, 1985). The historical trajectories in the Equatorial region have thus been marked by cataclysmic developments that traumatised societies and complicated, if not overturned, cosmologies with which communities had made sense of the world (see e.g. Bernault, 1996; Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1993). The colonial occupation, steered by duopolies of concession companies and embryonic colonial administrations, was itself characterised by outrages which led to the disintegration of village communities, the dislocation of precolonial commercial networks and political ecologies, and the onset of epidemic disease (notwithstanding significant regional variations in these effects). Missionary activities in the south(western) parts of the region fragmented extant spiritual world-views in the long run (see again for instance the work of Bernault, 1996 and Ceriana-Mayneri, 2014). This, in turn, had fundamental consequences for notions of political legitimacy, the role of violence. Set against the encompassing catastrophes that engulfed the Equatorial region 100–150 years ago, it is hard to believe that the *longue durée* of

these transformations would *not* impact this zone today. One can think here of the “politics of memory,” studied by Achille Mbembe (2001) and Meredith Terretta (2013) with respect to Cameroon and Jean Bruno Ngoufflo for eastern Oubangui-Chari (2018). The manner in which these transformations act out and the degree to which they are important in contemporary Equatorial Africa (as opposed to shorter term or contingent variables) were the subjects that the workshop participants engaged with during the debates.

The Debates: Thinking Regionally?

The aim of our workshop was to provoke thinking both regionally and over time, along the lines of the overarching theme of violence, physical, and otherwise. Perhaps predictably so, thinking regionally appeared more challenging than thinking in terms of (dis)continuities through time. Among the first elements of discussion was on what the boundaries would be of this region when – at least for the purpose of the workshop – certain francophone countries were excluded (DR Congo most importantly), while others were included that are actually not French speaking (Equatorial Guinea). As was argued in the papers by participants Stephanie Rupp, Guy-Max Moussavou, and Raymond Mayer, commonalities in the region included the broad reference to Bantu culture, the historically relative autonomy of different groups with an absence of overarching forms of governance or organisation as well as the zone of contact and communication demarcated by the Congo and Oubangui River basins and tributary systems. Rupp’s investigation of the forest community “Bangando” along Congo’s Sangha River offered a good example of how concessionary companies, forced labour, and resettlement impacted today’s entire region. Moussavou delved into the historically long, complicated, and mutually constitutive relationship that Bantu people shared with the forest “Baka” in Gabon, which has left a dynamic legacy of inclusion and exclusion.

At the same time, quite a few fault lines stand in the way of one coherent entity. In terms of geography, the divide between the forest areas (Gabon, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, and the southern parts of Cameroon and CAR) and the savannah lands further north (northern parts of Cameroon, CAR, and Chad) is important, as savannah populations enjoyed less autonomy and higher political–structural formations. Religious practices and traditions are further fault lines which course through the region (though in the precolonial past there were numerous peoples, such as the Sango, Yakoma, Ngbaka, etc. who were defined by their straddling of the two principal ecological zones – savannah and rainforest). Islam is dominant in the region’s northern areas and Christianity is struggling to get a foothold further south, where it coexists with other cosmologies and religious practices. These fault lines feed into local and national politics and run through the social fabric on a more local scale as Maixant Mebiame argued during the workshop, at times producing their own logic of violence. Lionel Ikougou-Renamy demonstrated how the ascribed powers to dead bodies is part of everyday politics, leading to theft and appropriation of bodies from graveyards in Port-Gentil (Gabon) with a surge in desecrations at times of legislative elections.

Although from the presentations it became clear that the imperial powers imposed themselves in different ways in different areas, it appeared that imperial rule was fundamentally weak and uneven and that one of the ways in which power could be imposed was through the destruction of existing social fabrics and local economic systems as was illustrated by Florence Bernault's keynote address. Enrique Martino discussed at length the despotic and arbitrary practices of labour recruiters throughout the Gulf of Guinea (Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon, and Gabon), who more often than not pursued unauthorised and violent strategies. In his paper, Enrique Okenve added that the disguise of force and the resort to violence in Equatorial Guinea were expressions of the weak imposition of power by the French and Spanish colonisers. Douglas Yates, who submitted a paper but was unable to attend, wrote extensively on contemporary journalistic coverage of concessionary abuses towards the completion of the Congo-Océan Railroad (Yates, 1996, 2018). In doing so, he revisited Albert Londres' largely overlooked *Terre d'ébène* (1929) and its critical reception, highlighting the extent of French administrative obfuscation and active support for violent labour practices. Several participants elaborated on how colonial officers created differing forms of interactions and alliances across the various resident groups, resulting in different forms of resistance and coalitions across the region. Klaas van Walraven presented a biography of Barthélémy Boganda, the CAR nationalist and founding father whose early violent experiences with colonial officers and missions left an indelible mark on his rhetoric and politics. His political style and comportment, as well as in their reception and understanding by Central Africans, reveals the continued relevance of cultural repertoires as ingrained in the religious cosmologies extant in the region in precolonial times (see also Van Walraven 2017). The notions and traditions involved may, in turn, provide insight, not in current explosions of violence but at least in the way that, locally, representations of power are formulated and understood. This in itself could be of relevance to the background of the political evolutions in the less distant past. Meredith Terretta argued that the *Union des Peuples du Cameroun* (UPC) was better characterised as a variegated group of *maquis*, each with a different structure and military capacity depending on the civil society within which each *maquis* was anchored. Tracing and comparing the lives and demises of some of the same political figures of independence in Cameroon and the CAR, Karine Ramondy demonstrated how the politics of memory is deeply politicised, oscillating between being seen as a threat to current political leaders and as a great potential for national unity.

Some of these dynamics also formed the basis of the first postcolonial states and hence similar processes of alliances and resistance emerged. Hoinathy Remadji argued that resistance to French colonial administration by Chad's Muslim north structured a postcolonial state with difficulties integrating all belief systems, often resulting in violence. In Congo, according to Héloïse Kiriakou, the French colonial utilisation of lineage systems in Brazzaville carried over to the postcolonial era to the extent that *cadets* (youth and women) formed revolutionary organisations. Maria Ketzmerick used de-colonisation petitions in Cameroon to draw a connection between France's reliance on the discourse of security and the postcolonial state's reliance on emergency measures to effect certain policies. So while it may be hard to define the region along sharp lines, it is evident that certain roots of the present-day societies, in terms of the precolonial social

fabric and the impact of colonial rule, are shared across what we broadly define as Equatorial Africa.

The Debates: Thinking Temporally?

The second axis, on the developments over time, was also source of discussion, with a focus on whether we should see developments over time through the lens of continuities or ruptures. How do precolonial roots explain today's characteristics of the social and political fabric? Should we see the anomy that characterised colonisation as a rupture and to what extent does the aftermath of this relative short period still have explanatory force in today's developments? Various presentations argued that identity formations are neither fixed by spatial boundaries nor sharply distinguishable in separate time frames. The hybridity of identity and the crossing of social and spatial boundaries are of all times. Transnational communities along the Oubangui/Ubangi River separating CAR and the DRC have persisted despite political boundaries as Catherina Wilson Janssens demonstrated, while the usage of ethnographic artefacts in the war-torn *Musée National des Arts et des Traditions Populaires "Barthélémy Boganda"* of Bangui (CAR) speak to the continually hybrid nature of national and subnational identity formation according to Andrea Ceriana-Mayneri. Yet, arguably more so than in the past, the identity formations have become part and parcel of the conflict dynamics shaping societies in the region today, feeding the fault lines that politicians and other actors maintain in order to sustain their power base. Such was the case in Cameroon, where national identity, or "*Camerounité*," has remained as elusive as it was prior to colonialism; the more recent violent confrontations between Anglophone separatists and the Francophone-dominated regime are only one expression of several persistent fissures, as Djanabou Bakary demonstrated. Andreas Mehler made a compelling argument for how international conflict management has failed to overcome entrenched regional crises since the onset of independence, making additional reference to the particular ineffectiveness of sub-regional organisations compared to their West African counterparts. As Sylvain Batianga-Kinzi showed, the recent crisis in the CAR and its regional repercussions is just the most recent example. Paradoxically, part of what unites the region are its disunities over time.

Another continuity that can be observed over time and across the region is the concessionary nature of economic exploitation and the precarity of the workforce. While large parts of the national economies operate in the realm of the informal, the state is the most important employer. Nonetheless, the position of a salaried worker comes with certain insecurities and difficulties, if only because entire extended families often depend on the modest salary of one or two individuals, or because public institutions lag behind their more developed counterparts in paying the salaries in the first place, as Dimitri Ndombi and Mike Moukoula Ndoumou demonstrated with respect to Gabon. In addition to the public domain, few sectors keep the economies of the region going. The exploitation of natural resources through the system of concessions to mostly European companies has always been an important foundation of the colonial enterprise. Essentially, this system remained intact after independence, with the difference that oil and

other primary commodities were discovered only in the decades after. As Joseph Mangarella argued for Gabon's oil communities, the company-state duopoly became legitimated over time at the expense of the ability of more recent local assemblies to build capacity and earn local trust (see Mangarella, 2019). The exploitation of oil also feeds into the regional power balance, its geopolitical clout, and the way in which the financial windfalls are used to benefit the powers in place, which Andrea Behrends demonstrated with the case of Chad. This has become very clear in moments of crisis, like for instance in the CAR (or perhaps the entire Sahelian region), which offered Chad the opportunity to exploit its new strategic position to the advantage of its interest in containing the crisis in a particular – and perhaps instrumental – fashion.

Bringing the Debate Further

Upon revisiting the workshop's aim of reflecting on the place of violence in this broad historical and regional context, several observations can be made. To begin, different forms of violence appear in the mundane. Everyday life, both in the world of the living and in the worlds of the dead, is characterised by a variety of forms of violence. The region's legacy of slave raiding, concession companies, and absent authorities often gave auxiliary powers – who were frequently despotic and arbitrary in their dealings with locals – free reign (see also Cordell, 1985). Although this was certainly a theme in much of colonial Africa, sparse and autonomous populations in heavily forested areas throughout the former AEF had particular difficulties mounting widespread, organised resistance to exploitation and violence (e.g. the limits of the UPC's success in Cameroon, fragmented opposition to concessionary regimes in Gabon and Congo, etc.).

Also, throughout much of the region, it appears that centralised governance has remained legitimate over time, along with the use of force by legitimised and central bureaucrats. Styles of political comportment often betray, at a deeper level, notions of force and power that may stem for the precolonial past but that have not disappeared abruptly. It would be interesting to investigate whether and how styles of political comportment among Central African leaders (from politicians to warlords) are fed by older (unhelpfully called “precolonial”) notions of power, cunning, and legitimacy. Naturally, one must guard against essentialist traps; societies and cultures are not unchanging or organic wholes. But further research in political anthropology could clarify whether there is, in this sense, an enduring *longue durée* in the representations of violence and power (see e.g. Ramondy, 2018). It remains our contention, however, that the continuity of leadership style and widespread repression may be more easily established from colonial times onward.

As most countries in the former AEF are extractive economies, power resides mainly in the capital and less so in urban centres. It appears that this has led to state absenteeism with respect to many peripheral regions, which helps to explain several region-wide particularities. First, state absenteeism exacerbated identity and religious practice as forms of political contestation and resistance (such as the intermingling between witchcraft and politics throughout the region). Second, as the government and its administration were, and continue to be, nerve centres for access to power and wealth,

both peripheral regions and marginalised groups have faced socioeconomic exploitation and a host of structural inequalities. While this dynamic has led to more direct forms of political contestation elsewhere on the continent, regional demographics (e.g. low population density) and a legacy of weak state-society links (for an interesting study of mediatic election coverage, see Frère, 2011) have led to mistrust and anomy (Lombard, 2016), although popular political contestations have been on the rise in recent years (Glawion, 2018).

Often the everyday forms of violence feed into the broader dynamics of relations between elites and the governed, though not always benefiting the elites (De Vries and Mehler, 2019). Here we see both the physical forms of harm and the violence of oppression, which are more often than not exercised during legislative and presidential elections (see e.g. Tull and Simons, 2017). Access to the regime and control of state apparatuses often leads to personal wealth, which leaders defend with co-optation, symbolism, and physical violence. Regardless of the exact type of violence that is exercised, auxiliary forces are often needed to conduct and maintain the system of exploitation and/or oppression. Under the colonial regimes, one could think of social groups that were privileged over others and took on the role of auxiliaries, such as the *tirailleurs (Sénégalais)* or *traitants* working for concessionaires. In the present day, auxiliaries that exercise different forms of violence vary from rebel groups to national security services, foreign armed services, or even international companies.

Ultimately, the social dynamics and the linkages with power dynamics differ throughout the region. The forms of social organisation and governance, the nature of the economies, the legacies of conflict or the absence thereof, and the place of the different countries in the regional context mainly point towards a large variation. This might well explain why the region never really established itself as a regional block vis-à-vis other blocks on the continent. The unifying characteristics and demographics of the region – dualism, despotism, neglected peripheries, and fluid identities – have resulted in diverging political and social trajectories of the different states. But what rings through in most papers on the region, whether from the past or from the present, is a sense of loss: the loss of land, social organisation, autonomy, memory, and ultimately control. The sense of loss should not be mistaken for the absence of agency, however. Instead, people incorporated and adapted to the elements of disintegration that characterised societies and continue to do so today. It is under conditions of incessant transformation that mundane, symbolic, and structural forms of violence continue to form an important part of social and political life in Equatorial Africa.

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Author biographies

Lotje de Vries is an Assistant Professor at the Sociology of Development and Change Group of Wageningen University in the Netherlands. Her research examines the relationships between citizens and different forms of authority, looking mostly into dynamics of security and insecurity in areas at social and (geo-) political margins.

Joseph Mangarella will defend his PhD dissertation (ASC Leiden and University of Paris 8) at Leiden University on September 11, 2019. Since 2014, he has studied the extractive communities of Gamba (Gabon) and Takoradi (Ghana), while contributing regularly on Equatorial Guinea to Brill's Africa Yearbook.

Workshopbericht: Das Erbe der Gewalt in Französisch-Äquatorialafrika

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Bericht fasst die Ergebnisse eines internationalen Workshops zusammen, der vom 23. bis 27. November 2018 an der Omar Bongo University in Libreville, Gabun, stattfand. Fachleute, die zu der Region forschen, und aus Kamerun, der Zentralafrikanischen Republik, dem Tschad, dem Kongo, Äquatorialguinea und Gabun kamen, diskutierten, wie unterschiedliche Formen von Gewalt soziale Strukturen sowie verschiedene Dimensionen der Politik beeinflusst haben und weiterhin beeinflussen. Der Workshop hat dieses Erbe der Gewalt auch im Kontext der Ressourcenökonomien in der Region betrachtet. Französisch-Äquatorialafrika ist mit sozialen und politischen Unruhen konfrontiert, die international wenig Beachtung finden. Die Kombination aus brodelnden Unruhen und offener Instabilität sowie der marginalisierten Position der Region gegenüber dem afrikanischen Kontinent birgt die Gefahr, offen ausgetragene Konflikte weiter zu forcieren, die auf die gesamte Region ausstrahlen können. Die Diskussionen auf dem Workshop zeigten, dass weitere Forschung zum Einfluss von Gewalt auf alle Aspekte sozialen und politischen Lebens in der Region dringend notwendig ist.

Schlagwörter

Französisch-Äquatorialafrika, Gewalt, Geschichte, Instabilität, Marginalisierung