

**Africa: Diversity and Development**

**‘Bumuntu’ memory in an Hobbesian world**

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**ABSTRACT:**

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is a nation seemingly plagued by violence. Common to situations of protracted conflict, a dominant narrative has emerged of the DRC as an ‘Hobbesian chaos.’ Further bolstered by the tenacity of colonial imagery of the ‘savagery’ and ‘inherent violence’ of the Congolese peoples, this narrative has given credence to fundamentally flawed understandings of violence and thus approaches to peace-building. This paper seeks to provide a counter-narrative, instead drawing attention to the existence of local sapiential resources which promote peaceful and harmonious societies. It will focus on the case study of one aspect of ‘cultural peace’<sup>1</sup> the ‘Bumuntu’ (authentic humanity) paradigm and its application amongst the Luba peoples of Katanga, DRC. This paradigm, which is shared across many ethnic groups (under varying names such as Ubuntu, Gimuntu, Bomoto) gives voice to an African vision of genuine humanity in which to be human is to recognize the sacredness and inviolable dignity of human beings.<sup>2</sup> This paper will present the preliminary findings of research conducted in Kamina, DRC. Specifically drawing from proverbs as well as preliminary interviews, this paper will argue

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<sup>1</sup> I refer here to Galtung (1990) definition of ‘cultural peace’ as those aspects of culture that can serve to justify and legitimize peace.

<sup>2</sup> Nkulu N'Sengha (2011)

that concepts of peace and humanness from the Congolese cultural context offer important alternate pathways for understanding violence and thus peace-building.

## INTRODUCTION

A young combatant is perched atop a high branch, witness to the killing of two of his comrades that is occurring below. With trembling hands, he aims and fires. He has successfully killed his first victim. Cautiously he descends from his high perch of safety and kneels before the body of his newly deceased adversary. From his pocket he withdraws a chunk of white cassava, dips it in the freshly spilt blood, and consumes it. He feels a surge of power run through him.

This is a scene from the DRC. A scene which at first glance is not difficult to align with an already powerful narrative surrounding the nation. A nation which, for over a century, has been branded in the imaginings of the globe as a primordial 'heart of darkness' out of which 'savagery' and 'barbarity' regularly emerge. In recent decades, this narrative has flourished through reports which provide a litany of horrors, of 'unimaginable', 'insanely savage,' and 'insensate' violence.<sup>3</sup> These reports tell the story of the Congo wars of the 1990s and the ongoing conflicts that have continued to smoulder in their aftermath. Common to situations of protracted conflict, this narrative presents the DRC as an 'Hobbesian chaos,' where a senseless war of 'all-against-all' reigns. A narrative, which has been criticized for giving credence to fundamentally flawed understandings of violence and thus approaches to peace-building.<sup>4</sup> As is always the case, however, alternate narratives exist, contradicting and contesting dominant ones, and in doing so inducing deeper curiosities.<sup>5</sup>

The above tale of the young soldier with the cassava in his pocket may well be one. It is told to me by a friend, who shared a prison cell with this young combatant<sup>6</sup>. After the initial

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<sup>3</sup> These terms are taken from a press conference statement of Lewis (2007) calling for a new UN initiative to end sexual violence in eastern DRC. See also Baaz and Stern (2008) and Chiwengo (2008) for accounts of representations of violence in the news.

<sup>4</sup> Autesserre (2009; 2010; 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Some good examples of this are: Autesserre (2010); Baaz and Stern (2008); Beneduce, Jourdan, Raeymaekers, and Vlassenroot (2006)

<sup>6</sup> The details of this encounter will be published in Mwamba, C.A (forthcoming) *Tête pas plus haute que la mienne: Le Syndrome Kabila. Un crime « U » pollueur!*

imagery conjured up by the tale of a blood thirsty combatant, I am given another woven narrative. A complex and layered collection of symbols and meanings. The white cassava is likened to his innocence and purity of motive. The blood of another human being taken internally, an acknowledgement of their shared humanity, albeit within a war context which necessitated the act of killing. The 'chasing away' of the spirit of the victim (and future victims) who otherwise, in vengeance, may have remained to plague and derange their killer. The surge of power, the addition of another human beings life force. It is a tale in which layers of seemingly conflictual meanings seem to be caught up in the one act, of power and protection on one hand, and reparation and atonement on the other. As a third hand account, with multiple points of interpretation, it is difficult to draw conclusions. However the importance of this tale, is not in its accuracy as a truth and importantly I add, not in its ability to justify various acts of violence. Its importance is in its potential to induce curiosity regarding those human moments in amongst the chaos of war, through which we are able to think more deeply about the causes of human violence and the possibilities for peace.

It is this curiosity which drives the doctoral research project that is the basis of this paper. I am interested in the way in which depictions of humanness influence our understandings of violence and thus approaches to peace-building. Drawing from local sapiential resources, I take a specific interest in the 'Bumuntu' (authentic humanity) paradigm and its application amongst the Luba peoples of the Katanga region. In this paper, I will take the 'Hobbesian' narrative, at least the popular interpretation of it, to elucidate a particular view of humanity and our relation to violence that has a continuity with the Congo in terms of contemporary violence. I will then turn towards an alternative narrative from the Luba perspective.

Drawing from preliminary findings from research undertaken in Kamina, the capital of the Haut Lomami region of Katanga, I will introduce this notion of 'authentic humanness' and present some beginning explorations of its relation to violence and peace. In line with the voices of a growing number of Congolese scholars,<sup>7</sup> I suggest that the 'Bumuntu' paradigm

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<sup>7</sup> Nkulu N'Sengha (2002); Yanga (2006); Muyingi (2013)

may provide a rich resource to assist in paving the pathway to a sustainable peace in the DRC.

## AN HOBBIAN WORLD: HUMANNES AND THE ROOTS OF VIOLENCE

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*Hereby it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war, as is of every man, against every man.*

*Thomas Hobbes – Leviathan (1651)*

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It has been argued that there has been a rather pessimistic trend in the history of Western thought. Attesting to this one can find, even in the absence of its original theological framework of 'original sin', the notion that human beings have a natural inclination towards, amongst other things, self-interest, competition, and ultimately human destructiveness, manifesting itself in varying forms in our understandings of violence.<sup>8</sup> According to De Zulueta, this pessimism has ultimately reduced both our curiosity in exploring the roots of violence and our creativity in responding to violence.<sup>9</sup>

In this paper I turn to the British philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who one could argue has come to be known as one of the quintessential examples of this trend of Western thought. While Hobbes himself may be the victim here of misrepresentation<sup>10</sup>, I refer here to the popular reading of his work which presents a vision of the state of nature as a state of anarchy with "every man, against every man."<sup>11</sup> The cause of this state, the three essential functions of competition, diffidence and glory, which are intrinsic to humans. The only

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<sup>8</sup> See De Zulueta (2006) for an account of the legacy of Augustinian doctrine of original sin in the study of human violence.

<sup>9</sup> De Zulueta (2006)

<sup>10</sup> Examples of literature that seek to rectify this image of Hobbes as the 'great maligner of human nature' include: Abizadeh (2011) and Voisset-Veysseyre (2010)

<sup>11</sup> Hobbes (1651) Leviathan is his most renowned work and Chapter XIII "On the Natural Condition of Mankind as Concerning Their Felicity and Misery" sets out this vision of the 'state of nature.'

remedy, that all citizens submit to an absolute sovereign to rule over them and maintain order and thus peace. The theme presented here of a chaotic and anarchical natural state of being transformed through order into a more civilized state of being should not be foreign to most readers. It is of course embodied in the “well known evolutionary hallucination” of world history which classified beings and societies according to their position on an ascending path from savagery to commercial societies.<sup>12</sup>

Whilst contemporary understandings of violence and approaches to peace-building are certainly complex and multi-dimensional, deriving their form and function from diverse ideological traditions and movements, it is not difficult to find traces of this Hobbesian vision still present. A compelling case for this emerges when we turn our vision towards the Democratic Republic of Congo.

#### THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO: A HOME FOR HOBBS

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*“Hobbes would have been right at home.”<sup>13</sup>*

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The Democratic Republic of Congo is a nation which has held a special place in the global imagination when it comes to pessimistic views of ‘humanness.’<sup>14</sup> The field of peace-building, it seems, is not immune to these views. Examining the international peace-building effort during Congo’s transition from ‘war to peace’ (2003-2006), Autesserre highlights a widespread view amongst international actors that Congolese were ‘inherently’ violent and that the ongoing violence in the east of the country was not seen as evidence that war was

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<sup>12</sup> Mudimbe (1988) p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Words of a Western Diplomat commenting on parts of the DRC cited by Autesserre (2010) p. 69

<sup>14</sup> It is, after all, at the centre of the ‘dark continent’ whose people were thought to be afflicted by more than one biblical curse from Genesis. The argument of a curse on Africans was based on Gen 9:20-27 of the Bible which described how Noah cursed Canaan due to his father Ham’s transgression in seeing Noah’s nakedness. The belief that Africans were the descendents of Canaan, hence blackened by their sins, became common during the slave trades of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries to justify slavery. A song from a schoolbook of the Belgian Congo from 1911 says “Cursed by our Father Noah, Look at us, all the Blacks of this oppressed country because of his (Ham’s) terrible insult.” See: Vinck (1998)

continuing, but instead was viewed as a 'normal' state even in a peaceful Congo. When discussing the Congolese conflict, she says, "they often analyzed the conflict and the peace process in Hobbesian terms. These recurring tropes portrayed the Congolese as irrational savages and constructed their actions as senseless and utterly foreign to civilized Western minds."<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps there is indeed something familiar about Hobbes notion of individuals in relentless competition, who naturally 'endeavour to destroy or subdue one another,'<sup>16</sup> in the context of a nation, which, during the dictatorship of President Mobutu Sese Soko, had in its constitution, at least in popular imagination, an additional article (article 15) *Debrouillez-vous* (Fend for yourself).<sup>17</sup> However, could this possibly be seen as a 'normal' state even in a peaceful Congo?

With a dominant narrative arising that decentralized violence was the natural result of state failure, international actors were able to justify the preclusion of action to address local conflicts and endorsed the focus almost exclusively on interventions at the national and regional level, an approach which according to Autesserre's analysis was the fundamental flaw of the peace-building effort. Worse still, she argues that international efforts exacerbated the problems they aimed to combat – for example through state reconstruction programs that boosted the capacity of an authoritative regime to oppress its population.<sup>18</sup>

If, as has been suggested, our vision of humanness impacts how we understand and respond to violence, how might local cultures visions of humanness differ? And what implications might this hold for peacebuilding? In order to shift to a different narrative, I turn now to Kamina, a city located in the Haut-Lomami district of the Katanga province. It is here that I have begun exploring the vision of peace as expressed through the 'Bumuntu'

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<sup>15</sup> Autesserre (2009) p. 264

<sup>16</sup> Hobbes (1651)

<sup>17</sup> The way in which this concept of 'Debrouillez-Vous' has entered into Congolese national identity and become somewhat of a *Habitus* is explored in Beneduce et al. (2006); Jourdan (2004). For exploration of a similar term 'Kobeta Libanga' see: Bilakila (2004).

<sup>18</sup> Autesserre (2012) p. 4

(authentic humanity) paradigm of the Luba tradition. What follows are some beginning explorations, drawing from conversations with academics, traditional leaders, a diviner and village communities during a preliminary field trip undertaken earlier in Kamina this year. This narrative begins with a greeting.

#### 'BUMUNTU' MEMORY IN KAMINA, KATANGA

On arrival in Kamina, I am greeted with 'Wako wako wako wako wako wako....,' a greeting which depending on the enthusiasm of the greeter can extend for quite a lengthy period of time. A variation of 'Wakomapo,' this greeting translates loosely as 'May you be filled with vital life force.' In response to this, a male will reply 'Eyo Vidje,' and a female 'Eyo Mwa,'<sup>19</sup> both loosely translating as 'yes, divine spirit,' a response which is essentially recognizing the divine in the other. This is the Kiluba language of the Baluba peoples of Katanga. This greeting may well be my first introduction to 'Bumuntu' memory in Kamina.

The 'Bumuntu' (authentic humanity) paradigm, as I refer to here is the Luba equivalent, of the more commonly known 'Ubuntu.' Notoriously difficult to define, it is perhaps best known as one of the core foundations of the South African Truth and Reconciliation process and is perhaps best encapsulated by the often quoted statement, from Archbishop Desmond Tutu "my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours." Shared across many peoples throughout Africa (under varying names such as Ubuntu, Gimuntu, Bomoto and Bumuntu), this paradigm, according to Nkulu N'Sengha, gives voice to an African vision of genuine humanity in which to be human is to recognize the sacredness and inviolable dignity of other human beings.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly the task of being human is ultimately a social task, and the interconnectedness and interdependence of human beings is our defining characteristics, put simply 'I am because we are.'

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<sup>19</sup> In fact here I am told 'Mwa' is said to reference 'Mwadi' a woman who possessed the divine capacity to hold the spirit of a deceased King, and thus likened to a 'divine spirit'. See Nooter Roberts (2013) for an account of the 'Mwadi.'

<sup>20</sup> Nkulu N'Sengha (2011)



It should be noted that the reference to 'Bumuntu' memory here, reveals something about the place that this paradigm is seen to have in the present. I borrow this term from Nkulu N'Sengha who has written about the loss of 'Bumuntu' memory.<sup>21</sup> It is clear from my brief time in Kamina, that it is both a living memory and a threatened memory.

### I MUNTU (HE IS HUMAN)

To understand 'humanness' from the Luba perspective is then to understand that "Muntu I Kipangwa kya Vidye" (a human being is a divine creature) and in this sense reflects, to a greater or lesser degree, its creator 'Shakapanga' (Father of Creation or God). As Nkulu N'Sengha writes, according to Luba cosmology, every human being exists between: Muntu (the category of human beings, good morality and intelligence) and Kintu (the category of things, bad morality and stupidity).<sup>22</sup> Becoming Muntu (a human being), in contrast to Kintu (a thing), is thus a project to be fulfilled by each individual and this 'becoming' is very much grounded in the way one conducts themselves in this world in relation to others (Mwikadilo Muyampe – A good way of being in the world).<sup>23</sup> In the same way, a human being has the potential to lose his humanness and shift to the category of things again through ones behaviour to others.<sup>24</sup> When one hears therefore the common statement amongst the Balubakat 'I Muntu' (He/She is a human being), rather than a simple case of biological labelling, it is in fact a testament that he/she is an 'authentic human being.'

### KUDJA TALALA IKWABANA BIYA (TO EAT IN PEACE, SHARE WELL)

The emphasis on the relational thus becomes the central quality of 'authentic humanness' and is expressed through countless proverbs which emphasize the importance of this in the

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<sup>21</sup> Nkulu N'Sengha (2011)

<sup>22</sup> Nkulu N'Sengha (2011) p. 307. It is noted that this reduction of the 'human being' to a position between two binary opposites may be somewhat reductionist and potentially refers only to the material level rather than the entire Luba cosmological sphere.

<sup>23</sup> Nkulu N'Sengha (2011) p. 309

<sup>24</sup> Nkulu N'Sengha (2011)

Luba world-view. The often invoked proverb 'Kudja talala ikwabana biya' (to eat in peace, share well), is one such proverb which is regularly referred to in Kamina. Translating this to practice, I am told by a group of notables of the, still standing, Luba royal dynasty, that to recognize the future Mulopwe (King) amongst the King's descendants, one must observe the way these children eat together. "One is not selfish, one is just reserved and pays attention to the needs of others."

#### NOUS SOMMES UN PEUPLES GUERRIER MAIS PAS VIOLENT (WE ARE A WARRIOR PEOPLES BUT NOT A VIOLENT PEOPLES)

How then is violence justified within such a paradigm? I am told the story of one of the local Mai Mai militia leaders<sup>25</sup> who during the war had started killing innocent civilians and even eating their flesh. Such abhorrent behaviours, it seems, had in turn enraged the ancestors who had withdrawn the power of this leader and had instead transferred it to a 'small child' who now leads this local Mai Mai. This story was used to elucidate the notion that "*Nous sommes un peuple guerrier mais pas un peuple violent*" (we are a warrior peoples, but not a violent peoples), presented to me by one Mulubakat and then echoed in numerous conversations. This is to say, while war and violence has been a significant feature of Luba history, Luba culture had and still has its own mechanisms for regulating and reducing the incidences of violence and, as with all cultures, for condoning and condemning different forms of violence. Certainly the ancestors, in this case, had initially condoned the violence perpetrated by this Mai Mai leader, presumable when it was for the protection and defence of the people.

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<sup>25</sup> The term Mai Mai refers to a cluster of militia groups. Although not unified, they do share common characteristics that conceptually organize them under the one umbrella. The two main features being their nationalist ideals as a defence movement and secondly a set of war rituals involving a specially treated water (Mai-Mai literally translating as Water-Water) which results in the invulnerability of combatants. See: Jourdan (2011).

The 'supernatural' backdrop and the use of war rituals for power and invincibility, alluded to in both the opening tale of the combatant with the cassava and this Mai Mai leader, are well known within the context of conflict in the DRC.<sup>26</sup> However, amongst my interlocutors, power and invincibility, either granted by the ancestors or through the use of rituals, seemed to be intrinsically tied to the conduct of a combatant and the respect of various rules. While in some cases these rules seem entirely based on beliefs regarding power, as for example the interdiction against eating food prepared by a woman during her menstrual cycle. In other cases, rules seem to be based also on notions of 'ethics' or a 'just war,' as for example the interdiction against any form of theft, or taking by force, a rule which I am told naturally includes an interdiction against the rape of women.<sup>27</sup> The desertion of such rules, from this perspective, was emphasized to me as being the behaviour of those who "no longer respect the will of the ancestors." Furthermore, within these conversations, the use of war rituals also involved the demarcation of spaces and contexts in which violence was permissible and those in which peace and social harmony, or perhaps one could say the principles of 'Bumuntu' must be maintained. Rituals, for example, which are performed prior to a combatant participating in war, involve the ritual rebirth of that combatant, who must be reborn a "new creature". Whilst one framing of this rebirth clearly relates to the purposes of gaining power and invincibility, another framing may also relate to the belief that the taking of human life is far from a 'normal' human activity. Supporting this view, on return from a war, a combatant must be ritually cleansed through the 'kujukola'. Without this, a combatant poses an enormous risk to the community, as the violence of what might be called the 'bush space' may be imported back into the peace of the 'village space.'<sup>28</sup> This notion of the demarcation of spaces is particularly interesting in the context of a region in which local Mai Mai, which began as popular defence movements, turned 'rogue' becoming predators of the

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<sup>26</sup> Jourdan (2011)

<sup>27</sup> Both of these examples are rules of the 'kisaba,' which is said to make combatants invincible. I am told this story by a local diviner who during the war performed these rituals for soldiers in the national army.

<sup>28</sup> These terms of 'bush space' and 'peace space' are drawn from personal communication with Mwamba, C.A

local populations whom they initially sought to protect.<sup>29</sup> Here violence, it could be said, ordinarily the exception, becomes the permanent state of affairs, and so one imagines an expanding 'bush' space imposing on a 'village' space which is continually being squeezed into a tighter and tighter space.

#### 'BUMUNTU' MEMORY AND PEACE IN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

In light of these beginning explorations, I suggest that while there may be a sense of familiarity with Hobbes vision of a 'state of nature,' there is also something wholly alien about Hobbes vision when looking at the values and beliefs that have framed Congolese cultures over a much longer time span. There are two important opportunities in this recognition:

Firstly, the fact that 'Bumuntu' memory still lives, can be seen as a vital resource for peace:

By rejecting 'dehumanizing' narratives of violence, peace-building becomes a possible project of the growth and extension of cultures of peace rather than an impossible project of ordering and controlling cultures of violence. The 'Bumuntu' paradigm's emphasis on human dignity hold particularly rich potential in rejecting a narrowly defined 'negative peace' and instead calling for holistic and integrative peace which acknowledges and addresses the multitude of layers of violence that exist in the DRC and that contribute to ongoing 'cycles of violence.' Such layers include epistemic violence, structural violence, gender violence, patterns of dependence and paternalism, and global injustice and the ongoing exploitation of the rich natural resources of the Congo.

Secondly, the fact that 'Bumuntu' memory is seen to be perishing, can help to induce a deeper curiosity regarding deeper causes of contemporary expressions of violence:

The Hobbesian 'state of nature,' is after all better understood as a particular point in time emanating from a multitude of socio-cultural, historical, economic and political factors.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> For reports on Mai Mai activity in the Katanga region see: Brown (2014); International Crisis Group (2006)

<sup>30</sup> After all, Hobbes himself lived through a period of intense chaos and devastation

Following Yanga's argument,<sup>31</sup> I have suggested the need for a deeper scrutiny of these factors in the context of the DRC and their role in the weakening of 'Bumuntu' memory and other such local mechanisms for peace. In light of the growing field of human dignity and humiliation studies, which has forefronted the 'diminishment of human dignity' and its central role in acts of violence,<sup>32</sup> I have further argued that the 'Bumuntu' paradigm may act as an important lens for a diachronic analysis of post-colonial violence in DRC.

## CONCLUSION

As I come to conclude this paper, I would like to return to the aforementioned unnamed combatant with the cassava in his pocket. I am drawn to this tale as it appears to be able to simultaneously hold seemingly conflicting messages and in this sense is able to "refuse any identity, to outwit any easy identification, to mistrust assignments in order to cross like a melody."<sup>33</sup> The choice then is ours. Do we focus on the gun, or on the trembling hands that hold it? Do we focus on the red of the blood or the white of the cassava? Do we focus on the desire for power and protection or the desire for reparation and atonement? Or do we simply hold it all and by doing so allow the movement that naturally occurs from the dynamism of complexity to transcend over a century of depictions of the 'heart of darkness.' The more we can allow space for this movement, the more possible is a fertile change.

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<sup>31</sup> Yanga (2010)

<sup>32</sup> Lindner (2006)

<sup>33</sup> A quote from Bisanswa (2010) on the 'true' nature of African memory.

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