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The structuration of armed mobilisation in eastern DRC's Kahuzi-Biega National Park

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March 2022

Acknowledgements

Fergus Simpson's PhD is funded by the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO). The research on which this discussion paper is based was funded by a grant from VLIR-UOS [Joint Project number 7957]. We would like to thank professor Kristof Titeca and Dr Catherine Windey for their support at various parts of the research process. Thank you also to the administrative team at ISDR and IOB for supporting the implementation of the fieldwork.

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Abstract

This discussion paper contributes to ongoing debates over militarised conservation and armed mobilisation surrounding protected areas situated in violent environments. Presenting evidence from war-torn eastern Democratic Republic of Congo's Kahuzi-Biega National Park, it shows how fortress conservation and its militarised enforcement have no doubt contributed to at least one major incident of violent resistance over recent years, but are by no means the main source of armed group mobilisation in and around the park. Drawing inspiration from structuration theory, it shows how socio-structural features of the landscape in which the park is embedded have led to a state of seemingly perpetual armed group mobilisation and violence. Individual agents can either serve to reproduce or reshape the social structure through the unintended consequences of their actions, thus setting off a self-reinforcing feedback loop. We conclude that although militarised conservation interacts with the structuration of mobilisation in the Kahuzi-Biega landscape, it is probably not integral to it.

Key words

Militarised conservation, resistance, armed mobilisation, structuration, eastern DRCongo

1. Introduction

In October 2021, indigenous Batwa people rose up against eastern Democratic Republic of Congo's (DRC) Kahuzi-Biega National Park (KBNP) and forcibly reoccupied their ancestral lands. Joint battalions of eco-guards and government soldiers attempted to expel the Batwa from the forest once again; but the Batwa fought back (Simpson and Geenen, 2021). They vowed under no circumstances would they leave the land of their ancestors for the second time. The ensuing conflict has resulted in the deaths of Batwa and eco-guards, the arrest and imprisonment of several Batwa chiefs, and the destruction of hundreds of hectares of forest in the park's highland sector. The story depicts what appears to be a classic case of mobilisation against fortress conservation – a population has been displaced from its traditional lands, leading to their impoverishment and marginalisation, which in turn causes that population to resist conservation rule. Yet this only tells part of the story of armed mobilisation inside KBNP.

Although fortress conservation and its militarised enforcement were no doubt central to the Batwa's decision to rise up against park authorities, they are by no means the only cause of armed group activity inside KBNP. The majority of the small insurgent groups and bandits that now hide out and extract resources from inside KBNP are not (principally) motivated by grievances generated by the legacies of coercive conservation both past and present; even if some of their leaders are willing to take advantage of local animosities against the park in order to justify their activities, recruit soldiers and gain supporters. In this discussion paper we argue that the majority of these armed groups would likely still exist with or without the addition of fortress conservation and its militarised enforcement. To understand armed mobilisations surrounding the park, we examine the broader political economic structures that produce motivations and opportunities to rebel.

Drawing on Anthony Giddens's (1984) theory of structuration we look to the interaction points between broader social structures and the actions of individual agents. The structuration approach is based on the assumption that while people's agency is influenced by the social structures that surround them, those same structures are reproduced, and in some cases reshaped, by the creative actions of individuals. Activity taking place at the point where individual agents come into contact with the social structure is thus deemed 'structuration'. We deploy this approach to illustrate how armed group mobilisation and violence are fundamental parts of the political economic system in which KBNP is embedded.

The analysis draws on fieldwork from August 2019 to February 2020 and April to June 2021 in the territories of Kalehe and Kabare, South Kivu, conducted by the authors. The data collected during the first trip, and the contacts and leads developed, were built upon in the second trip. This enabled us to

develop a chronological understanding of armed mobilisations surrounding the park both historically and during the periods of data collection. Data were collected from communities living around KBNP using ethnographic methods; including semi-structured individual and group interviews, focus groups, transect walks and participant observations. Informants were selected through a snowball sampling strategy, whereby a local chief or authority figure would identify additional informants based on the questions asked. As the armed groups operating in and around the park are engaged in illegal resource extraction and do not wish to attract attention to themselves, we often had to 'follow our noses', to listen out for gossip that could lead to relevant sources or information. Indeed, some of the most relevant, nuanced data was acquired in one-off, spontaneous encounters with people on roads leading up to the park, while eating lunch in small restaurants, or in bars during the evenings. In other words, the team itself had to become, for at least a short while, active agents within the social milieu in which the research was conducted.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with the leaders of several armed groups of different sizes, as well as six focus groups with their soldiers. The team also engaged various people living at the edge of the forest (over one hundred artisanal miners, farmers, livestock breeders, small business owners, timber and charcoal traders) through semi-structured individual and group interviews and focus groups. We also interviewed six eco-guards. The research team travelled to villages and towns in the territories of Kalehe and Kabare (Miti, Kavumu, Kafulumaye, Bitale, Bunyakiri, Katana Centre, Kahungu, Kabushwa Kabamba, Mabingu, Kadjuchu, Kasheke, Lemera, Katasomwa). Our respondents came from the Batembo, Buhavu, Bashi, Balega and Batwa ethnic groups. In Bukavu, we carried out over fifty in-depth interviews with representatives of local and international NGOs, ICCN, customary chiefs, Congolese civil society and members of the government. This interview data was triangulated with NGO reports, online and newspaper articles, and personal communications with key informants on WhatsApp. In terms of data analysis, the data was coded using categories identified from the academic literature on green militarisation and the structuration of social reality in the milieu of conflict.

To understand processes of armed group mobilisation in the context of fortress conservation in KBNP, the article proceeds as follows. It begins by providing an overview of the literature on resistance and armed mobilisation in the context of fortress conservation (2) while indicating how a structuration approach may be insightful (3). The subsequent section describes the form and effects of fortress conservation in KBNP (4). The section after that outlines the main social structures that give rise to armed mobilisations in and around the park (5). We then describe how individual agents enact a range of social practices which at times serve to reproduce, and at other times reshape, these broader structures through time and space (6). Next we consider what difference militarised conservation does make to dynamics of violence and armed mobilisation (7). Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings and conceptual approach for the broader literature on militarised conservation in violent environments (8).

2. Militarised conservation and its discontents

Political ecologists and critical geographers have long highlighted how processes of territorialisation and enclosure for fortress conservation can dispossess people of their traditional lands, resources and histories (Peluso 1992; Brockington 2002; Neumann 1998). Assessments frequently contrast on the one hand state conservation agencies and international conservation NGOs who aim to coerce, discipline and enforce; and on the other hand, people who have been marginalised and impoverished through protected area designation (Kelly and Gupta, 2016; Lombard, 2016). This can lead to popular mobilisations when people adversely affected by fortress conservation rise up against it (Norgrove and Hulme 2006; Hochleithner 2017; Cavanagh and Benjaminsen 2015; Simpson and Geenen 2021). From this standpoint, conservation conflicts take the shape of a domination/resistance binary.

More recent scholarship has focussed on militarised conservation, otherwise known as 'green militarisation'. A plethora of studies have since elaborated on the various forms of militarised conservation: the use of military-grade weaponry to enforce conservation regulations (Lunstrum, 2014; Asiyanbi, 2016; Massé and Lunstrum, 2016); the application of paramilitary and counterinsurgency strategies to apprehend poachers and other illegal resource users (Adams, 2019; Dutta, 2020; Minarchek, 2020); collaborations between national armies, UN peacekeeping operations and eco-guards (Verweijen and Marijnen, 2018; Wrathall

et al., 2020; Simpson and Geenen, 2021); and the deployment of surveillance technologies such as drones, satellites, digital cameras and audio devices in the service of conservation (Sandbrook, 2015; Lunstrum, 2018; Shrestha and Lapeyre, 2018; Millner, 2020).

In what might be described as the 'first wave' of literature on militarised conservation, authors were motivated to make the violence of militarised conservation visible, given that it was often occurring far from anybody who might provide oversight and control of its excesses (Lunstrum 2014; Duffy 2014). Their critiques often mirrored earlier critiques of fortress conservation, emphasising how it can lead to violent dispossession and marginalisation (Duffy, 2014; Lunstrum, 2014; Büscher and Ramutsindela, 2016). Other commentators have objected to militarised conservation on the basis that it can expand the reach of coercive states into isolated regions at the periphery of political and economic power (Peluso and Vandergeest 2011). According to this rationale, conservation is only of secondary importance to the more salient task of bringing undisciplined populations, along with their lands and resources, under the control of nation states. It has also been argued that the current focus on militarised forms of conservation has led to the allocation of resources toward paramilitary approaches at the expense of other conservation priorities, such as the monitoring of landscape ecology and species distribution (Annecke and Masubelele, 2016; Duffy et al., 2019). This has led many political ecologists to argue that militarised conservation is 'fundamentally unjust' (Duffy et al. 2019, 68).

In what could be seen as the 'second wave' of literature on militarised conservation, greater attention has been paid to understanding how militarised conservation is often part of broader political economies of violence – and in that sense, is fully part of the social arenas in which it is implemented (Kelly and Ybarra, 2016).[1] The anthropologist Louisa Lombard has made two important contributions which consider militarised conservation in a region where the state is weak or absent. In a 2016 paper, she proposed that the case of militarised conservation in Central African Republic (CAR) forces us to rethink classic accounts of fortress conservation, which paint a binary picture involving domination and hegemony on one side and subjugation and resistance on the other (Lombard, 2016). Instead, she argues that people living in a region where hierarchies are volatile, and no single actor holds dominion over violence, seek to maintain and gain access to sources of income through practices of 'threatening' and 'hiding'. This is not to say the capacity to resort to physical force is distributed uniformly, but rather that practices of threats and hiding are available to all who wish to use them, 'making it difficult to describe any of this as a matter of domination and resistance' (Lombard 2016, 6).' Instead of being the main cause of armed conflict or violence, militarised conservation in CAR comes to interact with a political economic scene in which these dynamics are already widespread.

Lombard and Tubiana (2020) further developed these arguments by zooming-in on the experiences of tracker guards employed as part of militarised conservation initiatives in CAR and Chad. They demonstrate how job opportunities as eco-guards feed into broader, more entrenched markets for arms-carrying work that men look to in their search for status and employment. Rather than existing separately from broader the political and economic structures that shape social reality in CAR, armed conservation thus becomes a component of them, 'a part whose importance varies in part as a function of how much the donors fund it, and a part that inextricably includes violent practice' (Lombard and Tubiana 2020, 6). In this sense, armed conservation is but one 'practical occupation' (Debos, 2016) among several alternatives that also involve the bearing of arms – including joining the government army, police force, and a range of non-state rebel and/or bandit groups. Lombard and Tubiana (2020, 6) conclude that both people who have written in favour of and against militarised conservation potentially exaggerate its effects: thus, 'Adding or removing militarized conservation alone is unlikely to change the importance of armed extraction as a mode of profit or rule.'

Although the violence of militarised conservation is not as anomalous as has been displayed in some first wave accounts, it can still be critiqued. One of the most potent objections to militarised conservation in violent environments is that it tends to intensify and prolong existing conflict dynamics. Militarisation thus gives rise to yet more militarisation through a self-reinforcing dynamic, which is difficult to deescalate

[1] Although the focus on militarised conservation is recent, it should be noted that Peluso and Watts (2001) released their famous edited volume on Violent Environments twenty years ago, in which conservation was treated as one among other projects undertaken in places where violence was already occurring.

once in train. Even in one of the earlier first wave accounts, Lunstrum (2014, 817) showed how in South Africa's Kruger National Park militarised conservation lead to 'an arms race between poachers and anti-poaching forces'. In Guatemala's Maya Biosphere Reserve, Devine et al (2020) found that strict conservation combined with demand for cocaine in the US, and US drug policy to create a political forest where narco-cattle ranchers could operate with impunity, leading to deforestation. Wrathall et al (2020) present evidence on how enforced methods of conservation in Central America provided drug trafficking organisations with opportunities to gain local legitimacy and cement their control. Verweijen and Marijnen (2018) make the case that the militarised approach adopted by eastern DRC's Virunga National Park served to further fuel dynamics at the root of armed mobilisation, violent resistance and unauthorised resource exploitation inside the park, thus rendering green militarisation counterproductive. On this basis, they push for the demilitarisation of conservation practice, including in conflict-zones.

However, militarised conservation may have some positive effects. Armed park guards can provide a degree of security for communities living at the edge of violent forest areas. Some previous work is instructive in this regard. For example, Kelly (2015, 730) shows how the dissolution or 'crumbling' of Cameroon's Waza National Park actually exacerbated violence and instability to extent that people longed for a return the relative order that the park had provided: 'the loss of the ability to exclude "outsiders" or negotiate differential use of the protected area's resources created a situation that was even more harmful to local people's physical and food security than the initial enclosure.' Based on cases from Cameroon and Botswana, Kelly and Gupta (2016, 172) conclude that 'conservation measures that various subsets of the local population once considered to be 'bad' (e.g. violent, exclusionary protected area creation) may be construed as 'good' at different historical moments and geographical areas.' Titeca et al (2020) demonstrate how people living in eastern DRC's Garamba National Park came to see this militarised conservation area as a source of predictability in a region otherwise racked by insecurity. In this regard, there are likely to be important differences between militarised conservation in relatively peaceful contexts (such as in Tanzania or Uganda) and more violent regions where there are multiple non-state armed actors and the state itself struggles to maintain a monopoly over the means of violence (such as eastern DRC or the Central African Republic). Given some of the more vocal opponents of militarised conservation often start from fieldwork in relatively non-violent contexts – at least when compared to central Africa – this would appear to be an important consideration for the debate going forward.

This paper is intended to act as a rejoinder to the first wave of literature on militarised conservation. Our hope is to help move further beyond the dichotomous representations that have characterised some of this work. By presenting militarised conservation as an 'on/off' binary switch, first wave accounts fail to provide a nuanced treatment of the multifarious consequences – positive, negative and neutral – of the use of military technologies to secure protected areas in violent regions. In so doing, they may overplay the role of fortress or militarised conservation as a driver of violent conflict and armed mobilisation. We propose that by focussing too much on conservation, this literature distracts attention from the more fundamental political economic conditions that lead to the proliferation of armed groups inside protected areas in eastern DRC and other conflict-zones. We explicitly contribute to the second wave of literature on militarised conservation by starting not from the armed park guards it finances, but from the non-state armed groups that are operating in the area of a park in eastern DRC. This serves as a check against seeing the armed park guards as exceptional or anomalous in the region. In the case of KBNP, fortress conservation provides some grievances which can feed into wider dynamics of armed mobilisation, but by itself is insufficient to create the intense concentration of armed groups inside the park.

3. Introducing a structuration approach

A long-standing debate at the heart of sociology concerns what is the appropriate balance between studying the extent to which society determines the behaviour of individuals (structure) and how the actions of individual agents affect society (agency). Early sociologists insisted that structures exist, comprised of rules and resources, which limit the freedom of individual agents to choose certain courses of action. Herbert Spencer and August Comte interpreted social structures as groups or clusters of individual agents. Emile Durkheim's analysis of society as a distinct entity laid the foundations for what is today con-

sidered structuralist or functionalist sociology (Giddens and Sutton, 2014). Talcott Parsons developed these ideas yet further with his theory of social action, which posits that the social object (society) dominates over the social subject (the individual). Individuals are thus shaped and moulded by the relatively durable social elements of social systems which are, in practical terms, beyond their control. Put simply, structure presupposes action.

Sociologists started to question structuralist theories in the 1960s. For example, Dennis Wrong (1961) argued structuralist sociology pathologically diminished the role of individuals as creative authors of their own actions. An increasing number of sociologists looked to agency-centric approaches for inspiration, including research designs rooted in hermeneutics, symbolic interactionism, phenomenology and ethnomethodology (Giddens and Sutton, 2014). These traditions place much greater emphasis on the knowledgeability and actions of human agents than structuralist approaches. They position the individual as having the freedom to think and choose for themselves among alternate courses of action. However, it has since been argued that in course correcting, those working from the agency-focussed traditions went too far in the opposite direction, swerving toward a form of extreme subjectivism that also lacked nuance. By this point, the ontological divide within sociology bent wider than ever.

Yet this started to change in the 1970s and 80s when the compartmentalisation of structure from agency and vice versa started to be perceived as restrictive for the discipline. There have since been several attempts to build a conceptual and methodological bridge between structuralist perspectives and agent-oriented approaches. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977) introduced the notion of 'habitus' to describe the socially embedded habits, skills and dispositions that are internalised by people coming from similar social groups, such as classes, religions, nationalities and professions. He maintained that 'Through the incorporation of past experiences in the body' 'social actors develop a set of preconscious expectations about the future that are typically inarticulate, naturalized, and taken for granted but nevertheless strategically mobilized in accordance with the contingencies of particular empirical situations' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, 978). Their habitus effectively enables them to quickly problem solve using their intuitions, which are in turn shaped by the wider social group, according to a range of options and limits imposed by the social structure. In other worlds, the habitus allows people to improve their chances of survival and flourishing in a particular social context. Individual agents reproduce the overall social structure by continually acting out the habitus.

We take particular inspiration from the theory of structuration developed by Anthony Giddens (1984) in his book, 'The Constitution of Society'. Rather than representing a dualism, i.e. comprised of two independent phenomena, Giddens argued that the connection between structure and agency should be seen to be as a duality, i.e. comprised of two interdependent phenomena. Giddens concluded that neither agency nor structure should be given primacy methodologically or theoretically speaking. The theory of structuration conceptualises social structures as enabling as opposed to prohibiting the action of knowledgeable human agents. Rather than being some distant, abstract or domineering force, the structure can be seen to comprise the practical rules, norms, discourses and resources that bring about the chronological ordering of social practices over relatively long expanses of time and space (Giddens 1984). The structure itself could not exist without the repeated, quotidian actions of multiple knowledgeable human agents. It comes into being and is maintained directly through people's free and creative choices, as opposed to in isolation from them.

At the heart of structuration theory is the notion of routine, which is the main form of day-to-day social action people use to reduce 'unconscious sources of anxiety' and increase 'ontological security' (Giddens 1984, 282). Related to the routinization of daily activities are the unintended consequences of action. According to Giddens (1984, 26) 'Through the knowledgeable continuation of routine activities to reduce everyday sources of anxiety and marginalisation, conscious agents unintentionally perpetuate the very sources of the (structural) conditions which serve to reproduce anxiety and marginalisation.' Put differently, the quotidian actions of individual agents operating within a society give rise to unintended consequences that reproduce the socio-structural conditions that give rise to the initial actions in the first place. Thus structuration necessarily implies a self-reinforcing positive feedback loop. However, given agents are to a degree conscious and knowing, they can also go against the structure and reshape it through their creative choices. In this paper we show how different agents either reproduce or reshape the social structures that

generate armed mobilisations surrounding KBNP.

Our literature review identifies two notable examples where the structuration approach has been applied to the study of violent conflict and armed mobilisation. The first is a paper by Verweijen (2018) which unpacks civilian resistance against the military in eastern DRC. She argues that civilians' repertoires of contention in relation to the DRC's military are imprinted by broader social structures, including the general paucity of opportunities to earn a viable income, as well as 'deeply rooted socio-political imaginaries and modes of action relating to patronage, ethnicity/autochthony, and stateness' (Verweijen 2018, 283). She argues that the theory of structuration can both help us to understand the factors which influence civilian resistance against the military, but also how resistance also influences larger social structures. She draws the conclusion that the structural impacts of civilian resistance against the military are limited as a result of their fragmentation and volatility.

Maclure and Denov (2006) provide a second notable example of how the theory of structuration can be applied to the study of armed mobilisation. They explore how young people ended up becoming child soldiers of the notorious Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebel group in Sierra Leone's civil war. On the one hand, they observe a discourse that presents child soldiers as unfortunate victims of large-scale structural forces external to them; and on the other hand, they point to a narrative that paints child soldiers as 'an assortment of misguided revolutionaries and "lumpen" delinquents who were knowing agents of terror and destruction' (Maclure and Denov 2006, 120). The authors posit that although both of these accounts capture some of the reality, ultimately neither is satisfactory. They look to the theory of structuration to transcend this dichotomy. Thus, 'The militarist, patron-client social system of the RUF did not function as an entity that was somehow disembodied from its recruits, but in fact was sustained and reproduced by the actions of its membership' (Maclure and Denov 2006, 132). Of particular importance for our analysis is their observation that the duality between structure and agency that leads to armed mobilisation plays out in heterogeneous ways, a process that is ultimately influenced by the creative choices of different individuals.

Applying the theory of structuration, we argue that the socio-structural conditions surrounding KBNP enable rebellions to take place. These include the legacies of insecurity and poverty and the presence of abundant natural resources and shadow state networks. In turn, the leaders and soldiers of armed groups reproduce these structural conditions through the unintended consequences of their actions. Fortress conservation and its militarised enforcement interacts with, sometimes exacerbating and at other times ameliorating, the structuration of armed group mobilisation and the dynamics of violence in and around the park. However, the actions of armed eco-guards are by no means integral to the broader political economic dynamics that produce violence and armed mobilisation in the park.

4. Conservation and conflict in Kahuzi-Biega national park

KBNP extends 6,000km² across the provinces of South Kivu, North Kivu and Maniema in eastern DRC. It is one of the most important protected areas for biodiversity conservation in the Albertine Rift and home to the world's largest population of endangered eastern lowland gorillas. It is a fortress conservation area, meaning its forests are protected exclusively for conservation purposes, scientific research and tourism as opposed to local land uses. The park is managed through a militarised approach that includes a number of technologies and techniques.

The territorialisation of Kahuzi-Biega National Park occurred in three stages (Simpson and Geenen, 2021). In the first stage in 1937, the Belgian Colonial regime created the Reserve of Mount Kahuzi with the aim of protecting the park's unique biodiversity. It was designate the status of an 'integral nature reserve' which meant access to natural resources was restricted though not forbidden. In the second stage starting in in 1970, the Congolese government of President Mobutu turned the reserve into a fully-fledged national park (Barume, 2000). This meant local populations would no longer be permitted to live or extract resources within its boundaries. In the third stage in 1975, the government extended the park to include an extensive lowland sector. During the 1970s around 13,000 people, including groups of indigenous Batwa, were forcibly expelled from inside the park boundaries. The park has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1980. The park was classified a World Heritage Site in Danger in 1997 due to the effects of conflict and increased threats to its biodiversity.

Today the park is managed by l'Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature (ICCN) with support from the German international development agency (GIZ) and World Conservation Society (WCS). The Germany development bank Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KFW) pays more than two hundred park rangers an additional $80 on top of their state salary of just $20 a month. These rangers are equipped with full military uniforms and AK47s to secure the park's perimeter and stop illegal resource extraction within its boundaries. A network of patrol posts surrounds the park boundaries, from which the rangers conduct regular patrols. These guards have been trained in military-style tactics by Israeli ex-military officers from the Maisha security company.[2] The park's headquarters in Tshivanga has a flat screen monitor and satellite technology donated by the United States government to track patrols in real time. Park authorities have also asked their backers to provide drone and camera technologies to provide further surveillance of illegal activities inside park boundaries. On occasion, when ICCN want to tackle a rebel group operating inside the park, they team up with soldiers from soldiers from the government military, Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo (FARDC) (Simpson and Geenen, 2021). Soldiers from the Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation en République démocratique du Congo (MONUSCO) have also accompanied these patrols in the past.

The coercive approach deployed in KBNP has resulted in at least one case where people dispossessed by conservation mobilised against park authorities, leading to violent conflict. This occurred in October 2018 when groups of indigenous Batwa people forcibly returned to forests in the park's highland sector from which they had been expelled when the reserve was transformed into a national park. This story could be positioned neatly within the first wave of literature on militarised conservation. Simpson and Geenen (2021) argue that the reasons the Batwa took the decision to return to their ancestral lands at this specific point are threefold: firstly, the failure to secure compensation and access rights to their ancestral lands through formal and legal channels; secondly, an increase in threats to the Batwa's dignity, identity, and livelihoods over recent years; and thirdly, the emergence of opportunities to forge alliances with more powerful actors in a way that consolidated the group's power and allowed it to exploit natural resources contained within the forest for commercial purposes. In this discussion paper, we do not wish to dispute or overturn this analysis. Instead our objective is to show that although there is resistance to fortress conservation and its militarised enforcement in KBNP, the main causes of armed mobilisations both inside and around the park would exist regardless of the method used to pursue conservation.

Although the Batwa's struggle represents perhaps the most obvious example of resistance to fortress conservation in KBNP, they are not the only group with grievances related to the history of conservation through dispossession. There are multiple conflicts over the location of the park's boundaries in the various administrative territories surrounding its forests. For example, a representative of local civil society told us how ICCN came to re-set the limits of the park with GPS technology in 1997, but ended up taking additional land that previously belonged to the local population. A local chief described how,

> *ICCN planted eucalyptus trees to show the boundary of the park, but these trees spread seeds which grew next to the park on people's land. ICCN then claimed this land was part of the park, causing the local population to protest and accusing ICCN of squeezing them off their land.*[3]

The population made a formal complaint to ICCN about the boundary issue, but to no avail; further fuelling local anger directed against the park. Another source of anti-park animosity is the destruction of crops by wild animals. During our research, we received multiple reports of large mammals (baboons, gorillas, chimpanzees, elephants[4]) raiding the fields of local farmers. According to a local chief, the population has made multiple requests to ICCN to remove animals from their land and provide compensation for damage done to their fields. But in most cases recompense was not provided:

[2] As reported by journalist Simone Schlindwein: https://www.sosmitmensch.at/naturschutz-ohne-menschenrechte
[3] Interview with local chief, territory of Kabare, 09/09/2021.
[4] Elephants fled the park's highland sector during the Congolese wars.

> *Every year the baboons devastate people's fields and so ICCN told us to write a complaint to them. But these complaints have piled up and up on the desk of ICCN, and they never respond. Now I have to pay people to guard my fields from baboons every day of the week. I must bear the cost of the park![5]*

> *The other conflict is when animals come from the park to eat our crops. We have no right to push the animal off our land. So we must allow them to harvest our crops for free and do nothing! They give us nothing back in compensation. They sometimes even arrest us for urinating in our own fields when there are no toilets in this area![6]*

The fact that the majority of people living around the park receive little or no economic benefit from conservation provides another source of resentment. In material terms, people's expectations for what the park should provide in return for the restrictions imposed by conservation can be divided into two categories: development projects and opportunities for employment. Regarding the former, a local representative of civil society implored, 'The local population wants ICCN to lead some projects for them – school buildings, animal breeding, electrification. If they make breeding [projects] we will not take animals from the forest; if they give electricity we will not take charcoal!' Where development projects have been implemented, the perception is that the benefits typically go to local elites:

> *KBNP is in a good collaboration with the Mwami[7] but not the local population. They corrupt the Mwami by giving him money and then give nothing to the local population. When the Mwami gets money, he eats it and keeps silent! No one looks to the suffering of the local population. We would like to have our own spokespeople who speak to the park, but not the corrupt Mwami![8]*

Many of our respondents also lament the lack of job opportunities coming from the park. For example, a peasant farmer described how 'NGOs come here but they do not recruit from the local population. They only employ people who have high positions [i.e. elites].'[9] Some limited job opportunities are available as eco-guards (around two hundred), but not nearly enough to make a difference in the densely populated region surrounding the park. The people that have received jobs working for the park are paid very little and often do not receive their salaries on time, which leads them to seek supplementary sources of income.

Human rights abuses committed by eco-guards against the local population have further intensified anger directed toward the park. During our research we recorded accusations of arbitrary arrests, corruption, extra-judicial killings and rape:

> *Sometimes when we are in our fields, ICCN come and arrest us and take us in jail. We say we did nothing, but they bring us to the jail anyway and then call our families to bring money to let us out. Sometimes we have to pay a lot of money! If it is a little it would be just $100, but it could be even more.[10]*

> *Even one sister of mine was raped by eco-guards in 2019. She was only a little girl when this happened. She went to go and collect wood in the park with another girl. The eco-guards went there to arrest them, saying that they were destroying the park. They tried to run away, but my sister could not run away. She was only 18. When the girl she was with ran away, the guards took her by force. We had to take her to Panzi Foundation. She was there for six months.[11]*

> *An eco-guard and two soldiers were drinking beer in the bar of a gentleman who was a friend of the eco-guard. When they finished, they left without paying for the beer they had consumed. The man who owned the bar followed them to ask for his money; he talked for a long time with these three armed men. In the end bullets were heard. The owner of the bar and another person who was with him had just been murdered.[12]*

[5] Interview with local chief, territory of Kabare, 09/09/2021.
[6] Focus group, territory of Kabare, 21/04/2021.
[7] 'Mwami' is the Swahili word for 'chief'.
[8] Focus group, territory of Kabare, 21/04/2021.
[9] Focus group, territory of Kabare, 21/04/2021.
[10] Focus group, territory of Kabare, 21/04/2021.
[11] Interview with peasant farmer, territory of Kabare, 14/04/2021.
[12] Interview with village chief, territory of Kabare, 21/04/2021.

Even though there are examples to the contrary, eco-guards are rarely held accountable for incidents of abuse like those described above, further aggravating local resentments against the park. As a result, some people have come to view the park guards as part of just another armed group operating in the region.

Based on the above evidence, our argument is not that fortress conservation and its militarised enforcement fail to produce local enmity and resistance. Resentments about the way in which the park is managed are widespread among people living in the villages scattered around its boundaries. Rather, our point is that the enforcement of conservation regulations is by no means the primary – or even the secondary – source of armed mobilisations in the social scene in which the park is embedded. As we will show in the following sections, armed groups have a long history in South Kivu, and their intractability within in and around its boundaries can be explained by dynamics mostly unrelated to conservation governance.

5. Structural drivers of armed mobilisation

There are a number of enduring features of the social structure that surrounds KBNP that have perpetuated armed mobilisations across time and space. The dynamics of armed groups in this locality typically follow a circular pattern whereby every time a group is disbanded or defeated, another comes to take its place, often pulling in the members of the previous group that has ceased to exist. In this section we focus on two interlocking aspects of the social structure that make insurgent activity so intractable. First, decades of conflict, structural instability and poverty have left limited opportunities for income generation outside arms-carrying careers, driving collaboration with armed groups. Second, shadow state networks connect armed groups to powerful politicians and businessmen, enabling them to access weapons and profit from park's mineral resources.

5.1. The legacy of insecurity and poverty

The territories surrounding KBNP have been the locus of virtually continual rebellion from the 1990s onward. The Guerre de Masisi broke out in eastern DRC's North Kivu province between 1993 and 1994. Pitting migrants against autochthonous peoples, this conflict led to widespread mobilisation of armed groups in Kalehe and Walikale which both overlap with KBNP (Vlassenroot, Mudinga and Hoffman, 2016). The armed groups formed during this period would go onto play a significant role in South Kivu's protracted conflict.

The refugee crisis following the 1994 Rwandan genocide was the match which lit the tinder box sparking conflict across DRC. The genocide led over a million people to flee for safety in eastern Congo, including between 50,000 and 65,000 soldiers from the ex-Rwandan army and the notorious Interahamwe Hutu youth militia group (Vlassenroot, Mudinga and Hoffman, 2016). Many refugees took shelter in two huge camps next to Lake Kivu at the edge of the KBNP's highland sector. From these camps, armed militia living among the refugees launched cross-border attacks back into Rwanda. In response, the new Rwandan regime joined forces with the Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération du Congo-Zaïre (AFDL) rebel insurgency under the leadership of Laurent-Désiré Kabila to disband the camps and ultimately overthrow the moribund regime of Mobutu Sese Seko.

In September 1996, a coalition of international and Congolese forces launched an offensive into South Kivu from the town of Uvira, triggering the First Congo War (1996-1997). As the rebels advanced into Bukavu, thousands of Hutu refugees and soldiers fled through KBNP to escape retribution. Many took refuge inside the park itself, including members of the ex-Rwandan government and Interahamwe youth militia, who went onto form the Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda (FDLR) rebel movement. A community leader from Bunyakire chiefdom, in the territory of Kalehe, described the situation:

> *Some FDLR positions were in the KBNP and others in its periphery. This is how the FDLR who were in the park started to attack the villages and taking the people into the forest. They built shelters and had fields in the park. At that time, no one could approach their camps, except their captives who carried the booty for them.*[13]

[13] Interview with community leader, Bunyakire chiefdom, Kalehe territory, 06/05/2021.

The First Congo War ended in May 1997 after AFDL successfully overthrew the Mobutu regime. But any hopes for lasting peace were unfounded. The Second Congo War kicked off in earnest in August 1998 when Kabila tried to oust his onetime Rwandan and Ugandan allies. The war set off another wave of armed mobilisations across eastern Congo, eventually drawing in the armies of nine different African countries and about twenty-five rebel factions. Throughout the war, KBNP was located mostly in the territory of the Ressemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie (RCD) Rwanda-backed rebel movement. Other regions of the park were under the control of the FDLR and Congolese local defence or 'Mai Mai' groups. Several Mai Mai factions joined forces with the FDLR during this period to launch joint operations against RCD.

The Second Congo War ended with the Sun City Peace Agreement in April 2003. The country was unified and many combatants were demobilised and incorporated into the government military.[14] At the same time, FDLR abuses against local populations reached a critical level. A particularly brutal incident took place at the Nduma mine located inside the park near Kasese. The FDLR had controlled Nduma and a number of artisanal mining sites in the surrounding area for several years. For reasons unknown, soldiers belonging to the group killed 36 people at Nduma in January 2010. They forced their victims to eat cassiterite before burying them alive (Stearns, 2013). Violent incidents like this drove another wave of armed mobilisations across the territories of Shabunda, Kalehe and Walikale as local defence forces were formed to protect people from the FDLR threat. In 2011, the Raia Mutomboki rebel movement emerged in Shabunda. Its objective: to chase the FDLR from eastern DRC and liberate Congolese people from its rule. For a period, the Raia Mutomboki enjoyed considerable local support with youths and army deserters joining its ranks, often with the blessing of customary chiefs (Stearns 2013). However, it's various factions eventually came to perpetrate many of the abuses they had originally mobilised to prevent, thus reproducing structural insecurity in the region.

The villages and towns surrounding the forests of Kahuzi-Biega have been ravaged by these various waves of armed mobilisation. For almost three decades, successive governments have failed to secure the population from armed bandits and rebels. As a result, numerous houses and farms have been abandoned at the forest's edge where the threat of looting is highest. A villager chief recalled,

> *The park is a deep source of insecurity here in our village but also in all the surrounding villages because first of all, being a forest, the park serves as a hiding place for many armed groups and other people of bad faith. And at any moment, these rebels hiding in the park can appear and attack us.*[15]

In the groupement of Irhambi-Katana in Kabare territory, civil society frequently requests the government military to demobilise the armed groups and secure the villages around the park. Yet when FARDC soldiers are provided, they are poorly trained and equipped, incapable of confronting the armed groups, and themselves engage in abuses against the population. When demobilisations of rebels have occurred, they end up being temporary as new around groups come to replace the old. Some government soldiers are even reported to collaborate with the armed groups in order to profit from resources inside the park. For example, FARDC soldiers were stationed in some villages in Irhambi-Katana toward the first half of 2021 to protect the local population. We documented these soldiers taking a portion of charcoal from each peasant working illegally inside the park. A peasant farmer said,

> *We do not understand how FARDC, who came to fight against the illegal exploitation and destruction of the park, have allowed themselves to impose taxes on forest products coming from the park. This is how the armed groups are taking advantage of the irresponsibility of the government to rule the park.*[16]

The lack of state protection and rumours of collusion between FARDC and armed groups has led to widespread anti-government sentiments, and given it is the only way to survive under conditions of rebel rule, further collaboration with armed groups. One-way people deal with pervasive insecurity in eastern DRC is by obtaining the protection of armed groups to secure their lives, property, family and income (Verweijen,

[14] Some of the Mai Mai groups surrendered during this period to join the national army, including the Mai Mai group of Padiri Buhendra which controlled large swathes or land in and around KBNP.
[15] Interview with the peasant farmer, Kabare territory, 21/04/2021.
[16] Focus group, Kabare territory, 18/04/2021.

2018). Despite the fact that these patrons often themselves pose very real security threats, they at least ensure some semblance of stability, which has in some instances led to strong local support for armed groups. These kinds of protection relationships often function across ethnic lines. In March 2021, for example, a conflict surrounding access to a gold-mining site inside the park near the village of Katasomwa contributed to a flare-up of violence between Bahutu and Batembo communities in Kalehe. In the aftermath of this conflict, people from each of these communities worked under the protection of ethnically affiliated armed groups to access the park's mineral resources.

In addition to the legacy of insecurity, condition of economic scarcity and marginalisation also provide incentives to form and cooperate with armed groups in order to access opportunities for income generation, usually through the illegal exploitation of the park's natural resources. People cited food insecurity and kwashiorkor, unemployment, limited education and healthcare, the lack of agricultural extension facilities, and scarcity of firewood as some of key challenges they faced living at the edge of the park. The lack of meaningful employment leaves young men in particular with few other prospects than to seek work with non-state armed groups.

For instance, when asked what prompts people to join his group, a rebel chief told the first author, 'First of all it is poverty and unemployment, and therefore economic reasons.'[17] Thus, in the words of a customary chief, 'When the delinquents [young men without jobs] hear that there is a rebellion somewhere, they jump in without questioning.'[18] In other interviews, people commented on how existing criminals, i.e. people who are already in trouble with the state, see armed groups as a route to greater economic security and a sense of meaning. As a way to re-gain access to a source of income and status, former rebels disappointed by the conditions of their demobilisation have re-joined – or are actively considering re-joining – armed groups inside the park:

> *Among our own children there are thieves and bandits in the armed groups. All of this is linked to unemployment. Many of them had been in the army. During the period of demobilization and reintegration, they were told that they would make enough money to survive, but this did not happen.*[19]

> *Young people join armed groups because of unemployment and dropping out of school. There are also many young people demobilised from FARDC in Katana who have not received socio-economic reintegration kits. These kits were promised but never delivered. These young people represent a security risk.*[20]

It should be noted that none of these conditions are exclusively the result of conservation practices. Rather, they are faced by the majority of people living in rural eastern DRC, both near and far from protected areas. Conservation governance – militarised or not – interacts with legacies of poverty and insecurity, but cannot realistically be held responsible for them. The following quote from a village chief reinforces this observation:

> *The government does nothing for the youth while our rural areas are underdeveloped. Almost all the government's responsibilities – the rehabilitation of roads, bridges, hospitals, the provision of markets – are carried out by NGOs on the ground. How can you expect the park to be protected when the government is sitting on its hands? The insecurity in and around KBNP is a consequence of the poor management of public affairs by the Congolese state. This explains the invasion of the park and the increase in insecurity in the region.*[21]

[17] Interview with leader of armed group, Kalehe territory, 02/06/2021.
[18] Interview with village chief, Kabare territory, 15/04/2021.
[19] Interview with deputy chief of groupement, Kabare territory, 13/04/2021
[20] Interview with customary chief, Irhambi-Katana groupement, Kabare territory, 15/04/2021.
[21] Interview with village chief, Kabare territory, 14/04/2021.

5.2. 'Lootable' resources and shadow state networks

The park provides an abundant source of 'lootable' resources that help to motivate and finance rebel activity. These include charcoal, timber, bushmeat and, most importantly in the context of armed groups, minerals. Located close to the ground surface, often in streams such as the Nyaweza River gold mine, these mineral resources are accessible to armed groups using low-tech methods of extraction and processing. The act of conservation enclosure has effectively created an arena rich in natural resources and economic opportunities in a region that is racked by insecurity and poverty. The leader of small armed group sums up the situation:

> *My friend, there is no one who knows all the minerals in this park! We need gold and that's what we are looking for. Other rebel groups need cassiterite, and another group is looking for tourmaline. All find what they are looking for in this park. There is a mountain called Namunene which contains all kinds of minerals.*[22]

Although the Belgium company Minière des Grands-Lacs (MGL) had been mining in the wider region since the 1920s, armed group involvement in mining became ubiquitous throughout KBNP during the Second Congo War and the global coltan boom of the 2000s. There are estimated to have been about 12,000 miners operating illegally inside its boundaries at the boom's peak (D'Souza, 2003, 11). Temporary trading posts sprung up all around the park during this period as the frequency of road and air travel increased between Bukavu and the territories of Walikale, Shabunda and Kalehe. Although the frenetic coltan boom is now over, cassiterite mines have appeared across the park's lowland sector, with a particular concentration around the town of Itebero. Numerous gold-mining sites have also emerged across the park's highland sector, especially in the Kalehe region around the village of Katasomwa.

The park's mining sites are contested by multiple non-stated armed groups. People who wish to gain control of the park's mining territories must either be armed themselves or work under the protection of armed actors. A miner in the village of Bitale explained how he had been kidnapped by an armed Hutu group and taken to a mine inside the park: 'To keep the operation safe, they had armed guards around the outside [of the mine] – one group was mining and another was keeping protection.'[23] This is necessary to protect mining sites from being attacked by other armed groups and (though less significantly) ICCN eco-guards and FARDC soldiers. Despite the obvious dangers, people are still willing to take the risk of working with armed groups to access mining sites due to the profits involved. A chief of village in the territory of Kabare described how 'They [the local population] can get as much money in one-day mining gold as they would get in a month outside of the park.'[24]

Not only does the park represent a resource abundant landscape that provides an opportunity for armed mobilisation: its mountainous forests also provide an ideal hiding place for insurgent and bandit groups. For example, a member of an armed group that had been working at the edge of the park in the territory of Kabare described how, 'Kahuzi Biega National Park represents a perfect hideout and a source of income. When you enter this park, nobody can see you or catch you.'[25] In turn, a local chief said that, 'KBNP is so large, yet its leaders do not have enough eco-guards to monitor it. The armed groups are aware of this and that is why there are so many of them inside [the park].'[26] The combination of resource abundance and forest cover are what make the park such an attractive place for the armed group to operate.

Entrenched 'shadow state' networks (Reno, 1995) offer insurgent groups a way to access weapons and links to wider markets in which they can sell resources extracted from the park. These networks blur the boundaries between legal/illegal, state/non-state and civilian/military (Bayart, 2009). They 'are marked by personalized power relations and generally encompass both state and non-state actors, and both soldiers and civilians' (Verweijen 2018, 288). Multifarious entanglements between armed groups, power-

[22] Interview with leader of small armed group, Kalehe territory, 11/11/2019.
[23] Interview with artisanal miner, Kalehe territory, 29/09/2019.
[24] Interview with peasant farmer, Kabare territory, 14/04/2021.
[25] Interview with member armed group, Kabare territory, 11/05/2021.
[26] Interview with peasant farmer, Kalehe territory, 27/04/2021.

ful politicians, military officers and businessmen in the urban centres of Bukavu and Goma enable the sale of minerals resources extracted within park boundaries. They are also what permit armed groups to access weapons to continue their activities within the park. The fact that the park is located close to the DRC's borders with Rwanda and Burundi means its mineral resources can be smuggled onto international markets with relative ease. Like intractable conditions of insecurity, shadow state networks have become so engrained that they can be considered an enduring socio-structural feature of this region.

In our interviews with various armed group leaders, we were repeatedly told about 'big men' in the government or military who facilitate the trade in minerals from the park. They are also said to provide armed groups with weapons. For example, the leader of one armed group asserted, 'We are working with other rebel groups and some people from the government. We sell our minerals to people in Bukavu and others from Goma.' A representative of civil society described how, 'The involvement of high-profile politicians is suspected at national and provincial levels. Politicians like to manipulate people to position themselves for their own selfish interests.'[27] In eastern DRC, politicians often lend their support to armed groups as a way to enhance their negotiating position and advance their own agendas. Shadow state actors also alert armed groups of incoming attacks by ICCN or FARDC soldiers before they take place, thus enabling the armed groups to move to another area before the attack comes. According to a miner working at a validated cassiterite mine at the edge of the park, 'It is as if there is a kind of communication between ICCN eco-guards, government soldiers and them [the armed groups]. That is why the armed groups know when are the government are coming to attack them.'[28]

There are various mineral traceability initiatives in place in eastern DRC (Geenen and Radley, 2013). These are designed to stop the illegal extraction and trade of minerals that contribute to the reproduction of regional conflict – or of mining in illegal areas, such as inside national parks. However, shadow state networks ensure that minerals extracted from inside the park can still get into legal, certified supply chains. During the coltan boom, for example, traders mixed the park's minerals with minerals from other sites. This practice continues up until today. A member of local civil society explained, 'The activities of the armed groups can no longer be hidden. Minerals from the park are sold in Bukavu and Goma. These ores are red [from non-validated sites] and they are mixed with the ores from the green [validated] sites.'[29] After reaching trading houses in Goma and Bukavu, the minerals are smuggled to Rwanda, and then exported to South-East Asia via Mombasa and Dar es Salam. Once the park's minerals have entered validated supply chains, there is virtually no way to differentiate them from the minerals extracted outside of the park.

6. Individual agency and armed mobilisation

We will now show how armed mobilisation is created through the interplay of larger socio-structural forces and the actions of individual agents. Of particular importance to our analysis is Maclure and Denov's (2006, 132) observation that, 'while the process of becoming a child soldier involved a circular dynamic between agency and structure, it also revealed the differentiated and individualized ways in which this duality was played out.' To demonstrate the differentiated and individualised nature of armed mobilisations around KBNP, we offer short vignettes of the lives of two rebel leaders that were powerful players in the park's highland sector over recent years, along with the story of one potential rebel leader who has so far resisted the call to arms. We tell their stories because they demonstrate how the creative choices of individual agents can serve to either reproduce, in the case of the former two leaders, or reshape, in the case of the latter leader, the larger socio-structural conditions which initially cause people to form and join armed groups.

6.1. 'Cisayura': the local defence

Born in the village of Kasheke in the territory of Kalehe, Bienvenu Cisayura created an armed group in 1997 to defend the population living on the periphery of the park from repeated attacks by the FDLR, who by that time had established bases inside KBNP. Cisayura described how his own family had been affected by the ravages of FDLR:

[27] Interview with member of civil society, Kalehe territory, 01/05/2021.
[28] Interview with artisanal miner, Kalehe territory, 21/09/ 2019.
[29] Interview with local civil society, Kalehe territory, 01/05/2021

> *The Interahamwe [FDLR] made life difficult in our villages. I remember well the time when these people invaded our village; my grandparents, my parents, my little brothers and sisters all died. That is why I have been in the forest up until today. The government has failed to secure the people; that is why I am a rebel*[30].

The Rwanda-backed RCD rebel movement provided Cisayura, along with several other local defence leaders, financial support and training given they shared a common enemy in FDLR. Cisayura was able to protect his community with this support, which strengthened his legitimacy among the local population. Cisayura essentially came to fulfil what would normally be the role of a functioning army or police force. According to a local chief of groupement,

> *He became a rebel during the RCD period first as a leader of a local self-defence group in the territories of Kabare and Kalehe. At that time, the FDLR came regularly to loot our villages, so Cisayura trained young people for local self-defence. The local population loved him for that. With him, we could sleep without worrying.*[31]

Cisayura's group was demobilised at the end of the Second Congo War. However, 'Once he returned to civilian life, the population were afraid of him because he had handled weapons, so he was recruited into the regular army'.[32] Cisayura worked for several years as an FARDC soldier in Kisangani and Equateur Province. However, he did not receive a high rank because he had not studied beyond primary school. He was poorly paid and lacked the status he had enjoyed as a leader in the local defence. Cisayura eventually left FARDC after the government offered to pay for him to train as a carpenter:

> *I had a deal with the government. They asked me to go to join a carpentry training course. Imagine a gentleman like me who has already drunk and eaten goat meat. Is it possible to go into carpentry? But I still agreed and honoured the government by going there.*[33]

Cisayura quickly became dissatisfied with the offer. He moved back to the town of Kalehe close to the park at the edge of Lake Kivu and become a moto-taxi driver. However, he struggled to make enough money to feed his family and was regularly harassed by soldiers from FARDC. Having once been a famous commander in the local defence, both loved and feared by the local population, he found his new existence humiliating. After some time living this way, he decided to reform his armed group at the edge of the park. Over the following years, Cisayura would demobilise and remobilise several times.

Although at first Cisayura aimed to protect the local population from the FDLR, his more recent mobilisations centred around the extraction of minerals and other resources from inside the park in order to accumulate wealth. Like so many other armed groups, Cisayura's soldiers eventually started to loot people living at the edge of the forest, thus serving to reproduce the very conditions of insecurity and poverty that Cisayura had first mobilised against. According to a customary chief, 'His armed group came with the mission of protecting the local communities, but they ended up turning against the very communities they came to protect.[34] This narrative was repeated by other people who lived in Cisayura's zone of influence:

> *In the beginning, he was good. He really fought FDLR in the region. Thanks to him, we could breathe. Cisayura was formidable. He was a defender of the communities. He could not loot us, but rather his militiamen would go and loot in villages far from us. He would send his men to loot, then he would intervene as a saviour in the victimized villages and return with looted goods to show the people that he was there for them.*[35]

[30] Interview with Bienvenu Cisayura, Kalehe territory, 15/10/2019.
[31] Interview with chief of groupement, Kabare territory, 12/04/2021.
[32] Interview with Heretier Cisayura, Kalehe territory, 16/04/2021.
[33] Interview with Bienvenu Cisayura, Kalehe territory, 15/10/2019.
[34] Interview with customary chief, Kalehe territory, 08/10/2019.
[35] Interview with businesswoman, Kalehe territory, 15/09/2019.

> *He asked us to collect food for his ration from the population. Woe betide the one who could not find something to give. Cisayura could send his militia to come to the village and take people with him. When those people returned from the forest, they could not tell anyone in the village what they had experienced there. No local chief could refuse Cisayura's orders, no matter how bad those orders were.*[36]

Cisayura's mobilisation and remobilisations did not only re-create insecurity and poverty, but also provided opportunities for income generation. When Cisayura remobilised his group for the final time in 2018, he gained control of several gold mining sites inside the park. More than two hundred young men, mostly unemployed youths from surrounding villages, are reported to have joined this militia. According to a local chief, 'Cisayura had different groups of people that mined gold for him inside the park. He takes young people from different villages. As there is no money, jobless people are willing to go with him!'[37] Two teachers described how on several occasions they had travelled to the park to buy minerals from Cisayura, which they sold at trading houses in Bukavu. One of them told us, 'As a teacher I earn just $145 per month. I can earn $60 every time I go to the park to buy minerals!'[38]

Cisayura's remobilisations also served to entrench the shadow state networks that enable armed groups to profit from illegal resource extraction within the park. As with other armed groups, traders, military officers and politicians from Goma and Bukavu worked with Cisayura in a clandestine fashion. These people encouraged him to enter the park and bought the minerals and gold he extracted from within its boundaries. A case in point is that of Colonel Charles Bizimwami. Charles and Cisayura had been classmates in Mabingu and were both in the local defence force of Kalehe. They joined FARDC after demobilising. But when Cisayura left the military and reformed his armed group, Charles remained in the government military. Then when Cisayura returned to the park in 2018, Charles became the main supplier of weapons and military uniforms to Cisayura in exchange for a cut of the park's resources.

However, the social structure also provides incentives for counter-mobilisations as different leaders vie for control of the park's minerals. After nearly two decades spent in and out of the bush, Cisayura was killed on the night of 18 October 2019 by a rival armed group under the leadership of 'Chance Mihonya'. In the weeks before his death, Cisayura attempted to stop Chance from mining gold inside KBNP's highland sector. Chance is reported to have bribed Cisayura's body guard to shoot his boss while he was eating dinner. The body guard asked Cisayura if he could take his rifle while he was drinking water – which would disable the rebel leader's protective charms – and then shot him. Cisayura tried to reach for restorative herbs in his bedroom. But it was too late; he died. The bodyguard fled the scene. Cisayura's soldiers quickly took his body to Kalehe so Chance's soldiers would not defile it for black magic.

In the following days, fighting broke out between soldiers from the two armed groups. Gunshots could be heard in villages at the edge of the forest. According to a local source, 'people could no longer sleep in their houses.' They hid in their fields at night or moved away from their farms and homes to the security of more populated centres in Kabamba or Katana. Yet again they had been swept up in wider dynamics of violence and insecurity, leading to their further impoverishment and marginalisation.

6.2. 'Chance': the opportunist

Like Cisayura, Chance had a long history of arms-carrying work in DRC that dates back to the First Congo War. At the age of 16, he was recruited as a 'Kadogo' (child soldier) in the AFDL rebellion against the regime of President Mobutu. In 1997, he fought for two weeks in Congo Brazzaville to defend President Denis Sassou-Nguesso from a rebel advance. He also fought alongside the Angolan military against the rebel army of Jonas Savimbi. During the Second Congo War he fought on the side of RCD, the politico-military movement which then controlled the east of the country. He eventually joined the government army under the rank of lieutenant after the signing of the Sun City Peace Agreement in 2003. He was promoted to Captain in 2011 and assigned to Nyabibwe, in the territory of Kalehe. Over one hundred soldiers were under his command.

[36] Focus group with village civil society, Kabare territory, 20/04/2021.
[37] Interview with village chief, Kabare territory, 14/04/2021.
[38] Interview with teacher and former gold miner, Bukavu, 27/09/2019.

But Chance deserted the army in 2017, after having been accused of raping a girl in the town of Nyabibwe. He went to Bunyakire where he joined a Mai Mai group led by his uncle 'Shabani', a famous rebel in the Bunyakire chiefdom. When Chance learned that the Batwa had returned to the park, he decided to take advantage of the situation. Seeing an opportunity to advance his own economic interests, Chance separated from Shabani to create his own armed group. He set up his headquarters at Cirehe, a small village on the outskirts of KBNP's highland sector, not far from where the Batwa had set up their camps in October 2018.

Unlike Cisayura, Chance was a Mutembo from Bunyakire. He did not originate from the region in which he started his rebellion. Neither had he gained legitimacy as a leader in the local defence against the FDLR. In order to justify his presence inside the park, Chance claimed to be a Batwa defending the rights of his brothers and sisters oppressed by ICCN – a claim widely rebutted by Batwa chiefs. Other than the Batwa communities now living in the park, Chance's armed group is the only non-Batwa group identified during the course of our research to use a narrative of resistance against conservation to justify its activities. Yet his main objective appears to have been to accumulate wealth through small-scale mining and the exploitation of other resources. According to a local chief,

> *Chance was Mutembo [of the Tembo tribe]. He claimed that he was a Mutwa [singular of Batwa] and that his family was also expelled from the park to justify his presence there. He claimed that he was coming to support the settlement of his brothers in their ancestral land in KBNP, but his claim was disputed.*[39]

As he did not at first have supporters in the local population, Chance asserted control over a part of the park's highland sector through terror and intimidation. He dug a hole where he imprisoned and tortured anyone he believed to have spoken ill of him, including one of ICCN's eco-guards. He would only release people from the hole after they had paid him $100 and a crate of beer. In the locality of Kabushwa, hundreds of people were forced to abandon their farms and homes during the period Chance was active. They took refuge in nearby Katana Centre which had greater protection from the government military and police force. From his headquarters in Cirehe, Chance began to exploit minerals, timber and charcoal inside the park. He was able to accumulate considerable wealth from these activities. In the words of a local chief, 'Chance stayed in the Park with his militiamen where he was the law. He got very rich by exploiting the gold that he mined in the Nyaweza river, making charcoal and the sawing of planks.'

Chance also offered people who collaborated with him and submitted to his rule protection, and a way to access resources inside the park. He provided employment for many young men.[40] According to a local chief, 'He recruited young people by promising them work and wonders. As there were many unemployed young people in our villages, he promised jobs to many young people who approached him.'[41] Respondents in the village of Cirehe, where Chance had his headquarters, expressed strong support for the rebel chief:

> *We called him Papa Chance and we were like his children. He managed to reduce the prevalence and movement of thieves in the area. Even some legal cases were referred onto him. He restored the rights of the inhabitants. He also intervened in marital disputes, giving advice to couples who were in conflict. He protected our villages against other armed groups, the bands of bandits who attacked and pillaged our villages.*[42]

Of course such glowing praise could also be explained by the fact that people remain afraid to speak Chance's name in vein even after his arrest. However, the period of relative security and access to the park's resources that Chance provided also likely led to a degree of local support from those living under his protection.

A joint battalion of ICCN eco-guards and FARDC soldiers eventually arrested Chance on 25 May 2020. Our research suggests a Batwa chief with whom Chance was in conflict provided FARDC with information which eventually led to his capture at the edge of the park in Kabushwa locality. Chance was incarcerated

[39] Interview with customary chief, territory of Kabare, 14/04/2021.
[40] Chance is reported to have paid 40,000 CF per week to his soldiers.
[41] Interview with customary chief, Kabare territory, 13/04/2021.
[42] Interview with peasant farmer, Kabare territory, 20/04/2021.

in Bukavu Central Prison for over a year and eventually given a life sentence by the Military Court of South Kivu on 21 September 2021. He was charged with crimes against humanity including murder, rape, the recruitment of child soldiers, and the violation and destruction of a protected area through deforestation and mining activities. Chance's supposed accomplice, a major in FARDC who had reportedly supplied Chance with weapons and ammunition, was acquitted based on the lack of sufficient evidence. Shadow state operators are likely more difficult to tackle than the leaders of armed groups themselves, who can easily be framed as scapegoats.

After the death of Cisayura and the arrest of Chance, it could have been expected that peace would once again return to villages at the edge of the park's highland sector next to Lake Kivu. However, both the social structure and the individual agents that lead Chance to mobilise were still in place: 'All the armed groups leaders had been arrested or killed, but their militiamen remained with weapons.'[43] And with reports of unknown armed group now operating in the villages where both Chance and Cisayura used to operate, it appears the void left in their absence had already been filled at the time of writing.

6.3. 'Héretier': the reluctant rebel

The story of Héretier, Cisayura's son, illustrates how individual agents can also prevent new waves of armed mobilisation, thus reshaping the socio-structural conditions that lead to intractable insecurity. Cisayura had many children and his family struggled to cope after his death. 'We ate badly, we studied in difficult conditions, we lacked everything.'[44] When Cisayura died, his collaborators encouraged Héretier to lead his father's armed movement: 'In our culture, when the father dies, the eldest son should take over.' But Héretier was reluctant to do so. He understood that he could earn money mining in the park as a rebel, which could help alleviate his family's financial problems, but he also knew how difficult and dangerous the life of a soldier would be. Given all the time and effort he had put into his studies, funded by his father's mining activities inside the park, this was not the future he wanted for himself or his family.

When Chance killed Cisayura, the government told Héretier that they would give him a job so that he would not follow in his father's footsteps. But after two years, no job materialised. Héretier contacted one of Cisayura's former collaborators in FARDC to see if he could find him work, but this man also pushed Héretier to take leadership of his father's movement: 'to my surprise, he suggested I join the militia instead!' As a result of his increasingly desperate economic situation, Héretier is now considering remobilising his father's group despite his initial reservations: 'When I get tired of my current living conditions, I will step out of my comfort zone and join the movement. I will need people to protect the movement and help me develop it. But for now, I'm still looking for alternative ways to make a living.'[45]

By resisting the call to arms despite the structural pressure on him to remobilise his father's militia, Héretier is reshaping the conditions in which armed mobilisation occurs. By remaining a civilian, he is neither reproducing the conditions of insecurity and poverty at the edge of the forest, nor the opportunities to access mineral resources inside the park and the shadow state networks that make armed mobilisation possible. The question is, for how long will he be able to do so?

7. Militarised conservation and armed mobilisation

The previous section demonstrated how the enduring social structures that perpetuate armed mobilisation are reproduced through the actions of individual agents and the unintended consequences of their actions. These dynamics exist separately from militarised conservation, although militarised conservation of course has an influence upon them. In this section, we provide insights about some of the key effects that militarised conservation does have on the structuration of armed mobilisation and violence.

Grievances generated by fortress conservation can provide pools of dissatisfied young men living at the edge of protected areas for armed groups to recruit from. In the case of KBNP, these grievances essentially add to those created by the wider social structure, i.e. through insecurity and poverty, in which

[43] Interview with chief of groupements, Kabare territory, 04/14/2021.
[44] Interview with Héretier Cisayura, Kalehe territory, 16/04/2021.
[45] Interview with Héretier Cisayura, Kalehe territory, 16/04/2021.

the park is embedded. There is evidence anti-park sentiments could motivate people to form or collaborate with armed groups in order to take revenge for what they see as injustices perpetrated against their communities in the name of conservation. For example, a disgruntled participant from a focus group in the village of Lwiro, at the edge of the park in Kabare territory, issued the following ultimatum:

> *If the park does not meet our needs, we will tell our young children to avenge their fathers who had their lands taken forcefully. We need to train our children that the park is for their benefit, but if situation continues we will send out children into the rebellion to fight the eco-guards!*[46]

People also form allegiances with armed groups to gain access to land and resources within the park's borders. The clearest case being that of the Batwa, who worked alongside various armed groups operating in the park's highland sector to take back their ancestral lands. It is widely known that non-Batwa people also seek protection from armed groups in order to collect charcoal, timber as well as mineral resources inside the park. By restricting people's ability to access to land and resources, fortress conservation and its militarised enforcement could therefore be a factor which contributes to wider insecurity by leaving people with few other opportunities than to work with armed groups in order to access park resources. However, it is also true that if there were more opportunities to earn a living outside the park, then people might not need to enter the park to meet their livelihood needs.

Militarised conservation also produces violence of its own. At least eleven Batwa, two eco-guards and a government soldier have been killed since the Batwa reoccupied parts of the park's highland sector in October 2018 (Simpson and Geenen, 2021). Many more have been injured on both sides of the conflict. Although it was the Batwa who forcefully returned to the park, it was when ICCN's eco-guards confronted them inside the forest that the violence began. Clashes also occur when eco-guards and FARDC soldiers encounter armed groups and their mining operations inside the park, though this does not seem to happen often. Armed eco-guards have also been accused of human rights abuses including rape, arbitrary arrests and killings. Yet, we still maintain that militarised conservation efforts are probably not the main cause of violence inside the park. Rather, the principal source of violence is the non-state armed groups themselves, which is apparent in the looting of civilian populations, but also when different armed groups fight one other over access to the park's resources.

It is in the regions of the park where ICCN have the least territorial control that the majority of non-state armed groups operate and the most violence occurs, including violence committed against civilian populations. For example, ICCN all but abandoned a region of the park's highland sector toward Kalehe when the Batwa entered the park along with their armed group collaborator: 'Eco-guards used to secure the area. But at the moment, the park is not controlled by the eco-guards who can no longer set foot in the park because of the armed groups.'[47] The sheer concentration of armed actors in this region has made it unfeasible even for armed park guards and FARDC soldiers to conduct patrols. This appears to have made life more as opposed to less difficult for many people. The following quotes provide an indication of what would happen if militarised conservation was abandoned in all regions of the park:

> *There were frequent clashes between ICCN and armed groups when they met in the park. As a result of this insecurity, ICCN had suspended its patrols in some areas. The theft of crops, goods and the materials of peaceful citizens is now frequently reported in the villages bordering the KBNP.*[48]

> *The park is a morgue. The armed groups have divided up the hills and rivers. You can't walk around. Even the eco-guards don't dare to enter anymore. Everyone is afraid of the park since the militia moved in. If the agents of the park can dare to walk there, it is perhaps toward Tshivanga [where the park headquarters is located]. The land has been conquered by the armed groups. The FARDC soldiers are helplessly watching the illegal exploitation of the park's natural resources; they do not dare enter otherwise they will die.*[49]

[46] Focus group, Kabare territory, 21/04/2021.
[47] Interview with local civil society, Kalehe Territory, 26/04/2021.
[48] Interview with customary chief, Kabare territory, 14/04/2021.
[49] Interview with human rights defender, Kabare territory, 14/04/2021.

In the areas recently overtaken by armed groups, some people are left longing for a return to the times when ICCN and FARDC had greater control. Rather than calling for the demilitarisation of conservation, these people want park authorities to provide more eco-guards and government soldiers to secure the forest's perimeter, so that they can once again access the farms they were forced to abandon. As noted by one peasant farmer, this could decrease pressure on the park's resources, as people will be able to make their livelihood through farming once again. A villager commented,

> *We want the state to come back to these places and make itself felt. This would give us more confidence in terms of security. We also ask that ICCN build patrol posts for eco-guards all around the park so that they can ensure the security of the surrounding population. The people who fled their homes here in Kabushwa due to the insecurity would like to return to their native lands, because they have been scattered to different villages.*[50]

It is also worth considering what would happen to the park's two hundred or so eco-guards if militarised conservation was abandoned. Perhaps they would become peasant farmers like the majority of people living in the wider region, or perhaps they would seek alternative forms of arms-carrying work, such as with the government army or non-state armed groups. In other words, the demilitarisation of conservation would not necessarily produce an outcome which leads to the demilitarisation of the wider Kahuzi-Biega landscape – in fact the opposite could occur. It cannot be assumed that people who bear grievances related to the historical legacies of conservation displacements and the locations of park boundaries are automatically in favour of the dissolution of protected areas, or the defunding of their militarised enforcement. Despite recognising some of the negative consequences of conservation, many people living around KBNP's highland sector experience the dissipation of ICCN's territorial authority as detrimental to their lives and livelihoods.

8. Discussion and conclusions

Our principal ambition has been to contribute toward the second wave of literature on militarised conservation, by studying the structuration of armed mobilisation around a park situated in a region long-afflicted by war and violence. We believe some accounts in the first wave of literature on militarised conservation may overstate the influence of conservation practices on the dynamics of violence. The one classic case of mobilisation against fortress conservation in KBNP was when the Batwa returned to the park in 2018. However, the Batwa would unlikely have succeeded had it had not been for the alliances they forged with armed groups which have little or no axe to grind against conservation per se. As opposed to being motivated by any desire to resist the park, these armed groups mobilised due to socio-structural conditions peripheral to conservation regulations: namely, the legacies of insecurity and poverty, and the presence of 'lootable' mineral resources and shadow state networks. As per the theory of structuration, these structural conditions are reproduced, occasionally reshaped, by individual agents, including leaders of armed groups and by the unintended consequences of their actions. Put differently: the structuration of armed mobilisation surrounding KBNP is dependant not so much on the use of force (or not) by park guards, or on continued funding for militarised conservation, but rather on the way in which individual agents attempt to survive within a wider political economic system which already produces ample incentives for rebellion to occur. Too much focus on militarised conservation may therefore end up missing these more fundamental forces which produce armed mobilisations.

Our goal here is not to cast aspersions on people's legitimate grievances against conservation projects. These are especially important to consider in the case of indigenous peoples, such as the Batwa of Kahuzi Biega, who have often been forcibly displaced from their traditional lands in the name of conservation (Simpson and Geenen, 2021). Neither do we dispute that these grievances can provide a fertile ground for local collaboration with armed groups and criminal gangs, as past research has demonstrated (Verweijen and Marijnen, 2018; Devine et al., 2020; Wrathall et al., 2020). Conversely, our intervention is to demonstrate how in regions like eastern DRC, where the state struggles to deliver even the most basic elements of a social contract with its citizens, the structural conditions which produce armed mobilisation and violence are in place regardless of the presence of protected areas – militarised or otherwise. Militarised conservation

[50] Focus group, Kabare territory, 21/04/2021.

does not set off the conditions which lead to armed mobilisation, even if it might serve to intensify or mollify their effects over space and time. Thus, any notion that violent conflicts surrounding land and resources inside KBNP would be resolved upon removal of militarised conservation is likely to prove false. According this framing, conservation becomes 'not so much a coercive anomaly overlaid on an otherwise benign and peaceful human landscape as it is one that is quickly embedded into the often-hostile dynamics of claiming access to the goods available in the region's open spaces' (Lombard and Tubiana 2020, 6). In war-torn countries the idea that militarised conservation somehow 'normalises' (Neumann 2004) violence therefore deserves to be questioned.

The most significant link between militarised conservation and armed mobilisation may not be that grievances generated by the former lead to the latter. Rather, it is that the landscapes created by protected areas provide ideal places for armed insurgent and bandit groups, where they are present, to hide out and pursue broader agendas (Raeymaekers, 2009; Devine et al., 2020; Wrathall et al., 2020). In this sense, protected areas can be viewed as 'staging grounds' (Gaynor et al., 2016) – resource rich, isolated 'rough' terrains (Korf, 2011) – where wider conflicts and political economic interests play out. This is evident in Nepal's National Parks, for example, where even though Maoist rebels targeted conservation staff and infrastructure, their political and ideological angst was primarily directed toward the state (Baral and Heinen 2005). Protected areas are also frequently located 'at the convergence of zones of territorial influence' (Titeca et al. 2020, 3), i.e. regions at the frontier of nation states or sub-national territories (Peluso and Vandergeest, 2011). They can act as what Galemba (2012) describes as 'blind passes' where 'traffickers bring illicit people, drugs, and natural resources without submitting to state checkpoints' (Ybarra 2018, 143). This often renders them outside of state sovereignty in any practical sense, thus increasing their appeal to people engaged in illegal activities or who wish to oppose government authorities.

Finally, we highlight the implications of our findings for conservation policy. If fortress conservation is not necessarily the cause of armed mobilisation, then should we aim for the demilitarisation of conservation, as some commentators recommend? If so, what would replace military force? One could question the feasibility of pursuing conservation through any means other than militarily in regions where politics typically takes place through the barrel of a gun; or in the words of Lombard and Tubiana (2020, 8), where there are 'very few other possibilities for being taken seriously.' Despite claims that protected areas 'limit the life changes' of people living in and around them through 'legal dispossession, denial of basic services (such as running water, electricity, and schools), explicit military dispossession, and tactical sanctioning of private violence against "conflictive" communities' (Ybarra 2018, 6), defunding the enforcement of protected areas may also serve to aggravate conditions of insecurity, but also remove some of the (licit and illicit) benefits that communities living in the vicinity of protected areas have access to (Kelly, 2015; Titeca et al., 2020). Such benefits could include employment and development opportunities, as well as continued access to resources inside park boundaries. Although eco-guards do frequently perpetuate human rights abuses, our findings suggest that they may also provide protection and basic security for populations living around protected areas (see also Kelly, 2015; Kelly and Gupta, 2016). On the basis that individual agents can either reproduce or reshape the structural conditions which lead to the formation of armed groups, we might also consider how to encourage more potential rebel leaders living around protected areas to take the path of Héretier: i.e., to resist the call to arms. This would mostly involve boosting incentives for combatants to demobilise (and stay demobilised) as opposed to an explicit shift in conservation policy.

A pertinent question for future research is whether militarised conservation tends to exacerbate, diminish or have a neutral impact on broader political economies of violence and conflict? Our findings suggest the answer to this is by no means obvious or deterministic. One need not go as far as the environmental peacebuilding literature in arguing that conservation can play an active role in mitigating conflicts (see Ali 2007; Dresse et al. 2019; Conca, Conca, and Dabelko 2002). However, the idea that peace would be more likely in violent frontiers if militarised conservation projects were discontinued also deserves to be challenged. Further studies might also consider specifically looking at the differences in the form and effects of militarised conservation in places where there is already a lot of armed mobilisation (such as in DRC) and more peaceful regions where non-state armed groups are absent (such as in Tanzania). A nuanced understanding of militarised conservation in these different settings will be essential for the design and management of protected areas going forward.

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