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# **Bermuda Triangulation: Embracing the messiness of researching in conflict**

Suda Perera

## **Abstract**

In conflict-affected states, poor transportation infrastructure and risk-averse security protocols can significantly constrain researchers' ability to access information. Pressure on academics to be methodologically rigorous and produce policy-relevant research, means that the problematic nature of the data we use is often obscured and ignored in research outputs. Through an autoethnography of my research in the DRC, I critically discuss the messiness of triangulating information in the field amidst the competing knowledge claims of different actors on the ground. Nonetheless, I argue that information which is messy and difficult to triangulate can itself be a valuable source of conflict knowledge. This knowledge emerges from what I term "Bermuda Triangulation" – whereby the verification of one piece of information leads to the uncovering of multiple views, which may themselves tell us much about the drivers of conflict.

## **Introduction**

The persistence of armed violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) since the end of the Second Congo War, despite an intervention committed to the 'consolidation of state authority' (UN Security Council, 2012, p. 4 [4.c]) has challenged the assumptions of international peacebuilding. Both the longest UN peacekeeping mission in the organization's history (with an annual budget of more than US\$1 billion<sup>1</sup> and an extensive military mandate), and the high-levels of Official Development Assistance from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development<sup>2</sup> that have been deployed to the country over the last 15 years, have failed to provide any meaningful pathways to peace and development in the country. After a decade of trying to build democracy in the country, President Joseph Kabila has failed to respect the constitutional two-term limit, and is indefinitely delaying elections. The country,

particularly the eastern provinces of North and South Kivu remains in a state of protracted humanitarian crises and violence, and as the incumbent government reacts to political opposition with increased repression, the whole country is once again on the verge of a full-scale war. Against this background, empirical data about the dynamics of conflict in the eastern DRC has become highly sought after, and the demand for field knowledge – particularly with regards to armed groups, who are often posited as the main drivers of conflict and insecurity in the Kivu provinces – has grown.

This paper draws on research conducted for a project on armed groups and political inclusion in the eastern DRC. In addition to extensive desk-based analysis, the research draws on an intensive 3 month period of in-country fieldwork, during which myself and my research associates conducted more than 200 interviews with armed group members, members of the Congolese government, army and civil society, UN military and civilian personnel, national and international NGO workers<sup>3</sup>. In order to supplement the data gathered from the field, I also collected data remotely via a crowdsourcing platform for over a year, and conducted multiple interviews with international journalists, researchers, and ethnographers who had worked extensively in the Congo. The project was conceived from the beginning with policy makers in mind, and throughout the entire research process (i.e. in the design, field research and dissemination of the project), I have been in extended discussions with numerous policy makers including members of the United Nations, UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, UK Department for International Development, World Bank, and Australian Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade as well as several international NGOs about my findings and their implications. This paper discusses the messy realities of the research process, and reflects on how research is consumed as “conflict knowledge” in ways that tends to obscure those realities.

In this article, I show how the demand for verifiable, objective “facts” obscures the extent to which drivers of conflict are not only to be found in isolated pieces of “hard evidence”, but also in the incompatibility of multiple perceptions and narratives. Peacebuilders’ own narratives are as much a part of this complex network of perceptions as local actors’ accounts. I go beyond the literatures which look separately at externally imposed frames, and locally-driven resistance, to discuss what emerges

from the space in which these two worlds meet. An understanding of the incompatibility of these narratives emerges from a process I have termed “Bermuda Triangulation”, whereby the verification of one piece of information results not in the confirmation of the original data, but in the uncovering of multiple versions of that story, each with their own additional details which lead to recursive processes of verification as new data emerges. The end result of Bermuda Triangulation is not the production of a single, “accurate” (meaning verified by multiple sources) narrative, but rather a messy mixture of competing and often contradictory narratives emphasizing different issues and explanations. The messy outcomes of such a triangulation process are often ignored or obscured as hearsay and rumour, with little analytical value. Such data does not tend to be treated as “evidence,” and as a result the data that emerges during this process rarely makes it into published research outputs. However, rather than disguising the problematic nature of this verification process, I argue that embracing the nature of the discrepancies themselves reveals dynamics of conflict which are rarely acknowledged. While messy data does not lend itself well to the production of clear, well-evidenced knowledge about conflict-affected states that academics and policymakers tend to desire, it does more accurately echo the dynamics of how actors working in conflict situations access, process and respond to information. If both acts of belligerency and peacebuilding attempts are unfolding in a context saturated by rumour and hard-to-verify narratives, it does not do to ignore these features in the pursuit of a “scientific” and singular ground-truth.

Embracing the messiness of conflict research, and taking seriously the difficult-to-verify data that is produced in this process, is essential to breaking away from the simplistic narratives that have plagued our understandings of complex conflicts to date. The article is therefore divided into three sections. In the first section I discuss the media-aid narrative that has dominated understandings of conflict in the DRC, and the various academic critiques of this narrative. In the second section I move to illustrate how the process of Bermuda Triangulation led to the uncovering of multiple narratives which revealed significant insights into the interests, incentives and understandings of different actors in the Congo, I do this through a discussion of my attempt to verify information about a particular armed group leader, Ntabo Ntaberi Sheka. To protect the identity of my informants, I have changed their names in this article, but I show the different ways

in which Sheka was described by multiple interviewees. In the final section, I discuss the real-world consequences of the clash of narratives, through an encounter with a victim of sexual violence and the effects of the different responses to her situation. I argue that as actors attempt to engage with each other's understandings they produce new forms of narrative which can also have unintended consequences and breed new prejudices. While I do not suggest that we can predict when and how these prejudices will manifest, I argue it is important to acknowledge that the narrative process that emerges from conflict knowledge production, and the types of interventions that narratives necessitate, are themselves a source of conflict, and should not be ignored.

### **Embracing the meta-data: media frames, dominant narratives, and local perceptions.**

The question of framing in the DRC is one which has concerned a number of academics researching in the country. In her discussion of her experiences of fieldwork in the eastern DRC, Judith Verweijen argues that violence in the Global South is often viewed through the lens of a media-aid complex, which is 'instrumental in the (re)production of the discourses that construct "the Global South" and that inform and legitimize aid, military and other interventions, ostensibly aimed at its "repair"' (Verweijen, 2015, p. 244). The media-aid narrative of armed groups situates them in a depoliticized state of anarchy, reducing armed groups as little more than roving bandits (Olson, 1993). Their motivation for fighting is often reduced to simple control and exploitation of resources, and their means of combat is viewed through a lens of rape and pillage. Both these images seek to dehistoricize and depoliticize Congolese conflict; to reinforce existing views of the Congo as a "Heart of Darkness" whilst simultaneously erasing traces of the historical legacy which led to the creation of that Heart of Darkness image. Verweijen argues that the pervasiveness of this media-aid narrative of African warfare 'has a profound effect on the mind-set of the researcher' (Verweijen, 2015, p. 249), in that it pre-disposes researchers to seek out what is barbaric and exceptional in conflict settings. This gives researchers a comforting sense of 'moral high ground, preventing us from making a free fall into the initially unsettling world of moral ambiguity, where

moralties, identities and narratives are multiple, ill-delineated and ever-shifting' (Verweijen, 2015, p. 261).

While a number of prominent critiques of peacebuilding have claimed to see past dominant media-aid narratives, the extent to which media-aid narratives shape the minds of academic researchers entering the field, is rarely discussed. Nor, indeed is the question of how researchers deal with the moral ambiguities that they encounter in the field. As a result many critiques of peacebuilding tend to offer alternatives to the dominant media-aid narrative which are different, but nonetheless relatively simplistic. Among the most prominent critiques of the dominant narratives of the DRC, is Severine Autesserre's work, set out in her two seminal monographs *The Trouble with the Congo* (2010) and *Peaceland* (2014). Autesserre has argued that the dominant narratives in Western framings of conflict in the eastern DRC, have led international peacebuilders to overlook the local dynamics that drive a lot of conflict. These frames, she argued, led to misguided policies that overlooked dynamics such as 'land conflict, poverty, corruption, local political and social antagonisms, and hostile relationships between state officials, including security forces, and the general population' (Autesserre, 2012: 4). Autesserre's research has been well-received in both academic and policy circles. Indeed, while Autesserre has argued that peacebuilders often lack the time to understand the context before arriving in the field or engage with the literature on conflict (Autesserre, 2014), many of the international peacebuilders that I spoke to while on fieldwork in 2014 had heeded Autesserre's advice and arrived in the field well-informed about the local context. Several had higher degrees in conflict and development and would talk about conflict using academic terms such as "neopatrimonialism" and "states of exception". As one interviewee pointed out, 'we've all read Autesserre, we know we need to pay attention to local dynamics, and we are changing our frames.'<sup>4</sup> Autesserre had, ironically, become the shaper of the new frame held by many international peacebuilders in the DRC, this time one which calls for the merging of both top-down and bottom-up approaches to conflict in the eastern DRC. Consequently, peacebuilders understood that they needed to focus not only on national drivers of conflict, but also to look at local dynamics of conflict. Although arguably an improvement on the frames which Autesserre had critiqued, this new frame however

was still one which sidelined ambiguity, and promoted a clear narrative about what drives conflict in the Congo.

The replacement of one dominant frame with another may be a response to the trend that Kai Koddenbrock notes in Western policy papers which tend to explain poor impact of past interventions as either a incoherently deployed or focussing on the wrong factors contributing to conflict (2012, p. 559). Autesserre's work, while critical of the manner in which Western intervention is conducted, still takes for granted the idea that Western intervention is nonetheless necessary. Autesserre's prescription that peacebuilders need to take local dynamics of conflict more seriously does not challenge the 'persistent Western urge to transform the DRC' which 'requires conceptual reductionism to legitimize intervention and make that legitimacy appear self-evident' (Koddenbrock, 2012, p. 549).

An emergent body of academic literature has noted that among local population the logic of intervention is, however, far from evident. This literature addresses how local populations have tried to resist, influence and adapt to the interventions that emerge from these international peacebuilding frames. Perceptions and narratives are at the core of this literature. Marta Iñiguez de Heredia for example argues that local contestation of externally imposed statebuilding takes place not through direct confrontation with international peacebuilders, but rather at the discursive level through the deployment of counter-discourses 'giving foundation to other strategies and the construction of political alternatives' (Iñiguez de Heredia, 2012, p. 80). Sara Hellmüller examines how interactions between international and domestic values, norms and practices 'shape the outcomes of peacebuilding operations, which are often unpredictable' (Hellmüller, 2013, p. 219). Hellmüller argues that, in the Ituri province of eastern DRC, international peacebuilding agendas are hybridized with local perceptions, but that 'the intersection of priorities – the space where friction occurs – remains dominated by international actors' (Hellmüller, 2013, p. 220). Yet, as Valeria Arnould's notes in her work on local and international interactions around the issue of transitional justice 'the question of what drives processes of contestation emerging from local-international interactions remains underexplored' (Arnould, 2016, p. 322). This research which engages with the narratives that local actors employ to resist international intervention acknowledge that

just as international actors construct frames, local populations frame back. This research is important in exposing the agency of local actors in shaping international intervention (Fisher, 2014).

However, in both the literature of how international peacebuilders frame conflict and how local actors frame back, the narratives and counter-narratives employed are treated as simplistic, fixed and universally held by all the actors within that category. Consequently, the alternative explanations offered by critics of the dominant media-aid narratives themselves tend towards simplicity. Indeed, Autesserre herself notes the practical importance of simplicity in understandings of conflict: ‘Simple narratives are critical to helping deal with such complexity: they identify salient issues, dictate urgent action, and help determine who is worth supporting and who should be challenged’ (2012, p. 7). But, while Autesserre argues that simplicity is a convenient (albeit risky) means to an ends, I argue that the entire way in which narratives are treated and used as a method of analysis means simplicity will always *be* the ends. As such existing critiques of peacebuilders’ frames simply replace one (ostensibly misguided) frame with another (more accurate and/or nuanced) frame without engaging with the reality that multiple, ever-changing and difficult-to-define frames are operating in the same environment and creating fluid dynamics of conflict.

Prioritizing simplicity over ambiguity in conflict research is understandable, especially if the researcher wants their findings to have a policy impact. Complex information with ill-defined findings are often poorly received by both academic and policy audiences. Indeed, even research that challenges existing frames without prescribing exactly how these frames could be changed and providing clear evidence that such change will bring about positive results (an impossible ask, given that this evidence could only emerge if/when the change is put into practice), is unlikely to have much impact within policy circles. Several colleagues have noted that when presenting research which calls for deep-rooted or fundamental discursive shifts in understandings of conflict, at both academic and policy-oriented conferences, there is invariably a practice-orientated question from the audience along the lines of ‘that’s all very well, but what do you want me to do on Monday morning?’ This question is not designed to elicit a sensible response; it is designed to dismiss paradigm-challenging or theoretically complex



research as irrelevant because it cannot provide a clear solution. During the course of my research I attended a Stabilization Unit event in which a senior civil servant was rather disparaging of academics' tendency to tell him that "context matters": 'I know context matters, but what can I do with that?'<sup>5</sup> In this consumption of conflict knowledge, knowledge which does not point to clear solutions is not deemed "useful" knowledge. As Finkenbusch points out, messy contextual information undermines that universalising reductionist knowledge that much of statebuilding is predicated upon. 'And the less they [statebuilders] know (in the reductionist, generalizable sense of the term), the less they can govern in a purposive way and with the reasonable expectation of actually achieving anything (Finkenbusch, 2016, p. 165). However, as Law asks about dealing with mess in social research, if something is an awful mess, then would something less messy not make a mess of describing it? (Law, 2004). This is not to say we should not try and analyse the mess in a coherent or rigorous manner, but we should not be forced to simplify if simplifying causes us to mislead.

The experiences of Bermuda Triangulation that I outline below shows how the prioritization of solution-orientated research obscures those difficult-to-articulate and hard-to-measure drivers of conflict. Despite the fact these drivers continue to fuel conflict, their invisibility in conflict research means that they are rarely addressed by peacebuilding measures. Acknowledging that sometimes conflict research results in Bermuda Triangulation brings these hidden issues to attention. In processing the information uncovered during Bermuda Triangulation, I draw on ethnographic descriptions of rumour, lies and conspiracies. This literature is less interested with the objective truth behind the information that the researcher receives and is more concerned with what this information can tell us about how informants view their worlds and their places in it. Much of this work is auto-ethnographic, reflecting on what informants tell the interviewer and why they tell it. Lee-Ann Fujii argues that even information which might be deemed as lies, half-truths or rumours constitutes valuable meta-data that can 'indicate how conditions in the present shape what people are willing to say about violence in the past, what they have reason to embellish or minimize, and what they prefer to keep to themselves' (Fujii, 2010, p. 231). Others, such as Michael Murphy acknowledge that rumours about who the researcher is, may affect how informants respond to him and what they chose to tell him, and discuss the importance

of gossip and rapport between informant and researcher in gathering data (Murphy, 1985). Indeed, in the context of the DRC – where the dominant international media-aid complex’s simplification of conflict narratives seems to have such a large effect on the policies which govern the everyday lives of conflict-affected populations – rumours provide a useful coping mechanism and the spreading of rumours can be a source of empowerment to the speaker. As Moulin has argued, rumours provide the excluded and marginalized with discursive imaginaries, which allow the subaltern to speak and make ‘sense of the forms of life shared by the community, while at the same time constructing it’ (Moulin, 2010, p. 349). For conflict analyses that seek to understand conflict dynamics from the bottom-up, a focus on rumours can be an invaluable source of knowledge, for it is ‘through this everyday discourse that difference is continually marked and constructed. If these constructions of everyday difference are ignored, the full implications of political change may be lost or misunderstood’ (Mains, 2004: 357).

I present below a autoethnography of my own process of research and how, through a process of Bermuda Triangulation I uncovered a series of underlying beliefs, rumours and conspiracies which shaped different narratives of conflict. I am not concerned here with whether these beliefs, rumours and conspiracies are well-founded. Rather I am interested in how they weave together different drivers of conflict into their narratives (Mains, 2004) and the extent to which they constitute a ‘mode of making reality’ (Heathershaw, 2012, p. 610). This method of analysing narratives also draws on Emily Pia’s work on narrative therapies which ‘acknowledges the broader socio-political context of people’s lives and relationships and the cultural connotation of meanings produced in language by challenging the effects of institutionalized power and the saturated productions of the self’ (Pia, 2013, p. 477). I attempt to understand in this article how the different narratives promoted by different actors allows them to promote or pursue a particular form of action.

### **Psychopath or Saviour? The case of Sheka**

Prior to embarking on fieldwork, I interviewed Andy (not his real name) a former aid worker who had worked for *Médecins Sans Frontières* in the town of Pinga, in the

Masisi Territory of North Kivu. Andy told me about an armed ethnic stand-off that had taken place in 2012-13 between the Hutu population (who were backed by the FDLR<sup>6</sup> armed group), the Hunde population (supported by the ACPLS<sup>7</sup> armed group) and the Nyanga population (supported by a group called Mai Mai Sheka). The central character in this story (and the leader of the Mai Mai group in question) was a man called Ntabo Ntaberi Sheka, a former member of the miners cooperative COMIMPA<sup>8</sup>, who then went on to work for Mineral Processing Congo (MPC), a mining company that holds the exploration rights to the Bisie mine (Mueller, 2014) in Sheka's home territory of Walikale. The initial story that I heard during this interview was one which presented Sheka as an opportunistic populist who exploited anti-Rwandan sentiments to rally support against the Rwandan-Hutu FDLR and the Hutu population (who, even if they were Congolese Hutu, nonetheless spoke the Rwandan language, Kinyarwanda<sup>9</sup>). I was told how Sheka had started as little more than a mercenary for hire, who relied heavily on child recruitment for his group. However, as Andy told it, Sheka made some attempt to posit himself as a defender of his community. 'Sheka was a bastard, but he would talk about development and made some effort to put some political structures in place, even if his rhetoric was not matched by actions'<sup>10</sup>. Furthermore, even though Sheka did recruit children, Andy pointed out that some of the Nyanga community gave their kids over willingly because they trusted that Sheka would protect them. The story did involve tropes of barbarism; I was told about Sheka's men cutting off Hutu heads and parading them around on sticks, but the barbarism had a context: 'People arm, because things seem unfair, ultimately it stems from that.'<sup>11</sup> It was an interesting story – it fit with the dominant media-aid narrative of the marauding criminal, but there was some contextual justification for that criminality. The way that Andy told his story, Sheka had used the insecurity of the Nyanga people to create a defense force. Mai Mai Sheka struck me as a potential case study of an armed group which had some political basis and challenged the depoliticized barbarianism trope.

A month later, I was conducting one of my first interviews in Goma with Ben, a UN worker, and the story of Sheka came up again. Ben and I were discussing the possibility of direct dialogue and engagement with armed groups, and Ben was sceptical: 'I mean, how can you talk to a psychopath like Sheka?'<sup>12</sup> I found the labelling of a man that Ben

had never met before as a psychopath a little extreme, but he remained adamant: ‘If you abduct children and rape...and walk around with their hearts in your hand, I’d say you’re a psychopath...he doesn’t have a political motive, he’s just evil’<sup>13</sup>. In my field notes evil and psychopath are underlined. Ben began reeling off a list of stories that he had heard about Sheka’s barbaric actions. They involved eating hearts, asking to be buried alive, shooting unarmed children, and raping young girls. Within the context of all these stories, the idea that Sheka was anything *other* than a psychopath seemed beyond the realms of possibility. Unlike Andy’s more ambivalent account of an opportunistic “bastard” exploiting the legitimate grievances of desperate people, Ben’s story made no attempt to acknowledge the context within which Sheka was operating. This story was about brute causes of conflict, not root causes of conflict.<sup>14</sup> Certainly, the dominant stories about Sheka available to Western consumers emphasised his criminal nature (Mueller, 2014; Human Rights Watch, 2015), but the language of psychopathy and evil seemed to take this narrative a step further. Morten Bøås describes how a similar language of psychopathy seeped into the International Crisis Group’s reporting on Sierra Leone and Liberia – thereby simplifying conflict and ignoring important contextual factors driving Taylor and Sankoh’s rise to power (Bøås, 2014, p. 654-55). It was also reminiscent of the Kony 2012 campaign, a campaign notorious for its depoliticization of conflict, and reification of a saviour complex among Western consumers that is stripped of context (Mamdani, 2010; Fisher, 2014). Just as Jason Russell had declared that Kony was ‘not fighting for any cause, but only to maintain power...he is not supported by anyone’ (Russell, 2012), the causeless psychopath label gave an instant moral justification for international presence and action against Sheka.

Congolese attitudes towards Sheka reflected a much more contextual understanding. That is not to say that these attitudes towards Sheka were uniform, or necessarily positive, but they did not see him as that powerful a player in the grand scheme of things. Claude, a Congolese NGO worker told me how Sheka was little more than a pawn for the interests of the Rwandan government: ‘he was a businessman selling minerals...but he was co-opted to start a group...the M23<sup>15</sup> and [the] Rwandan Intelligence Service created him.’<sup>16</sup> Whereas Didier, a businessman from Sheka’s hometown argued that Sheka was a pawn in a much larger geopolitical game:

‘2008 is when Sheka started, it was also the time that the West had a financial crisis...The West couldn’t buy coltan, but China still had money to buy, so the West created a conflict so they could say China’s buying conflict minerals.’<sup>17</sup>

Others did not see Sheka as so much of a pawn, but rather an opportunist – several interviewees said they thought Sheka had taken US\$60,000 from the PMC mining company that he previously worked for, but why he did it was disputed. Some said he was given the money by the mining company for mineral explorations, some said he was given it to start an armed group to defend the company’s interests, and others said he just stole the money and used it to start an armed group in order to protect himself.

The psychopath trope, however, was most challenged by Etienne, a Congolese journalist, who claimed to have known Sheka quite well before he became a Mai Mai leader:

‘According to Sheka, he said he became a rebel in Walikale because they [Sheka and his followers] are not happy to see the government exploit the mining [industry in Walikale]. The population was upset – 50% of the budget comes from mining but there were no services. The population felt conned.’<sup>18</sup>

Etienne explained how Sheka had begun seeking a peaceful solution to the exploitation of the people of Walikale. Sheka, according to Etienne, had written letters to the Congolese government, MONUSCO and the EU imploring them all to end the repression that his people were receiving at the hands of the Congolese army (FARDC), but nothing was done. Then, one day, he flew to Kinshasa to present a memo to the Congolese Minister of Mining. Like several other Congolese informants, Etienne emphasised to me how educated Sheka was, and how he had used his legal background to appeal for more rights for the population through peaceful means, but that he was met with violence from the government: ‘When he returned to Walikale [from the Minister of Mining in Kinshasa] the army forced him to eat his memo, they made him “shit it out” in public. This angered the population, especially the young men’.<sup>19</sup>

The interview was full of background information about Sheka's life, Etienne gave me a number of biographical details that coincided with Sheka's decision to take up arms. Apparently, Sheka's father died of a tooth infection because he did not have access to penicillin. His sister miscarried, and was sent to a hospital in Masisi just over 100km away, but died before she got there because the road was so bad her car got stuck in the mud. 'You need to consider all these things, which all coincided at the time. In the end he was beaten and the youth started revolting, so Sheka told these people to fight for their rights'<sup>20</sup> Could this be true? I had travelled outside of Goma along terrible roads and seen plenty of cars stuck in the rain. I knew that many Congolese people die needlessly every day because of a lack of access to basic services. Why should I assume that Sheka should not be someone who suffered such similar tragedies? Furthermore, there was plenty of evidence that the Congolese state, and particularly the army, were willing to crush peaceful protests with violence. Perhaps Sheka did begin peacefully. At the same time, if Sheka was a psychopath there is equally no reason why he would be above manipulating people with stories of his own victimhood. I did not want to reinforce barbarism tropes, but at the same time, I did not want to naively be led astray by 'ethnographic seduction' (Robben, 1995).<sup>21</sup>

I have spent days looking for reliable documentation to support all of the stories presented about Sheka above and, to varying degrees, I have found evidence to support every story and evidence to refute them as well. But the veracity of the stories is not really the point, for they reveal a number of significant dynamics in and of themselves. For a UN worker like Ben, given the disinclination of the UN to engage in deep-rooted political and governance reform, the psychopath trope justifies the dialogue-free military approach taken towards Mai Mai Sheka, and armed groups more generally. For the Congolese respondents the stories reveal the dynamics that they feel drive conflict: For Claude, the NGO worker it was Rwandan interference. For Didier, the businessman it was Western interference more generally. For Etienne the journalist it was exploitation, disillusioned youth, and marginalization. These were all significant dynamics which kept featuring in my interviews, and yet they barely feature in dominant Western narratives of the conflict.

It appeared that several of the informants were trying to indicate to me what factors they thought most significant in driving conflict in the DRC through the manner in which they framed the story of Sheka. But their narratives went beyond simply giving an opinion on what they thought were the most significant drivers of conflict, their stories seemed to demonstrate *how* these factors – be it the predation of the state, the interference of the Rwandans, the nefarious forces of international business, or some other reason – had resulted in the creation and militarization of Mai Mai Sheka. And *all* of these reasons, to different people and to varying degrees, were presented as potentially legitimate reasons why people may turn to armed violence.

### **White lies and self-evident truths: How narratives and counter-narratives shape actions**

The process of Bermuda Triangulation also revealed to me the manner in which dominant narratives and their counter-narratives interacted in everyday manners to create *new* understandings and beliefs among actors within the Congo. This was perhaps most pronounced in a chance encounter with a victim of sexual violence in the DRC. Sexual violence is one of the most heavily reported aspects of the conflict in the DRC, and many international aid agencies emphasize the urgency with which the issue needs to be addressed in the country. Again, armed actors are posited as the main perpetrators of sexual violence in the country. For example, War Child publicise on their website that:

‘the UN estimates that a staggering 200,000 women and girls have been the victims of rape or sexual violence in Congo during the last 15 years...It’s not just the rebel groups like the FDLR and Lords [*sic*] Resistance Army (LRA) that use rape and sexual violence as a weapon. The Congolese army (the FRDC) [*sic*] is widely acknowledged to do so too’ (War Child, 2015).

While not necessarily refuting the UN’s statistics, during fieldwork it became evident that this simple framing of armed groups as perpetrators of sexual violence was

misleading and had created a logic of intervention in the Congo that did not necessarily cater to the realities of victimhood.

In their extensive research on sexual violence in the DRC, Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern have observed that there is only a ‘limited framework through which we can hear, feel and attend to the voices and suffering of both those who rape and those who are raped’ (Eriksson Baaz & Stern, 2013, p. 2). I saw the first-hand effect that this limited framework had on the everyday lives of victims in a chance encounter with a woman after I had finished conducting an interview at the MONUSCO headquarters in Goma. The woman was sitting in the corner of the headquarters’ security cabin, wailing. ‘This poor woman is really suffering,’ the security guard told me when I enquired as to why she was crying profusely. There were two Congolese men with her, trying to assist her, and my research associate and I went to see if we could do anything to help her. It turned out that the woman had come from Kitchanga, a town about 50km from Goma, to seek refuge and assistance for her family. Her daughter had been raped by a neighbour, and the crying lady had reported the assault to the police, who had arrested the perpetrator. However, the rapist had, through a corruptible legal and judicial system, managed to bribe his way out of prison. Upon his release, the perpetrator had threatened to kill the woman and her family for having him arrested in the first place. Realising that the police could not protect her, the woman had made the arduous journey from Kitchanga<sup>22</sup> in order to beg MONUSCO for protection. But MONUSCO could not help her – dealing with crime was outside their remit. I happened to have the contact details of an NGO that focussed on human rights abuses which I gave to the woman in the hope that they might be able to help her.

A few days later, I was interviewing George, a member of that same human rights organisation, and asked if they had heard from the woman I referred to them. As far as George knew, they had not seen the woman in question, and as he pointed out, ‘in any case, we couldn’t have helped her, as we only deal with human rights abuses, not crimes.’<sup>23</sup> I enquired as to the difference and was informed that a human rights abuse ‘had to be committed by someone in a position of authority’<sup>24</sup> – if a soldier or an armed group member had raped her daughter it would be a human rights abuse, but as in this



case it was a civilian (the woman's neighbour) it was a crime. And crimes were left to the Congolese police system. At the MONUSCO headquarters, one of the people trying to assist the crying woman had advised her to tell them that her daughter had been raped by a soldier. At the time I thought it an odd and unnecessary lie, but now I realised why the advice was useful. If a soldier had been the rapist, the woman could have accessed international assistance only available for victims of human rights abuses. As a victim of a crime she could only rely on assistance from the Congolese justice system – a system notorious for its predation and corruption. The bottom line was that the woman needed help; her daughter had been raped and her life threatened, and it made sense in this context to lie about the perpetrator if it meant she got the assistance that she needed.

I do not know if the woman in question did lie about who her attacker was, but the scenario revealed to me a number of maladies within the larger system. Firstly, it showed a broken justice system; this was not the first time that I had heard stories of police corruption. I had been told several times that the police were badly paid and often resorted to extortion, and I had witnessed people's everyday fear of police predation first-hand. Secondly it showed how international framings created different levels of assistance for victims of the same crime – in this case rape – by focussing solely on the circumstances in which the crime had taken place. This created incentives for people, desperate for assistance and aware of the inequalities in the system, to adjust the narratives of those stories in order to ensure access to the assistance that they needed. This however, creates a vicious cycle of inequality in which the initial narrative – which justified the relatively large amounts of aid available to victims of human rights abuses (but not crimes) – is vindicated.

While it is certainly true that armed groups and Congolese army members do commit sexual violence, the international framings of sexual violence in the DRC overlook the victims of everyday sexual abuse not committed by armed forces, and the woeful incapacity of the Congolese system to help them. As one interviewee told me, in many places crimes like rape are committed by '*un homme non identifié*' (an unidentified man, who could be an armed group member, a soldier, or a civilian) and because people

do not know who did it, it is often easier for them to speculate that it was a combatant from a group that is known to operate in the area.<sup>25</sup>

The deployment of narratives that fit with, and can therefore benefit from the aid that is tied to, dominant international narratives is one way in which the marginalized can seek empowerment. I am reluctant here to describe these narratives as “lies” for, although they contain omissions and/or inclusions that are not entirely truthful, they are told by victims in order to gain resources that are badly needed and resist a system that is intrinsically stacked against them. Instead, I consider such narratives as a type of ‘methodology of the oppressed’ (Sandoval, 2000) – a means by which the victim can gain power through mobilising different aspects of his/her identity. However, this methodology is not without risk, and can create new dynamics of conflict.

In a recent article, Silke Oldenburg argues that the politics of love and intimacy that has emerged as a result of intervention in the Congo has created in Goma ‘a conflict between morality and materiality that shapes and (re)configures local gender relations’ (Oldenburg, 2015, p. 316). Oldenburg deconstructs the notion of female victimhood and notes how some women are able to strategically deploy their femininity in order to access the “market of intervention”. This could be done in a number of different ways from entering into relationships with peacekeepers to taking advantage of the discourses on gender mainstreaming and empowerment which results in humanitarian assistance and NGOs privileging women. However, as she notes ‘this seeming advantage also shapes local gender relations, and might trigger feelings of envy, powerlessness and fatalism, particularly for young men. [Because] In the framework of gender-specific programmes, young men are most invisible’ (Oldenburg, 2015, p. 327).

Such feelings seemed to manifest in some of the discussions that I had with some Congolese interviewees about the issue of sexual violence. During my interviews with a number of Congolese officials, community leaders, and combatants I was struck by how unimportant many of them viewed the issue of sexual violence to be. Their dismissal of the issue was understandable: ‘people think Congolese men can’t control themselves and have to rape women all the time,’ Jacques, a Congolese researcher told me, ‘but

have I raped anyone? No! I believe in God, and I have a wife, I am not an animal...this rape, what is it?’<sup>26</sup> Many (admittedly male) interviewees felt that the label that the Congo ‘was the rape capital of the world’ unfairly maligned them *personally*. They were keen to emphasise the respectfulness of Congolese men towards women, even using that fact that I was a female researcher (who had experienced no inappropriate behaviour from any of my Congolese male interviewees) as evidence that ‘rape doesn’t really happen that much’<sup>27</sup>.

I had asked Jacques what he thought about the experiences of the woman that I had encountered at the MONUSCO headquarters, and although he was sympathetic to her predicament, (‘Yes, the justice in this country doesn’t work, you can’t trust the police’<sup>28</sup>) he took the story to be evidence that women lie about rape. Despite me pointing out that the woman may not have lied at all, but if she did she would not be lying about her daughter *being* raped but rather about *who* raped her in order to get the assistance that she needed, Jacques was still dismissive. ‘But how do you know her daughter was raped? Many women lie about this’<sup>29</sup>. This sentiment was echoed by other informants I was told several stories about women who used the threat of crying rape as a way to extort money from men. I was even told that NGOs inflate the problem of rape so that they can get more funding for themselves. As one interviewee told me, ‘when someone gets raped, someone gets paid’<sup>30</sup>

As in the case of Sheka, I could not determine what evidence any of these theories and stories were based upon. Again the stories were largely anecdotal and lacking clear evidence, but in a context where all actors (including the UN and NGOs) relied on stories, these counter-narratives had a lot of power. What was clear was that the emphasis on rape as a weapon of war (which I reiterate does happen) has led to a simplistic and unified narrative of sexual violence in the Congo which delegitimises the victims who experience sexual violence differently. As a result, other nefarious dynamics of gender inequality (the high levels of prostitution in IDP camps by young girls unable to fend for themselves any other way, victims of rape by civilians, victims of domestic abuse, etc.) are ignored. Female victims of these more complicated abuses cannot access help unless they change their narratives to fit the system, and when

Congolese men who feel marginalized by the system witness some women adapting their narratives to access assistance, they perceive them as liars. Consequently the limited externally imposed framework and the manner in which local actors adapt to and resist such a framework creates new inter-communal tensions which themselves generate new narratives about victimization. These may become themselves a source of tension. In this case, international interventions to combat sexual violence gave rise to narratives which were predicated on a belief that female victims may not be as victimized as they claim to be, and that narratives about rape in the Congo are designed to dehumanize Congolese men and present them as savages.

## **Conclusion**

The complicating effect of competing narratives, half-truths and rumours on real-life dynamics in the Congo is under-appreciated in conflict analyses, and as a result poorly understood. In part, this is because analysing these narratives is difficult. Furthermore, dynamics are “messy”, ever-changing and complicated – three characteristics of research with which policy-makers are poorly equipped to work. Consequently, such research does not seem worthwhile, being as it is difficult to produce, with little likelihood of impact. However, these narratives reveal very important dynamics of conflict that need to be acknowledged if peacebuilding programming is to be successful. The process of Bermuda Triangulation – embracing the messiness of the research process and the data it produces as accurately reflecting the complexity of the situation – can help uncover some of these competing narratives and draw attention to certain dynamics of conflict that may be obscured through conventional forms of analysis.

## **Note on the Contributor**

Suda Perera is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Developmental Leadership Program, University of Birmingham. She holds a BA (Hons) Politics from Durham University, an MA in Post-War Recovery Studies from the University of York, and a PhD in International Conflict Analysis from the University of Kent. Her research

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<sup>1</sup> The United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) currently has an approved budget of almost US\$1.5 billion for 2015-2016, and 22,492 uniformed and civilian personnel currently deployed, making it also one of the organization's most expensive and extensive peacekeeping missions to date

<sup>2</sup> The DRC received US\$2.6 billion per year in aid from OECD donors between 2012 and 2014 (OECD, 2016), and foreign donors have contributed more than half of the Congolese national budget between 2003 and 2010 (Autesserre S. , 2010).

<sup>3</sup> The fieldwork took place in North and South Kivu between August and November 2014, I am extremely grateful to my two research associates, Victor Anas and Josaphat Musamba who assisted with the arrangement of interviews, interpretation of responses, logistical support during this fieldwork, and continued to assist me the collection of data after I returned from the field.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with MONUSCO worker. Goma, 25 August 2014

<sup>5</sup> Stabilization Unit meeting. London, 5 November 2014

<sup>6</sup> *Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda* – an armed group led by, and mainly comprising of, Rwandan Hutus who fled Rwanda in the aftermath of the Rwandan Genocide in 1994. They have been operating in various forms in the eastern DRC since.

<sup>7</sup> *Alliance de patriotes pour un Congo libre et souverain* – a Congolese armed group led by a defector from the Congolese army, General Janvier Karayiri. Many of its members are from the



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Hunde ethnic group. At the time of the event being described in this interview the ACPLS and the FDLR were working in a loose alliance.

<sup>8</sup> *Coopérative minière de Mpama Bisie*.

<sup>9</sup> As a result, the distinction between Congolese and Rwandan is often blurred to be between Congolese and *Rwandaphone* – speakers of Kinyarwanda who include Congolese Hutu and Tutsi.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Andy, an expatriate former NGO worker. Birmingham, 1 July 2014

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Andy, an expatriate former NGO worker. Birmingham, 1 July 2014

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Ben, an expatriate UN worker. Goma, 27 August 2014

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Ben, an expatriate UN worker. Goma, 27 August 2014

<sup>14</sup> Rather than focussing on societal factors which cause conflict, those who take a brute causes approach to analysis ‘highlight the more immediate motivations for members of the political elite to use organized violence’ (de Waal, 2014, p. 350).

<sup>15</sup> *Mouvement du 23-Mars*, a Congolese rebel group, made up mainly of former members of the *Congrès national pour la défense du peuple* (CNDP) who had defected from the Congolese army. It was believed that the group had support from the Rwandan government.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Claude, a Congolese NGO worker. Goma, 5 September 2014

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Didier, a Congolese businessman from Bisie, Walikale. Goma, 31 August 2014

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Etienne, a Congolese journalist. Goma, 6 September 2014

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Etienne, a Congolese journalist. Goma, 6 September 2014

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Etienne, a Congolese journalist. Goma, 6 September 2014

<sup>21</sup> Robben uses the term to describe the process of being led astray by research subjects whose personal qualities might affect your critical sensibilities. Robben choses ‘the word *seduction* to describe those personal defences and social strategies... Seduction is used here exclusively in its neutral meaning of being led away unawares, not in the popular meaning of allurement and entrapment’ (Robben, 1995, p. 83)

<sup>22</sup> The road network in the eastern DRC is notoriously poor and neglected, even short journeys can take hours, as rain on the dirt tracks can cause the roads to wash away and vehicles to get stuck. In many areas even dirt track roads do not exist, and travel is only possible by foot or motorbike.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with George, an expatriate NGO worker. Goma, 13 September 2014

<sup>24</sup> Interview with George, an expatriate NGO worker. Goma, 13 September 2014

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Irene, expatriate academic. London and Uvira (via Skype), 11 July 2014

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Jacques, Congolese researcher. Bukavu, DRC, 26 September 2014

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<sup>27</sup> Interview with Jacques, Congolese researcher. Bukavu, DRC, 26 September 2014

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Jacques, Congolese researcher. Bukavu, DRC, 26 September 2014

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Jacques, Congolese researcher. Bukavu, DRC, 26 September 2014

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Didier, a Congolese businessman from Bisie, Walikale. Goma, 31 August 2014