MICRO CON

A MICRO LEVEL ANALYSIS OF VIOLENT CONFLICT

Social Mobility in Times of Crisis: Militant Youth and the Politics of Impersonation in Côte d'Ivoire (2002-2011)

MICROCON Research Working Paper 58
Karel Arnaut

January 2012

Correct citation: Arnaut, K. 2012. *Social Mobility in Times of Crisis: Militant Youth and the Politics of Impersonation in Côte d'Ivoire (2002-2011)*. MICROCON Research Working Paper 58, Brighton: MICROCON

First published in 2012

© Karel Arnaut 2012

For further information, please contact:

MICROCON: A Micro Level Analysis of Violent Conflict, Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9RE

Tel: +44 (0) 01273 915706

Email: info@microconflict.eu

Web: www.microconflict.eu

Social mobility in times of crisis:

Militant youth and the politics of impersonation in Côte d'Ivoire (2002-2011)[1,2]

Karel Arnaut [3]

Abstract

This paper explores critical aspects of the agency of youngsters in situations of crisis. Throughout the political-military conflict in Côte d'Ivoire (2002-2011), the patriotic militias were the locus of extensive networking and, to the extent that this was informed by political or ideological choices, vast enterprises of civil society building. In this paper, I focus on the performative and social dimension of youth militia activity: (a) the sustained attempts by youngsters to insinuate themselves into the armed forces by 'impersonation', and (b) the wider and often intricate processes of networking and hierarchism within which these persistent pursuits of social mobility took place. Rather than to capture the wider transformations triggered by these processes in narrow analytical concepts such as 'brutalisation' and 'militianisation', this paper considers them to be the contingent outcome of competencies, mobility, and creativity of youngsters whose performative, social, and physical trajectories transform public life. This paper thus seeks to make the point that the long post-war (post-2002), or rather pre-peace, multiplication of militias and their growing impact on social and political life, constituted a protracted, multifaceted and multi-sited process which we can productively begin to disentangle in terms of social mobility albeit of a juvenile and subaltern kind.

---

[1] In memory of General Ato Bely

[2] I owe a large debt of gratitude to the two protagonists of this paper, Marcus Garvey and the late Ato Belly, for sharing with me their life histories, their dreams and disillusions. Many others made the field research for this paper, an intellectually stimulating and emotionally enriching experience: Gadou Dakoury, Téhéna and Mariam Koné, Adjallou, and the numerous 'patriotic' militia members and political militants of which so many have sadly 'disappeared' after the dramatic events of March-April 2011. Most of the field research for this paper was funded by MICROCON. I thank Koen Vlassenroot, Anne Walraet, Morten Bøås, and Timothy Raeymaekers for many years of inspiring collaboration.

[3] Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen, Arnaut@mmg.mpg.de

Introduction

This paper addresses the issue of social mobility of the youth whose condition has at times been described in terms of hyper-mobility (Richards and Chauveau, 2007) or extreme immobility, verging on 'social death' (Vigh, 2006). Particularly in the contexts in which these apparent opposite conditions have been observed – those of heavy societal turbulence sometimes accompanied by widespread violence (Arnaut and Højbjerg, 2008) – the saying applies that 'the extremes meet'. Both predicaments imply a lack of enabling attachments provoking extreme rootlessness hence making youngsters 'mobilisable' or exploitable for different sorts of mostly violent enterprises (Chauveau and Richards, 2007), or leading to extreme 'stuckness' and isolation which youngsters try to overcome by grasping the opportunities offered by war and turmoil (Vigh, 2006). Taking its lead from these insights, this paper wishes to extend the focus beyond the immediate violent context by exploring the longer term goals and aspirations of the youngsters under consideration (Raeymaekers, 2011, Argenti, 2007, Diouf, 2003, Hall and Jefferson, 2006 (1993)).

Several successful attempts have been made to take into account pre- and/or post-conflict continuities. Hoffman (2007b: 640), for one, stressed the socialisation processes that preceded militia-formation by documenting how the erstwhile Sierra Leonean 'militia' Civil Defence Forces was the product of "the militarisation of a web of social relations". Another attempt in that respect is Utas' (2005) who followed these changing relations into the post-conflict era; but more importantly for our present purposes, he looked at how wartime structures and competencies were being transferred into peace-time Liberia, in the field of democratic politics (Christensen and Utas, 2008, but see also: Hoffman, 2007a, 2011).

In a similar vein, the present paper looks at social networking and professional advancement, in other words at life-making projects (Raeymaekers, forthcoming), which youngsters seek to realise under the guise of military action. Considerable insight has been gained by looking into processes of 'militianisation' or the capturing of youth constituencies in the proliferation of militias (Banégas, 2008, Ngodi, 2006). However, within the on-going quest to strike the right balance on youth agency (Honwana, 2000, Vlassenroot and Raeymaekers, 2004, Vigh, 2009, Utas and Jörgel, 2008), 'militianisation' could be argued to unduly stress youth's instrumentalisation and preclude any consideration of social mobility. In order not to fall into the other extreme (Raeymaekers, s.d.), this paper suggests a triple movement.

The first move operates a reversal of agency and tries to discern in the narratives of the militia members, attempts to insinuate themselves into on-going processes of militianisation for purposes

of professional and social advancement. The second move consists in documenting the deployment of this agency which, unsurprisingly, is of a largely tactical nature that can best be described in de Certeaunian terms of ‘détournement’ or ‘misuse’ (De Certeau, 1984). Finally, the third move is a theoretical one in that it tries to reconceptualise youth agency in these contexts as spatial and embodied performance. The turmoil of crisis, it is argued, elicits border transgressions of different kinds or, stated otherwise, opens transgressive spaces in which youth can occupy aspired positions by enactment. The kind of enactment which I call here impersonation combines mimicry with aspiration and heralds the insinuation of youngsters in particular fields (security, politics, etc.). The impersonation anticipates social mobility in the post-conflict era and can, occasionally, be the basis of societal innovation.

More concretely, this paper addresses the recent conflict in Côte d’Ivoire since the insurgency of 2002 (see: McGovern, 2011). First it looks at the process of massive mobilisation into the different pro-presidential militias (Chelpi-den Hamer, 2011). This, I argue, was to some extent propelled by the expectation of youngsters that joining the militia meant approaching the regular defence and security forces – 'the dressed-up corps' or *le corps habillé* – and eventually joining it. What followed for most of the militia members was a short but dreadful decade of trying to cling on, and keep mobilised, or at least of staying connected with military or political entrepreneurs or ‘big men’ who could remobilise them in time to join one reintegration programme or another into the regular defence and security forces. The subaltern tactics of the destitute militia members was one of discursive and performative perfection (speak/act like the military) and networking (into groupings of variable size and formality called *gbôhi*). The resulting mobility can best be described as ‘going in circles’: circulation without penetration and apprenticeship without full mastery, impersonation without nomination. However, it is still early days to perceive what long-term effects these ‘movements’ will have, both on the life projects and aspirations of the youngsters in question and on the societal fields in which they have been deploying their truncated experiences and competencies.

Although the present paper is based on approximately 110 formal and informal interviews with a total of 74 interlocutors during four spells of fieldwork between March 2008 and March 2010, its narrative gives ample attention to the lives of two special interlocutors: the late Ato Belly and ‘Marcus Garvey’. During the post-electoral crisis of November 2010 to May 2011, I kept in touch with them (as well as with 17 others) mostly by telephone. This story begins with the last telephone conversation I had with Ato Belly to whom this paper is dedicated.

Final redress

The last time I spoke to ‘General’ Ato Belly was on Thursday 31st March 2011. It was the first night of the battle for Abidjan between armed forces defending the incumbent president Laurent Gbagbo and those dedicated to instate the elected president Alassane Ouattara.[4] This battle heralded the tragic finale of the post-electoral crisis which took a decisive turn with the arrest of Laurent Gbagbo, ten days later. The pro-Ouattara offensive was carried both from the rebel-held northern territories by the recently erected Republican Forces of Côte d'Ivoire (FRCI), and from within Abidjan by the so-called 'Invisible Commando' led by Major Coulibaly alias IB. This urban guerrilla group had been active in Abidjan for more than a month when at the end of March, in parallel with the final FRCI offensive on Abidjan, it began attacking strategic sites in the heart of the city: army camps and headquarters, the presidential palace and residence, and not in the least, the buildings of the national radio and television, RTI.[5] In response, the pro-Gbagbo, so-called 'patriotic' armed forces stepped up their mobilisation efforts by recruiting youngsters and/or handing out arms (mainly Kalashnikovs) to them.

At about midnight of that Thursday 31st, Ato Belly was defending the RTI against the Invisible Commando when the deafening noise of detonations forced us to break off our (last) telephone conversation. Previously Ato had expressed his dismay about the speed of the FRCI *blitz* and (related to that) the laxity of the regular armed forces – called the Defence and Security Forces (FDS) – and the speed with which the majority had abandoned their positions. Forestalling an imminent military debacle for the pro-Gbagbo camp, Ato Belly joined (or, one can say, rejoined) the patriotic battle and took up the arms which he had officially put down back in May 2009. At that time, he was formally disarmed as a member, with the rank of 'general', of Abidjan's largest militia, the Grouping of Patriots for Peace (GPP, *Groupement des Patriotes pour la Paix*). Earlier that month patriotic youth leader Charles Blé Goudé urged youngsters to sign up for immediate recruitment into the army, Ato had declined. Nonetheless, he told me how he found pride in assisting in the enrolment of many members of his *gbôhi* (see also: Banégas, 2011). The latter is the Nouchi term for gang or group and, as we will see soon, it can refer to different types of networks, bands, and factions as well as formal militia groups. The junior militia members of Ato’s *gbôhi*, he reported, were quartered at the prestigious infantry camp of Akouédo and he

4. Ato Belly died soon after. It appears that Ato was severely wounded during that night’s battle and spent a couple of days in hospital before being discharged. Less than one week into his convalescence, Ato was shot dead in his house by people who have so far remained unidentified.
5. The history of IB and his Invisible Commando remains to be elucidated. His role in the battle against Gbagbo is as murky as his participation in the coup d'état of 2002. On 27th April 2011 IB was killed and his Invisible Commando dismantled.

reckoned they were finally very close to becoming real soldiers: "they have a bed, a uniform, and a fire arm of their own".

Ato Belly's reluctance to join the patriotic battle this time around was largely due to his resentment against the Gbagbo administration for lack of recognition and remuneration for his participation in the previous patriotic battles (following the coup d'état of 2002). Among other things, his long-standing pro-Gbagbo militancy had materialised into the creation of GPP militia barracks in different parts of Abidjan in 2004 and 2007. Instead of official appreciation, Ato had seen both barracks being forcibly shut down by the FDS on direct orders from the president whose embattled nation he was trying to defend. On top of that, the 500,000 CFA (approximately 900 Euro) demobilisation fee promised to every formally demobilised militia member, was never disbursed by the Gbagbo administration. This was all too grave for Ato who not only needed this money for his young family – living in a ramshackle house with a 10-month old disabled daughter – but also for the hundreds of youngsters of his *gbôhi* who kept on hassling him for financial support or urging him to raise the matter of this broken promise among the militia leadership and its patrons in presidential circles. But against all odds, Thursday 31st March offered the occasion for ultimate redress.

During our last telephone conversation, Ato explained that he was rigged out in a complete battle dress, put together from among the uniforms, boots, berets, and belts, left behind by the many FDS who had abandoned the RTI premises. He had even succeeded, he added, in procuring a number of shoulder marks (*galons*) which he would sew on later. Also, he had an impressive amount of weapons at his disposal: Kalashnikovs in great numbers as well as anti-tank RPG-7 grenade launchers. Finally, Ato did not miss the occasion to point out that all this took place in the presence, and with the support of Gbagbo's finest and manifestly bravest army unit, the Republican Guards (*Gardes Républicaines*). They made this sudden transformation 'real': vouching for his soldiery value, turning his hasty dressing-up into an official act of instantaneous conscription, and converting his seized weaponry and insignia into bestowals complementing his last-ditch, ‘well deserved’ career move.

Militias and pre-peace networking

The above section recounts one of the many tragic micro-moments in Côte d'Ivoire's recent post-electoral drama which formed the violent denouement of a long decennium of politico-military strife. The latter started with the 1999 coup d'état removing Henri Konan Bédié from power, followed by a turbulent military transition under General Guéï. Laurent Gbagbo's seizure of power

in late 2000 and the (half-successful) coup d'état which ensued from this in September 2002, resulted in the creation of a rebel-held northern zone. The recent post-electoral crisis set off when Laurent Gbagbo and Alassane Ouattara both claimed victory in the November 2010 presidential elections. After four months of fruitless mediation the crisis took a decisive turn when the two protagonists chose recourse to military force and Ouattara won largely due to the support of the international community.

The types of armed forces engaged in the conflict since 1999 were many and diverse. Apart from the regular military and security forces (FDS, and later, the FRCI), and the international peace-keeping forces – the UN peace-keeping force ONUCI and its French counterpart 'Operation Licorne' – there were mercenaries, (gangs of) thugs, youth militias, hunter-warriors groups (the so-called *dozos*), *ad hoc* armed youth groups, and activist civilians providing shelter and food for the various combatants.

Although estimates vary widely and (will) remain extremely difficult to make, one may count up to 40,000 people, mainly youngsters, who were active in so-called parallel forces on both sides of the conflict. An estimated 25,000 of them belonged to the pro-Gbagbo patriotic militias. The latter emerged in late 2002-early 2003 within widely differing contexts of local and national mobilisation. Although the large majority of the militia members waited for their official demobilisation and disarmament until the end of 2009, many were only active in military operations prior to 2005 and only for a couple of months in total.

With a few notable exceptions, the operations in which the patriotic self-defence groups participated were of limited military significance. Ironic perhaps but quite typical for the Ivorian situation, militia organisations were mostly established in the aftermath of the early decisive combats in the west (Chelpi-den Hamer, 2010, 2011), and in anticipation of post-war registration and so-called communal reinsertion programmes, which began to materialise in a haphazard way from 2009 onwards. Throughout this period many remained mobilised or kept in contact with their units and commanders while attending to other activities. As we will see in more detail below, throughout the short decade of political-military conflict (2002-2011), the patriotic militias were the locus of extensive networking and to the extent that this was informed by political or ideological choices, became vast enterprises of civil society building. On the latter dimension of militia-formation I have written elsewhere (Arnaut, 2008b, 2008c). In this paper, I focus more on its social dimension: the intricate processes of networking. After all, the post-war, or rather, pre-peace multiplication of militias and their growing impact on social and political life, was a

protracted, multifaceted and multi-sited process, which this paper tries to begin to disentangle in terms of social mobility of a juvenile and subaltern kind.

Military triangulations

The dynamics of expansion, dissemination, and mobility of militias in southern Côte d'Ivoire during the preceding decade had at least three dimensions to it: (a) the flexibility of militia members as related to their resourcefulness and entrepreneurship, (b) the changeability of militia structures within strategies of clientelism and low-key elite formation, and (c) proximity to regular defence and security forces. The latter are commonly referred to as *le(s) corps habillé(s)*, meaning 'corps in uniform' (literally, 'the dressed-up corps') and comprises several categories of uniform-wearing, arms-carrying civil servants: police, state police (*gendarmes*), specialised police units (such as environmental police), army, and customs (*douanes*). By 'proximity' to the *corps habillés*, I mean either the latter's physical co-presence during training, on the front lines, and in various sites and schemes of 'violent labour', or their omnipresence in the aspirations of the youngsters – as holders of a secure employment and as icons of social success. As we will see at the end of this paper, this proximity situates the *corps habillés* and the militias in a common 'field'. Theorising this will allow us to get a firmer grip on youth, their social mobility and networking as dimensions of subaltern agency in times of crisis and violent conflict. But first, we need to grasp the basic entangled dynamic of militia members, their chiefs and patrons.

Coming back to the issue of militia mobility, ‘General’ Ato Belly was definitely a stationary type, both geographically and in terms of militia membership, but that did not make his calculations about his own and his fellow militiamen's social mobility any less judicious. Ato was an Abidjanese local taxi (*woroworo*) driver until late 2002, when he joined the patriotic movement. In early 2003 he joined the Abidjan-based GPP militia and remained active in its networks until his death. Within the GPP Ato played a central role in successive attempts to establish camps (*cantonnement*) in Abidjan. He took the lead in transforming the girls' school *Institut Marie-Thérèse* into a GPP barracks. Between August 2004 and March 2005 this camp, branded as the *First Battalion of Commando Legionnaires* (1^{èr}BCL), housed up to four hundred youngsters. Much later, in mid-2007, Ato made another successful attempt to accommodate several hundred militiamen who were out on the streets of Abidjan after having been chased from their camps and from the police and gendarme barracks in which they had been housed for several months. This time around, Ato chose the deserted run-down hotel Akwaba along the Abidjan beach as his self-styled ‘naval’ base – located in Vridi, the neighbourhood where Ato was raised and spent most of his life. According to Ato, his sustained attempts to muster and accommodate his ex-combatants

were meant to keep up the latter's public visibility in anticipation of announced demobilisation and reinsertion schemes. However, as we will see presently, given the inveterate uncertainty of these programmes, militiamen also bet on other horses.

Both from the Akwaba ‘naval’ base (until it was dismantled in November 2008) and, even more so, from the above-mentioned First BCL camp in Adjamé, Ato observed and supported the to and fro movements of 'his' troops. On an individual basis or in groups of variable size (also called *gbôhi*) combatants were seizing all sorts of opportunities to valorise their 'violent labour' (Hoffman, 2011) or other skills. In between answering one or the other call for support on the front lines, they carried out often very short-term contract work in as diverse areas as construction work and development projects, but mostly in security and vigilantism in very different sectors such as transport (or transport regulation) and politics.

While serving as a dispatching centre for thousands of militia members in different war sites in the interior, the GPP in Abidjan increasingly fragmented. Whilst in action along the so-called front lines, GPP members formed new groups and networks which, on return in Abidjan, did not (fully) reintegrate into the parent organisation. These new networks, referred to as *gbôhi*, sometimes took the form of new militia factions with new leaders who autonomously proclaimed themselves 'general' or 'commander'. Such was the case of the CNLB of Watchard Kédjébo, the FLP of Oliverson le Zoulou, and the GCLCI of Jimmy Willy, to name a few.[6] The clearing of their only centralising camp at the *Institut Marie-Thérèse* and the relative failure of subsequent camps such as the one at Azito (Yopougon) and Biabou II (Abobo), as well as the aforementioned camp at Vridi (Port-Bouët), reinforced this process of disintegration which, in turn, was countered by subsequent attempts to regroup the militia factions. These federalising attempts were either undertaken by long-standing GPP leaders such as President Bouazo Yoko Yoko Bernard or 'Chief of the Defence Staff' Jeff Fada, or by newcomers with relevant resources in the form of political contacts and financial means. Such was the case of 'General' Jimmy Willy who capitalised on his contacts with Gbagbo's FPI party in order to create the very influential federation *Union des Mouvements d’Autodéfense du Sud* (Union of Self-defence groups from the South, (UMAS)).[7]

From the above description one can already infer that the fragmentation of militias was not only the outcome of grassroots militia mobility and networking but also of intervention 'from above', *in casu*, of sustained attempts by political and military entrepreneurs to raise militias or federations thereof and become officially recognised as their chiefs. The general dynamics of the Ivorian

6. CNLB = Comité National pour la Libération de Bouaké ; FLP = Front pour la Libération du Peuple; GCLCI = Groupement des Combattants pour la Libération de la Côte d'Ivoire.
7. UMAS = L'Union des mouvements d'autodéfense du sud.

patriotic activism in general and militancy in particular, is one of mobility, of fission and fusion. These processes started within days of the outbreak of the conflict in September 2002 and, as far as we can discern, are still going on in the post-conflict period with militia leaders repositioning themselves and building new constituencies in the peace process. If Eugène Djué is now (May 2011) a figure-head of the reconciliation of patriotic militias with the new Ouattara regime, it is mainly due to his more or less consolidated status as a Big Man of patriotic militantism: in order to mark his senior position as a militia paramount chief among the many militia 'generals', he labelled himself 'marshal' (Arnaut, 2006).[8]

Further to this point, it is significant that the GPP, the self-declared 'mother of all patriotic militias', is itself the offshoot of an earlier patriotic organisation, the UPLTCI (*l'Union des Patriotes pour la Libération Totale de la Côte d'Ivoire*) created by Eugène Djué in the immediate aftermath of the September 2002 insurgency. Almost at the same time, Djué's fellow former student leader and competitor in patriotic activism, Charles Blé Goudé, created the eventually hegemonic patriotic federation, the *Alliance des Jeunes Patriotes pour le sursaut national*. When, after a couple of months, Charles Groguhet and Touré Moussa Zéguen left Djué's activist UPLTCI and founded their own, more belligerent and instantly very popular, GPP militia, both Goudé and Djué recouped some of the GPP's trained combatants, while at the same time tried to incorporate the GPP and other organisations into their respective patriotic federations. The same double operation of patronage underlies the overall dynamics of the patriotic militias: (a) emerging patrons trying to draw together networks of adventurous and peripatetic juvenile militants (from below) while (b) capturing through federation (from above) the networks that escape their control.

In order to illustrate how the above processes were also at work in other militias, but above all, in order to introduce the aspect of the proximity of *corps habillés* as the third factor of militia dynamics, I introduce another character, a militia member called 'Marcus Garvey'. His case in combination with that of Ato Belly provides the core empirical ground for further theorising subaltern mobility and networking in conflict situations.

'Marcus Garvey', networker and 'Nouchi'

Like Ato Belly, 'Marcus Garvey' took up arms again in the tragic finale of post-electoral conflict, . Also like Ato Belly, 'Marcus Garvey' saw himself very much as part of the so-called reserve pool or support base *(base arrière)* of the FDS, not by dispatching 'violent labour' or by accommodating its 'labourers' in barracks (as Ato Belly did) but by executing such violent labour

8. A reworked version of this paper will appear in Utas (2012) and expands on the phenomenon of 'bigmanity' in the networking and performance of militia members in Cote d'Ivoire.

first as a combatant and later as the foreman (*chef de dispositif*) of a group engaged in security operations. In sum, both Ato and 'Garvey' – hereafter without quotes – were Big Men of sorts, managing a network (*gbôhi*) of (ex-)combatants around them. Of both their networks nothing much is presently left: Ato's *gbôhi* has lost its leader (and in all probability most of its members), while Garvey's is entirely dispersed and reduced to a dozen friends trying to keep in touch by mobile phone.

In March 2003, at the age of 28, Garvey left Abidjan where he was born and raised, in order to join the western front near Guiglo. After a stay of about eight months during which he was enrolled by the FLGO militia, Garvey was flown home in the company of exactly 677 Abidjan-based FLGO recruits. Following a short stay at-cum-forced-removal from the Akouédo army camp, half of the returnees, including Garvey, took up residence in the vicinity of the camp, in the unfinished houses of a gigantic building site on the outskirts of Abidjan called *Lauriers*. Later on, for about seven months (November 2004-May 2005) Garvey ran a large-scale vigilante operation around the radio and TV transmitting station of Abobo (northern Abidjan) in collaboration with the FDS. For this, he estimates that he employed more than 200 (ex-)combatants, most of whom belonged to his already unravelling *gbôhi* at *Lauriers*. One year later, Garvey returned to Guiglo where he associated himself with the MILOCI militia who, in the meantime, had won a certain notoriety and was first in line for receiving demobilisation fees. In late 2008, after more than two years in Guiglo waiting fruitlessly to be demobilised, Garvey returned to Abidjan and joined what was left of his *gbôhi* at *Lauriers*. As before (2003-2004, between moving into Lauriers and taking on the vigilantes operation at Abobo), he and his dispirited gang survived on small jobs mostly in building, security, or petty trade until the violent denouement of the post-electoral crisis made him and the remaining 60 members of his group take up arms again.

On 3rd March 2011 Garvey got hold of an AK-47 rifle from one of the many deserting trainees at the Gendarmerie School and integrated into the armed forces that were defending the residence of the incumbent president Gbagbo at Cocody. When one week later, heavy UN and French bombardments destroyed the entire defence infrastructure around the presidential residence, and the arrest of Gbagbo was imminent, Garvey abandoned the battle. He also walked out on what was left of his *gbôhi* most of whom had decided to continue the struggle from the marine base at Yopougon, seconding the notoriously intrepid marine forces loyal to Gbagbo. Two months after this naval base was 'pacified' by national and international forces in May 2011, only two of Garvey's *gbôhi* have returned home. As before, Garvey now (May 2011) shares a squatted storage container with his old mate Aubin (who was too ill to partake in the recent fighting). Garvey's

girlfriend who takes care of their three-year old daughter has so far refused to join her partner in this make-shift abode.

Having no proper job, no proper house, and no family in whose midst he resides, Garvey labels himself a 'Noussi'. Going against the standard spelling of 'Nouchi' which refers to a broad category of (juvenile) urban vagrants and their slang (Newell, 2009a, de Latour, 2001), Garvey employs an idiosyncratic etymology to stress the word's composition of the French morphemes: 'nous' (we) and ‘si’ (if), while explaining that:

> "We the unemployed, we the students who have diplomas but no jobs, we, children whom the street has given birth to without checking into the maternity hospital, it is us; if you could accept us in your society without too many *arrière-pensées* [reservations] about us".

This passage in which Garvey tries to grasp the predicament of his exclusion from mainstream society, is an excerpt from one of his many writings which total about 350 pages of manuscript describing his life during the 2002-2011 violent conflict. His story as well as that of Ato (which is enshrined in about eight hours of recorded interviews), form the core of the empirical basis for exploring what I have called the proximity of the *corps habillés* as a first step towards addressing the central questions of subaltern mobility and networking in times of conflict.

Corps habillé

The relationship between the youth militias and the *corps habillés* during the 2002-2011 conflict in Côte d'Ivoire entails (a) the latter's physical co-presence during training, on the front lines, and in various other sites and schemes of 'violent labour', and (b) their importance in the youngster’s imagination as icons of successful people with a (potentially) honourable profession, a secure employment, and a flourishing social life. This does not mean that youth militia members have an unqualified admiration for the *corps habillés*. Rather, the relationship between militia members and their professional counterparts is riddled with ambiguity.

Reading through the writings of ‘Marcus Garvey’, it is difficult to miss the fact that, similar to many of his fellow combatants, the proximity to the army is the alpha and omega of his engagement with militias. In the first pages of his war journal, ‘Garvey’ reports a short conversation with a friend which instantly made him volunteer for the patriotic battle. When informing his friend ‘Garvey’ that an organisation was being set up in order to dispatch youngsters to the front lines, he explained its modus operandi as follows:

> "You go, they train you, they drop you off on the battle front in order to fight alongside the FANCI (Ivorian regular army) and after the war, they put you in the army, at least those who survived." (Garvey, 2011: 7)

The plausibility of this causal link between militia membership and entry into the regular army, largely followed from the appeals of popular politicians in the early months after the insurgency of 2002, calling on youngsters to join the regular army which was diagnosed as ageing, depleted, disheartened and in urgent need of reinforcement. Officially in late 2002 about 3000 of those who volunteered were incorporated into the army while thousands of rejected youngsters kept roaming the streets and public places of Abidjan for several months hoping fruitlessly to become part of future recruitment campaigns. That is where the process of militia formation took off.

Once they were incorporated in one or the other self-defence group based either in Abidjan or on the front lines in central and western Côte d'Ivoire, these volunteers immediately came into direct contact with members or former members (either retired or dismissed) of the *corps habillés*. Among the earliest recruits of the GPP were a group of 65 marines who had recently been dismissed for insubordination (Njabehi 18/6/2008; Shao 4/4/2009).[9] Rather than becoming plain militia combatants, most (ex-) members of the FDS took up more responsible positions and acted as trainers and coaches, exceptionally as militia leaders and in a few cases also as gatekeepers. In all, members of the *corps habillés* occupied vital positions in the intricate patronage structure surrounding the militias.

With few notable exceptions such as that of 'Commander' Nahui Lazare, leader of the self-defence group MI-24, who was an ex-member of the Ivorian army (Nahui 26/03/2009), (former) soldiers and policemen acted most often as coaches and trainers of the militia groups. To start with the former category, the late Koré Moïse alias 'Ministre de la Défense', was a military officer effectively dispatched from the Ministry of Defence, who acted as a coach to the GPP leadership during the first years of the conflict (2002-2005) (Ato 25/3/2009; Saintgbal 21/3/2008; Delta & Assoumou 3/4/2009). A typical example of a trainer is 'Colonel' Zagbayou who was a sergeant of the Ivorian army. In Abidjan he was one of the GPP's most important trainers since the very early days (Lago 8/4/2009; Njabehi 18/6/2008). Zagbayou continued his training sessions of militia volunteers in Yopougon into the post-electoral crisis, and even ended up fighting alongside his trainees until the final days of patriotic resistance to Ouattara's election (*Le Patriote* 11/1/2011; *Times Live* 30/04/2011). On the western front sergeants like Koulaï Roger and Oulaï Delafosse played a similar role. Unlike Zagbayou who appeared to have had good connections with the

9. The standard format for referring to formal field interviews is: (Name d/m/yyyy).

presidency, Koulaï and Delafosse were dispatched by their respective superiors, Colonel Oulé Yedess and General Denis Bombet, to train and coach the FLGO recruits. Importantly, higher officers such as Yedess and Bombet were less patrons than gatekeepers. As prominent members of the armed forces they legitimised the temporary permeability of the military sector for enterprising and zealous youngsters. In this role the military gatekeepers were endorsed by high-profile politicians cum agitators such as presidential security councillor Kadet Bertin and patriotic youth leader Charles Blé Goudé who regularly proclaimed the state's receptivity to juvenile input for its *corps habillés.* In fact, Bertin's and Blé Goudé's rapid rise to national prominence in itself indexed the new possibilities for youngsters. In addition to the politicians who made public appeals, there were those whose occasional public encouragement of youthful patriotic activism was complemented by moral, material, and financial support for certain militias. Among these sponsors featured members of parliament of Gbagbo's FPI party such as Nko Marcel and William Attéby, and fellow party member Geneviève Bro Grébé, president of the patriotic women's organisation (Ato 26-2-2010, Bouazo 19-03-2008). Together, military gatekeepers as much as politicians and propagandists who either represented or supported the militant youngsters, inscribed the militias into the larger story of the emergent 'rejuvenation of the nation' under president Gbagbo by showing them concrete pathways leading from militias into the military and by extension the *corps habillés* (see: Arnaut, 2005).

More concretely, it is no exaggeration to say that all ex-combatants of the self-defence groups I have spoken to could name at least one member of the *corps habillés* who was involved in their training or an important military operation in which they participated (such as *Dignité* or *Léopard*). Moreover, many of the militia members spent some time in one or the other military precincts on the front lines or in Abidjan. In and around Abidjan the prestigious marine base of Adiaké and the spacious 1st Battalion camp at Akouédo were important sites in that respect and so were the two so-called war schools of Abidjan: *Ecole de Police* and *Ecole de Gendarmerie* (e.g. Guéï & KRR & Ato 10/04/2009). In all of these places militia members received extremely variable treatment – a puzzling alternation of being glorified and humiliated. They were nurtured and accommodated at one moment and starved and chased at gunpoint at the next. As we will see presently, a similar ambivalence was equally at play in the core signifier of the *corps habillés*: the dress which could connote dignity and righteousness as much as cowardice and travesty.

One of the central items of proximity between the *corps habillés* and patriotic militias was the outfit. Issues and anecdotes relating to the uniform or battle dress (*treillis*), including the shoulder marks (*galons*), the beret (*beret*), boots (*rangers* or *rénaux*), and the belt (*ceinturon*), crop up in

almost any conversation with ex-combatants. This is also the case in Garvey's autobiography. Merely four months after his arrival on the western front line, he reports that militia members of Guiglo went out demonstrating half naked in military drill (*pas-gym)* while chanting "Give us uniforms".[10] This incident was as much revelatory as foreboding. It heralded ever growing tensions between the militia rank and file on the one hand and its leadership and the *corps habillés* units at Guiglo on the other. Eventually, this resulted in the deportation of more than 600 FLGO youngsters to Abidjan in early October 2003, as discussed earlier. Also, as I explain below, this event exemplarily revealed the broader meaning of 'dressing-up' in the context of the Ivoirian conflict and the participation of militant youngsters in it.

To "dress up the militia members" (*habiller les éléments*) does not simply mean provide them with uniforms or authorising wearing them, but falls nothing short of securing official employment including registration, monthly salary, health care and pension schemes, etc. That is what sergeant Roger Koulaï, the FLGO's main trainer and Yedess's aide de camp, referred to when in response to the nude *pas-gym* he promised his trainees would all 'be dressed'; yet several months later, just days before their deportation to Abidjan, he broke down in tears, admitting: "I have lied to you, you will not be dressed here" (Garvey, 2011: 21). This strongly indicates that the militia's focus on uniforms is much more than a (juvenile) obsession with outward appearance. As we will see presently, apart from considering the uniform as indexing a potentially critical move qua social mobility, for its aficionados it also functioned as a marker of moral distinction.

As could be expected, the military leadership gave preference to its regular troops when it came to the distribution of battle dresses and equipment. Garvey reports on the frustration this sometimes caused among his fellow FLGO members but while explaining this he also provides us with some clues as to how this combines with a more general disdain about the FDS's (in)significance in maintaining public order in a front-line city like Guiglo. During the rainy season of 2003, he writes, "The policeman at his roadblock could sleep throughout, the gendarme commuted between the Mini Shop bar and his desk, while the soldier was busy managing his women's business when he wasn't attending to the roadblock." In order to measure the degree of Garvey's low esteem for all three categories of the *corps habillés*, it is important to know that not only drinking at the Mini Shop and flirting was considered to be of little profit for national security, but also hanging around the office, and even more so, occupying a roadblock was despised as a futile war-time activity.

10. The full song is "Donnez treillis oooh ça va finir (2x)" (Give us uniforms" oh it will finish), adding "han got the natty dread". The word 'dread' is an interesting contamination of dress (the expression 'natty dress') and dreadlock which together with the rest of the English 'got the' indicates the presence of Liberian fellow combatants (mercenaries as well as members of the LIMA militia) on the western front. Garvey could not explain the meaning of the word 'han'.

This is also explained by Ato Belly (25/3/2009) who, in a long narrative about the day he decided to abandon his job as a taxi driver in order to "liberate his country", he insulted the policemen who approached him at the central junction (*le grand carrefour*) of Abidjan's important commune of Koumassi: "I told them: this country is dying and you are here busy racketeering along the road; one asks us to go and liberate Bouaké, you have the required arms but you use them to force taxis to stop". The fact that, as a taxi driver, Ato had been undergoing the racketeering-at-gunpoint of these police officers for many years, certainly added to his frustration and to the ferocity of his scolding. However, it is probably not so much the practice of roadside racketeering itself which Ato took offence at – after all that was also one of the militias' favourite activities –, but the fact that the *corps habillés*' arrogance towards helpless citizens masked a proven lack of courage when it came to facing an armed adversary. This also was exemplified in the way the FDS dealt with their uniforms.

The most obvious sign of the cowardice among the FDS was what 'General' Ato Belly witnessed in 2002/2003 as much as in 2011: imminent attacks by rebel forces were preceded by massive desertions. As Ato experienced on 31st March 2011, at the national radio and television site these deserters set off with a hasty change of clothes. In 2003 Richard & Eric (10/04/2009), two members of Ato Belly's *gbôhi*, identified this to be the reason for their own recruitment into a special commando for attacking a rebel stronghold near Daloa: the FDS who were stationed there "had taken fright, they undressed [...] they took their rifles and threw them away, they put on civilian clothes and fled". In recompense, 35 GPP members such as themselves and 15 professional commando troops from Akouédo, formed a new commando which received the same red (marines) berets, the same uniform and the same weapons – for Richard and Eric a source of profound job satisfaction.

Finally, uniforms were not only a way of distinguishing oneself from the non-uniformed civil servants and civilians, but also from different armed units, and most of all, from enemy troops. Recounting his admission to the GPP, Ato explains that he feared confusion and infiltration when he observed that GPP militia members were dressed in the same way as the rebels he had seen on TV: wearing no proper boots (*rangers*) but plastic sandals (*lèke*), and merely uniform trousers and a T-shirt (*bas treillis*)" (Ato Belly 07/06/2008).[11] As the late GPP 'General' Shango (14/06/2008) explains, dressing up like the rebels was sometimes part of the tactics used mainly on the western front (see Utas and Jörgel, 2008 for parallels). In other circumstances, wearing the full uniform

11. Having observed this confusion, Ato Belly proposed to the militia leadership to create and supervise a GPP intelligence service.

was indispensable and an important part of the military etiquette. During the military crisis of November 2004, Ato Belly (26/02/2010) explains, his troops started seconding the elite Republican Guards in their task of defending the presidential residence. The way Ato recounts it, the trustworthiness and the dedication of both groups as expressed in their sharing a full dress (*treillis complet*) warranted the fraternal co-presence of both formal and informal armed forces. This brings us to the 'social' dimension of the relationship between both groups.

Militia members generally refer to the *corps habillés* as their 'elder brothers' (*grand frères*). This relationship carries the full ambiguity of their rapport: it combines familiarity with respect and, at times, resentment, which in practice underlies their mutual complicity as much as inequality and the militia's subjugation. The deep sense of complicity transpires well, for instance, from a whole series of mutual engagements with the FDS which, for instance, Garvey reports in his writings. One typical example relates to the arrangements about the road blocks or checkpoints (*corridors*) and patrols (*patrouilles*) which Garvey and his *gbôhi* set up in the vicinity of the transmitting station of Abobo during the time they were responsible for its protection. At four so-called passage ways (*corridors)* members of Garvey's group undertook the rather lucrative activity of checking the identity papers and luggage of passers-by and accepting bribes from them. By doing this they entered into direct competition with the surrounding *corps habillés* who were readily cut in on the deal. "The elder brothers agreed", Garvey (2011: 90) notes with satisfaction.

At certain dramatic moments this complicity between militias and the military was reversed by the latter who used their power and position to discipline or punish their 'younger brothers'. In late 2006 and early 2007 more than 300 GPP youngsters experienced this during their time at the aforementioned Abidjanese war schools. While initially the militias were well received there, the relationship rapidly deteriorated in the run-up to the March 2007 Ouagadougou peace accord, and resulted in the militia members being chased at gunpoint from their guest abode. However humiliating such forced evacuations and other reprimands were, they were sometimes glossed over as the legitimate right of 'elder brothers' to correct or admonish their younger siblings (Delta & Assouma 3-4-2009). Finally, such reprimands were all the more humiliating when they involved uniforms. When in November 2008 Ato Belly's so-called naval base at Vridi was evacuated by the chief of staff, General Philippe Mangou, himself, the sad climax was that all uniforms, boots and military gear were piled up and set fire to in the presence of television cameras (Ato Belly 25/03/2009). In spite of deeply traumatic events such as these and other camp evacuations, many militia members persevered in the desire to and hope of joining the military one day. Such tenacity requires our theoretical attention.

Subaltern mobility: going in circles?

The above detailed description of the complex and ambivalent relationship between the military and the militias through the prism of *corps habillés*, allows us to safely speculate that for militia members FDS uniforms and military gear were important markers of a prospective transition process which could lead into the heart of the *corps habillés*. Such a process starts, quite plainly, with a change of clothes, as described in graphic terms by the late GPP 'commander' Roger Njabehi (26/03/2009):

> "because we were civilians, we had to put on a military uniform [...] in order to help the military [...] and the military were aware of that, and the gendarmes were also aware of that: that these kids there are helping us; so we are going to fight along with you, ‘dress them’, and they have dressed us".

However, as we know now, with the exception of a few lucky ones, thousands have seen their military dreams unfulfilled until this day (Banégas, 2008).

The magnitude of this disillusion is certainly proportional to the recursivity of the false promises expressed by many important political and military entrepreneurs, and at critical moments, echoed by the militia leaders themselves in a desperate attempt to keep their *gbôhi* mobilised and rallied behind them. However, the impact of these messages 'from above' must be completed by considering the tactics 'from below', for instance the sustained attempts by youngsters to insinuate themselves into the *corps habillés* in spite of the successive disillusions and even downright rejections over a period of many years. For many of the militia members, like for Ato Belly and Marcus Garvey, these disillusions repeated themselves over a period of eight long years and ended sometime in March 2011, in a decisive if not fatal bid to enter the *corps habillés*. By then the latter were perceived as stripped of the weak, the cowards and the imposters who, in an ultimate *démasqué*, had abandoned their battle dresses. The militia members' sticking to the uniforms in itself became a demonstration of their unabated loyalty and proof that they deserved what they had been asking for since day one: 'being dressed'.

In the remainder of this paper, I want to further explore the effects and, above all, the mechanisms of these tactics of impersonation within broader frames of apprenticeship, on-the-job training, and social mobility. As a starting point, it is important to be aware that the youngsters were somehow conscious of the fact that by putting on some military garb and hanging about in the vicinity of the *corps habillés*, they were playing a big game with all the ambiguity that came with it. Near the end

of 2007, after yet another six months of waiting for the demobilisation and reintegration programme in Guiglo to resume, Garvey noted:

> "I am 32 years old, it is true that without having served in the army, I have served in the army. I have frequented it so much that I can claim I was with it, this army, it is beautiful, impressive but hypocrite and treacherous. When I recall the words of Sergeant Koulaï Roger I feel myself suffering, regretting. I still see him sobbing, telling us that he merely executed orders. That makes me feel like throwing up: to offer hopes of beauty and of strength, and shatter these in such a hypocritical way. In one word, I have walked alongside this beauty, this imposing and betraying hypocrite and I have come to detest it in the end." (Garvey, 2011)

The central metaphor of this paragraph – companionship – provides some guidance for starting to devise an analytical framework for subaltern (social) mobility in-times-of-crisis. Garvey looks back on a trajectory in which he got entangled with the army, learned much about it, learned much of it, but never really became part of it, never fully inhabited the corps he so eagerly wanted to belong to. Instead, in phrases such as "I was *with* it" (my emphasis) Garvey positions himself as a (travel) companion of the army. This matches the general theme of his autobiography which he entitles 'The companion' and in which he addresses the reader throughout as 'my companion'. Companionship has at least two strings of meanings which relate to social mobility and networking respectively. In the realm of social mobility, the companionship implies an enduring situation of initiation or apprenticeship without ever reaching full proficiency. Garvey sees himself lingering in a situation of truncated mastery which for some time constitutes a source of hope but eventually also of desperation. Equally so in the realm of networking, the enduring co-travelling produces 'company' in many forms albeit mainly of a rather ephemeral and cursory nature. The fellow companions of the army and *corps habillés* in their capacity as elder brothers have a large stake in regulating the see-saw movement of nearing (complicity) and distancing (subjugation) between the militia dilettantes and the properly 'dressed' FDS professionals. Furthermore, militia members seek the company of friends or *'compagnons de route'* and more often than not consider themselves belonging to a *gbôhi*. Although at certain times the *gbôhi* can be a strong locus of identification and solidarity, it has very permeable boundaries and is in constant flux as people join and leave. Finally, militia activity creates conduits to the bigger world of national politics, magistrature, and top-level administration. The web of military and political patronage surrounding the self-defence groups in Côte d'Ivoire of the preceding decade resulted both in occasional contacts and short or long-term contracts between members of both realms.

Having addressed Gbagbo directly in the course of a protest action was a source of pride for Marcus Garvey, as much as it was a source of prestige for Ato Belly to have met the army chief of staff Philippe Mangou on several occasions. More durable and lucrative were the special operations or long-term bodyguard contracts for politicians, judges, or top-level civil servants, which certain militia members were able to secure for themselves and their *gbôhi*. A good example of this was the two-month contract Ato Belly concluded with the Mauritanian ambassador in February 2011 in order for him and a dozen of his 'elements' to protect the embassy and the hundreds of Mauritanian refugees it accommodated at that time.

In all, the networking as much as the on-the-job training of militia apprenticeship, were rather shallow and elusive, and, for the large majority of the militia members, never resulted in full mastery, a stable professional or patronage network, or a far-reaching identification with the coveted *corps habillés*. Instead, the relationship with the latter largely boiled down to a fascination for what Garvey calls its "beauty and strength", that is, its outward appearance epitomised by the uniforms and paraphernalia, and its strength indexed by the fire arms and the direct impact of carrying weapons in public. Thus, in spite of their tenacity and dedication, militia members remained forever ‘outside’ and hierarchically 'below' the army ‘corps’ – enduringly peripheral and subaltern. Any further theorising should start from here.

Incrementalism, impersonation, and the field

Tens of thousands of youngsters who try to supplement the state's *corps habillés*, can be taken as an instance of what AbdouMaliq Simone describes as 'incrementalism' (Simone, 2008a: 17). In his usage, this refers to the gradual albeit sometimes rapid process of appendage in the construction of houses, markets and other urban infrastructures . When applied to institutional contexts such as the *corps habillés*, incrementalism alerts us the proliferation of “state”; what Aretxaga (2003: 369) identifies as "an excess of statehood practices: too many actors competing to perform as state". This enables me to further develop the idea developed elsewhere (Arnaut and Højbjerg, 2008, Hagmann and Péclard, 2010, Menkhaus, 2008) that the absence of the state in Africa leaves voids that are filled in by entrepreneurs of different sorts. 'Incrementalism' does not start from possible voids but from the supplementing or multiplying operations in the vicinity of state institutions which may either condense and extend them or rather drain and trim them down. As one of Hibou’s seminal texts on state transformation – in accord with founding texts such as that of Bayart (Bayart et al., 1999) and Reno (1995) – points out, the privatisation of the state does not simply concern its 'décharge' (discharge) but also its 'dédoublement' (duplication/multiplication) by way of the "intensive use of intermediaries" (Hibou, 1999: 13-14). More recent studies in

domains as diverse as administration (Blundo, 2006) and conflict transformation (Menkhaus, 2008, Mehler, 2009, Engel and Mehler, 2005) show the empirical potential of exploring this multiplication or refraction, resulting in the creation of vast terrains of hybrid state-related activity. These mediations take place within the networks described in the preceding sections of this paper and consist of *gbôhi* and militia structures with shifting degrees of formality as well as the patron networks that surround them. Central nodes in these hybrid, mediating structures are Big Men of different scale and weight who occupy equally ambivalent positions in transition zones between state and non-state activity.

In order to understand such zones of state mediation it is important not only to acknowledge the pull factors of state 'décharge': formal (say World Bank or Washington-consensus guided) as well as informal privatisation. The obvious 'push factors' of state mediation are youth unemployment or, more generally, lack of opportunities. This situation has been rightly identified as "social death" (Vigh, 2006) or 'blockage' – as a lack of mobility and opportunities "to keep the options open" (Simone, 2008b). The (auto)biographies of Ato Belly and Marcus Garvey offer us a certain insight into the tactics of setting out on a voyage that could open the possibility of entering the composite state institution of the *corps habillés*. The tactical movements of the militant youngsters take place in the vague terrain situated between a state-in-crisis which is outsourcing its military force and a vast group of youngsters engaged in what Mitchell (2007) perhaps would call a "counter-inscription of the state". In sum, it seems proper to suggest that the main juvenile tactics, that of impersonation and dressing up, is above all an "art of being in between" (De Certeau, 1984: 30). Like 'la perruque' – De Certeau's *locus classicus* of the subaltern tactics of the detour: the diversion of labour time in government and commercial administrations as much as in factories – the militia activity of so many militant Ivorian youngsters during the past decade can best be understood as a sustained "act of camouflage, of counterfeit and make believe" aimed at insinuating themselves into the state and its institutions.

These provisional remarks on impersonation are meant to indicate that we are dealing with a particularly complex phenomenon which requires the kind of empirical and theoretical grounding which this paper is merely able to begin to provide. After all, we need to account for the reflexive dialectics involved in dressing up (from below) and being dressed up (from above), or more broadly, in the appropriation and registering of forms, types and postures which circulate within the urban, national and transnational Ivorian space – to the extent that, in themselves, these forms come to stand for circulation, (social) mobility and advancement in life. Any proper interpretation of impersonation as subaltern tactics, must avoid slipping into simplistic, supremacist, if not

downright (neo)colonialist conceptions of subaltern mimicry (Apter, 1999, and see Fabian, 2002, Ferguson, 2002).

The broader empirical grounding for juvenile impersonation in patriotic militantism and activism in Côte d'Ivoire, must be sought within popular culture and popular politics, which in the preceding decades had been vested in new a urban culture which has sometimes been labelled as 'Nouchi' (see also: McGovern, 2011). To describe the successful career of Nouchi in Ivorian public life over the last two decades is beyond the scope of this paper. It suffices to situate the expansion of Nouchi street culture in the period of fast urbanisation of the 1980s, and, most importantly, its take-up by the student 'revolutionary' movements of the 1990s. This, in turn, led to the introduction of street culture and discourse into opposition politics, mainly in the hands of the leftist party FPI and its leader Laurent Gbagbo. And when the latter came to power in 2000, to its sedimentation in mainstream politics (Arnaut, 2008a, Arnaut, 2005). By and large, what many Ivoirians seem to observe in politics is comparable to what Newell (2009b) describes as 'bluff' in economic and sexual exchange in Abidjanese urban street culture, and what before him Banégas and Warnier (2001: 8) identified as "mischievousness, astuteness, [and] the right of the strongest [...] in a moral economy of shrewdness and 'débrouille'". What makes the bluff particularly interesting is "the incorporation of deceitful illusion and illocutionary performance into economic transactions, gender roles, and claims to modernity" (Newell, 2009b: 384). Very important for our purposes is the fact that in typical bluff settings none of the participants are completely fooled, but at most embezzled:

> "It was at once based on the idea of deception and prestige of illusion, yet at the same time no one was fooled, the audience was aware of the hoax before the show even began. And yet, everyone acted as though the bluff were real."

In conclusion, Newell (2009b: 385) claims: "the audience's awareness of fakery was irrelevant, it was the aptitude for artifice that earns respect and praise, and had transformative potential."

The politician who embodied this 'aptitude for artifice' most cogently was President Gbagbo, the Biggest Man in the country at the time, in his capacity as 'the baker' (*le boulanger*) who, according to the French expression to which this epithet refers, "rolls everyone in flour" (*il roule tout le monde dans la farine*), that is, takes everyone (his colleagues, his opponents as much as his electorate) for a ride. However, if streetwise bluffing is a youth competency, so are its political and activist variants. One of the most flagrant instances of juvenile political 'bluff' was the so-called 'Versailles Accord' signed in July 2006 by 'warring' youth leaders such as Charles Blé

Goudé and Karamoko Yayoro six months before the senior politicians signed a new peace agreement at Ouagadougou. Adding to the ‘artifice’ was that ‘Versailles’ in the aforementioned accord did not refer to the French town where the post-WWI peace agreement was signed, but to *Café de Versailles*, a bar-restaurant in a posh part of Abidjan owned by Ivoirian reggae superstar Alpha Blondy. The juvenile ‘Versailles Accord’ had all the makings of a successful 'fakery': a peace accord named after a world historical event, discussed in a trendy Abidjanese pub by youth leaders who not only impersonated senior national and international negotiators and simulated its drafting and signing, but who also anticipated the latter and, thus, imposed themselves as political players to be reckoned with.

The well-frequented popular parliaments were other examples of youthful political bluff involving a dozen or so junior political leaders. The flippant use of 'Versailles' resembled in this respect the use of 'La Sorbonne', the name of Abidjan’s most notorious people’s parliament. ‘La Sorbonne’ was created in Abidjan's administrative centre (Le Plateau) in the 1980s as a place of, and served as a model for, hundreds of other popular parliaments set up since 2000 (Yao Gnabeli, 2005, Bahi, 2003, Bahi, 2004: 59). Like the renowned Parisian university, to which they relate through the Abidjanese 'La Sorbonne', the many parliaments employed self-styled 'professors' who delivered 'scientific' analyses, thus claiming some sort of 'open university' status for their political propaganda (Bahi, 2001: 159, Atchoua, 2008).

A final example of juvenile activist 'bluffing' is that which took place on a grand scale in the urban militias and the southern youth militant groups in general. As we have seen, the simulations of ‘real’ military life were manifold and pertained to matters of rank, outfit and attire, and, of course, activities. Among these the use of military titles by the GPP leadership was the most flagrant, since not only GPP members were meant to recognise them but also civilians and the FDS acknowledged them publicly, sometimes tongue-in-cheek and sometimes more seriously – depending on the power balance at the moment of interaction (Arnaut, 2006).

Lastly, in a recent paper Newell (2009a) invites us to situate impersonation and ‘bluff’ in the very heart of Nouchi culture. Bluffing, he argues, as the appropriation of alterity is also central to the urban slang called Nouchi. Taking most of its lexical material from French, Nouchi also incorporates lexical material from English and a number of national languages such as Dyula, Baule, and Bété. By dethroning ‘metropolitan’ French and venturing into trans-local and transnational linguistic terrains, Nouchi indexes urban cosmopolitism and modernity (idem). But there is more to it. Nouchi is in constant flux and its speakers take pride in using the latest new words or even try to introduce them themselves by transferring lexical material from other

‘languages’ within their repertoires. This can be attested in Marcus Garvey’s autobiography in which he enriches ‘standard’ Nouchi with expressions which he himself identifies as “military slang” or “builder’s idiom”. Taken together, his repertoires index his ‘walks of life’: the different sectors of society and professional activities which he straddles. In other words, his linguistic agility is a function of his (professional) flexibility, and, his potential social mobility. Taking our lead from Mbembe (1992, Mbembe and Roitman, 1997) who saw the multiplication of identities as a performative tactics in what he calls the postcolony, the impersonating behaviour of Ivorian youngsters can be seen as an attempt to insinuate themselves in different spheres of activity in order “to keep the options open” (Simone, 2008a, Simone, 2008b). The ultimate task, which this paper can merely initiate, is to conceptualise this.

The theoretical frame of the topography and performativity of the kind of juvenile impersonation observed above, consists of three related analytical concepts: articulation, navigation, and fields.

Taking her lead from Gramsci and Hall, Tania Li (2007: 22) looks at identification as well as the social practice of 'political subjects' in terms of articulation, that is, "the multiple positions that people occupy, and the diverse powers they encounter." For research purposes, articulation "points rather to the necessity of teasing out, historically and ethnographically, the various ways in which room for manoeuvre is present but never unconstrained." (Li, 2000: 153). Navigation, as used by Vigh (2008) and Utas (2005, Utas and Jörgel, 2008), partly based on Honwana (2000: 77-78) and De Certeau (De Certeau, 1984), is precisely conceived in order to account for this 'room for manoeuvre'. Situations of crisis, according to Vigh (2008: 18) "force agents to take into account not only how they are able to move within a social environment, but also how the social environment moves them, and other agents within it, as they seek to traverse envisioned trajectories.” Navigation implies a dialogical relationship between actors and their social environments, hence some more attention needs to be given to the actual constitution of the terrain on which it takes place. Between overstressing stability and predictability and merely characterising actors' mobility as "motion within motion", an intermediate position seems possible which acknowledges that flow and fixity constitute each other as much as mobility rests upon structures of immobility (Lien and Melhuus, 2007: ix, Hedetoft and Hjort, 2002). In order to make this into more than a truism, we need some concept of 'field' without – and here I agree with Vigh – adopting the rather heavy and static concept Bourdieu made of it. Instead, our analyses of tactical agency may profit from a rather open, dynamical notion of field which helps to identify and map 'terrains' in terms of the stakes and opportunities they contain, the competencies they value and the expectation they nourish. Taken as such a field largely corresponds with Turner’s

definition of it as "an ensemble of relationships between actors antagonistically oriented toward the same prizes or values (in this case control over the state apparatus)" (Turner, 1974: 135). The dynamical and open nature of such a field allows, above all, to register how these fields alter through the incursions of 'navigating' actors – as well as other external interventions (Martin, 2003). As far as the identification of fields is concerned, contemporary field theory allows us to define fields rather loosely and according to specific analytical needs, more or less as 'spheres of activity' or 'registers of social action' in the Weberian sense (Lahire, 1999) even related to particular social networks (Breiger, 2004). In this paper I have focused mainly on the *corps habillés* as a field and ventured into interrelated fields such as popular culture, media, and popular politics.

Afterthoughts in lieu of a conclusion

The first months of the new Ouattara administration has witnessed a series of far-reaching interventions into public space. Within days of taking power, Alassane Ouattara ordered the FRCI to clear out and destroy *La Sorbonne*, signalling the imminent demise of the dozens of popular parliaments in Abidjan and other urban centres in Côte d'Ivoire. More recently (August 2011), Yopougon saw the demolition of large sections of the Rue Princesse, Abidjan's archetypal night life hot spot and breeding ground of world-famous music genres such as Mapouka, Coupé-Décalé, and Ivorian Rap. The destruction of these sites of popular culture and popular politics makes us realise the extent to which over the last decade public life, at least the pro-Gbagbo part of it, they had been flourishing in a novel and vigorous human infrastructure and built environment. Two items of this public culture – generally labelled 'Nouchi' – which rose to prominence and proliferated in many different guises in this milieu, were *gbôhi* and 'bluff'.

In this paper, 'bluff' was presented as a key performative tactics in a broader politics of impersonation of subaltern urbanites concerned with their ever threatened social mobility. In the hands of the thousands of members of patriotic youth militias, 'bluffing' had the *corps habillés* as its target and took the form of a tenacious and sometimes fatal, impersonation of military postures, discourse and practices. The cases of Ato Belly, but above all of Marcus Garvey demonstrate how unrewarding this politics of impersonation was and how it merely resulted in a state of enduring apprenticeship without full mastery or ongoing 'companionship' without properly 'joining in'. The latter observations bring us to the *gbôhi*, the second important item of urban public life which flourished during the Gbagbo era. *Gbôhi* thrived in Nouchi in the years since 2000 as a new term for 'gang' derived from the Dyula term for 'house', 'gbo'. Simultaneously, it was adopted in militia circles as the key-term for referring to the intricate process of networking: the fission and

fusion of groups and 'groupuscules', the continuous fragmenting and merging of formal self-defence groups as well as the formation and disintegration of smaller factions, of bands of friends, and of *ad hoc* squads of youth militia members offering their 'violent labour' to state and non-state actors. The cases of Marcus Garvey and Ato Belly not only illustrate the vibrancy of networking but also revealed the double dynamics of subaltern 'big-manity' involved in this: the search of groups for leadership and patronage as well as the quest of different types of leaders to gather and coach 'elements', merge factions, and federate militia groups.

By choosing to approach the problematic of networks in conflict situations within a perspective of impersonation and social mobility, I have tried to bring out both the geographical and historical specificity of militia-formation in the Ivoirian conflict of the preceding decade *and* its universality in terms of juvenile subalternity and postcolonial urbanity.

References

APTER, A. 1999. Africa, Empire, and Anthropology: A Philological Exploration of Anthropology's Heart of Darkness. *Annual Review of Anthropology,* 28**,** 577-598.

ARETXAGA, B. 2003. Maddening states. *Annual Review of Anthropology,* 32**,** 393-410.

ARGENTI, N. 2007. *The intestines of the state: youth, violence, and belated histories in the Cameroon Grassfields,* Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

ARNAUT, K. 2005. Re-generating the nation: youth, revolution and the politics of history in Ivory Coast. *In:* ABBINK, J. & VAN KESSEL, I. (eds.) *Vanguard or vandals: youth politics and conflict in Africa.* Leiden: Brill.

ARNAUT, K. 2006. Two meetings with Eugène Kouadio Djué, Marshall. Paper presented at the EASA 9 conference in 21 September 2006, Bristol.

ARNAUT, K. 2008a. Les hommes de terrain: Georges Niangoran-Bouah et le monde universitaire de l'autochtonie en Côte d'Ivoire postcoloniale. *Politique Africaine,* 112**,** 18-35.

ARNAUT, K. 2008b. Marching the nation: an essay on the mobility of belonging among militant youngsters in Côte d'Ivoire. *Afrika Focus,* 21**,** 89-105.

ARNAUT, K. 2008c. Mouvement patriotique et construction de 'l'autochtone' en Côte d'Ivoire. *Africa Development/Afrique et Développement,* 33**,** 1-20.

ARNAUT, K. & HØJBJERG, C. K. 2008. Gouvernance et ethnographie en temps de crise: De l'étude des ordres émergents dans l'Afrique entre guerre et paix. *Politique africaine***,** 5-21.

ATCHOUA, N. G. J. 2008. *Discours politique et dynamique de communication dans les espaces publics ivoiriens : l'exemple des « agoras et parlements » et des « grins » des quartiers populaires d'Abidjan.* Université de Cocody.

BAHI, A. 2001. L'Effet 'titrologue' : étude exploratoire dans les espaces de discussion de rues d'Abidjan. *En Quête,* 8 129-167.

BAHI, A. 2003. La «Sorbonne» d'Abidjan : rêve de démocratie ou naissance d'un espace public. *Revue Africaine de Sociologie,* 7**,** 1-17.

BAHI, A. 2004. Approche sémio-contextuelle des communications dans les forums populaires d'Abidjan. *Revue Ivoirienne d'Anthropologie et de Sociologie, Kasa Bya Kasa,* 5**,** 52-72.

BANÉGAS, R. 2008. « La république oublie-t-elle ses enfants ? » Militianisation et démilitianisation du champ politique en Côte d'Ivoire. *Regards croisés sur les milices d'Afrique et d'Amérique latine en situation de violence.* CERI.

BANÉGAS, R. 2011. Post-election crisis in Côte d'Ivoire: The gbonhi war. *African Affairs,* 110**,** 457-468.

BANÉGAS, R. & WARNIER, J.-P. 2001. Nouvelles figures de la réussite et du pouvoir. *Politique africaine,* 82**,** 5-21.

BAYART, J.-F., ELLIS, S. & HIBOU, B. 1999. *The criminalisation of the state in Africa,* Oxford & Bloomington, International African Institute in association with J. Currey & Indiana University Press.

BLUNDO, G. 2006. Dealing with the local state : the informal privatisation of street-level bureaucracies in Senegal. *Development and Change,* 37**,** 799-819.

BREIGER, R. 2004. The Analysis of Social Networks. *In:* HARDY, M. & BRYMAN, A. (eds.) *Handbook of Data Analysis.* London: Sage.

CHAUVEAU, J.-P. & RICHARDS, P. 2007. Land, agricultural change and conflict In West Africa: regional issues from Sierra Leone, Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire. *In:* L'OUEST, C. D. S. E. D. L. A. D. (ed.) *Transformation du monde rural et Développement durable en Afrique de l'Ouest* Paris: Club du Sahel et de l'Afrique de l'Ouest.

CHELPI-DEN HAMER, M. 2010. Militarized youths in western Côte d'Ivoire: a closer look at mobilisation and demobilisation processes. *Paper presented at the African Studies Association 53rd Annual Meeting.* San Francisco, 18 November 2010.

CHELPI-DEN HAMER, M. 2011. *Militarized youths in Western Côte d'Ivoire: local processes of mobilisation, demobilisation, and related humanitarian interventions (2002-2007),* Leiden, African Studies Centre.

CHRISTENSEN, M. & UTAS, M. 2008. Mercenaries of democracy: The 'Politricks' of remobilized combatants in the 2007 general elections, Sierra Leone. *African Affairs,* 107**,** 515-539.

DE CERTEAU, M. 1984. *The practice of everyday life,* Berkeley, University of California Press.

DE LATOUR, E. 2001. Métaphores sociales dans les ghettos de Côte d'Ivoire. *Autrepart,* 18**,** 151-167.

DIOUF, M. 2003. Engaging postcolonial cultures: youth and public space. *African Studies Review,* 46**,** 1-12.

ENGEL, U. & MEHLER, A. 2005. 'Under construction': Governance in Africa's new violent social spaces. *In:* ENGEL, U. & OLSEN, G. R. (eds.) *The African exception.* Aldershot: Ashgate.

FABIAN, J. 2002. Comments on "Of Mimicry and Membership". *Cultural Anthropology,* 17**,** 570-571.

FERGUSON, J. 2002. Of mimicry and membership: Africans and the 'New World Society'. *Cultural Anthropology,* 17**,** 551-569.

GARVEY, M. A. 2011. Le Compagnon: journal d'un noussi en guerre: 2002-2006 (unpublished manuscript). Abidjan.

HAGMANN, T. & PÉCLARD, D. 2010. Negotiating statehood: dynamics of power and domination in Africa. *Development and Change,* 41**,** 539-562.

HALL, S. & JEFFERSON, T. (eds.) 2006 (1993). *Resistance through rituals: youth subcultures in post-war Britain,* London: Routledge.

HEDETOFT, U. & HJORT, M. 2002. Introduction. *In:* HEDETOFT, U. & HJORT, M. (eds.) *The postnational self: belonging and identity.* Minneapolis: University of Minesota Press.

HIBOU, B. 1999. La 'décharge', nouvel interventionnisme. *Politique africaine,* 73**,** 6-15.

HOFFMAN, D. 2007a. The city as barracks: Freetown, Monrovia, and the organisation of violence in postcolonial African cities. *Cultural Anthropology,* 22**,** 400-428.

HOFFMAN, D. 2007b. The meaning of a militia: Understanding the civil defence forces of Sierra Leone. *African Affairs,* 106**,** 639-662.

HOFFMAN, D. 2011. *The war machines: young men and violence in Sierra Leone and Liberia,* Durham, Duke University Press.

HONWANA, A. 2000. Innocents et coupables. Les enfants-soldats comme acteurs tactiques. *Politique Africaine,* 80**,** 58-74.

LAHIRE, B. 1999. Champ, hors-champ, contrechamp. *In:* LAHIRE, B. (ed.) *Le travail sociologique de Pierre Bourdieu: dettes et critiques.* Paris: La Découverte.

LI, T. M. 2000. Articultating indigenous identity in Indonesia: resource politics and the tribal slot. *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* 42**,** 149-179.

LI, T. M. 2007. *The will to Improve: governmentality, development, and the practice of politics,* Duke University Press.

LIEN, M. E. & MELHUUS, M. 2007. Introduction. *In:* LIEN, M. E. & MELHUUS, M. (eds.) *Holding worlds together: ethnographies of knowing and belonging.* Oxford: Berghahn.

MARTIN, J. L. 2003. What is field theory? *American Journal of Sociology,* 109**,** 1-49.

MBEMBE, A. 1992. Provisional notes on the postcolony. *Africa* 62**,** 3-37.

MBEMBE, A. & ROITMAN, J. 1997. Figures of the subject in times of crisis. *Public Culture,* 7**,** 323-352.

MCGOVERN, M. 2011. *Making war in Côte d'Ivoire,* Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.

MEHLER, A. 2009. Hybrid regimes and oligopolies of violence in Africa: Expectations on security provisions 'from below'. *In:* FISCHER, M. & SCHMELZLE, B. (eds.) *Building peace in the absence of states: Challenging the discourse on state failure.*

MENKHAUS, K. 2008. The rise of a mediated state in northern Kenya: the Wajir story and its implications for state-building. *Afrika Focus,* 21**,** 23-38.

MITCHELL, J. 2007. A fourth critic of the Enlightenment: Michel de certeau and the ethnography of subjectivity. *Social Anthropology,* 15**,** 89-106.

NEWELL, S. 2009a. Enregistering modernity, bluffing criminality: how Nouchi speech reinvented (and fractured) the nation. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology,* 19**,** 157-184.

NEWELL, S. 2009b. Godrap girls, Draou boys, and the sexual economy of bluff in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. *Ethnos,* 74**,** 379-402.

NGODI, E. 2006. *Militianisation et engagement politique au Congo-Brazzaville,* Paris, L'Harmattan.

RAEYMAEKERS, T. 2011. Forced displacement and youth employment in the aftermath of the Congo war: From making a living to making a life *MICROCON Research Working Paper 38.* Brighton: MICROCON.

RAEYMAEKERS, T. forthcoming. To shelter or fade away: the precarious space of youth displacement in eastern DRC. *In:* HAMMAR, A. (ed.) *Displacement economies: Paradoxes of crisis and creativity in African contexts.* London: Zed Books.

RAEYMAEKERS, T. s.d. Towards a topography of mobile livelihoods in conflict environments.

RENO, W. 1995. *Corruption and state politics in Sierra Leone,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

RICHARDS, P. & CHAUVEAU, J.-P. 2007. Land, agricultural change and conflict in West Africa: regional issues from Sierra Leone, Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire: Historical overview. *In:* GNISCI, D., HITIMANA, L. & ZOUNDI, J. S. (eds.) *Transformation du monde rural et Développement durable en Afrique de l'Ouest* Paris: Sahel and West Africa Club.

SIMONE, A. 2008a. Emergency democracy and the 'governing composite'. *Social Text,* 26**,** 13-33.

SIMONE, A. 2008b. Some reflections on making popular culture in urban Africa. *African Studies Review,* 51**,** 75-89.

TURNER, V. 1974. *Dramas, fields, and metaphors: symbolic action in human society,* Ithaca & London, Cornell University Press.

UTAS, M. 2005. Victimcy, girlfriending, soldiering: tactic agency in a young woman's social navigation of the Liberian war zone. *Anthropological Quarterly,* 78**,** 403-430.

UTAS, M. & JÖRGEL, M. 2008. The West Side Boys: military navigation in the Sierra Leone Civil War. *Journal of Modern African Studies,* 46**,** 487-511.

VIGH, H. 2006. Social death and violent life chances *In:* CHRISTIANSEN, C., UTAS, M. & VIGH, H. (eds.) *Navigating youth, generating adulthood: social becoming in an African context.* Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.

VIGH, H. 2008. Crisis and chronicity: Anthropological perspectives on continuous conflict and decline. *Ethnos,* 73**,** 5 - 24.

VIGH, H. 2009. Conflictual motion and political inertia: on rebellions and revolutions in Bissau and beyond. *African Studies Review,* 52**,** 143-164.

VLASSENROOT, K. & RAEYMAEKERS, T. 2004. *Conflict and social transformation in eastern DR Congo,* Gent, Academia Press.

YAO GNABELI, R. 2005. Reconstruction identitaire chez les orateurs des sorbonnes, sénats et parlements des quartiers d'Abidjan. *Revue Ivoirienne d'Anthropologie et de Sociologie, Kasa Bya Kasa,* 7**,** 33-45.