Rethinking rebel rule: How Mai-Mai groups in eastern Congo govern

Around the world, vast amounts of people live in areas marked by rebel presence. A growing body of scholarly work examines "rebel governance", which has emerged as an interdisciplinary field of study. Scholars in this subfield typically share a desire to go beyond stereotypical images of rebels as violent savages or as greedy warlords. By focusing on how rebels govern, these scholars wish to show that rebels are engaged in creating forms of order rather than disorder.

Order may not be apparent in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo's highly dynamic, fragmented, and fluid military landscape. In the Kivu provinces alone there are presently well over 130 active armed groups. Most of these groups label themselves "Mai-Mai"-an umbrella term for armed groups claiming to engage in "self-defense" against "foreigners".

Kasper Hoffmann. Ex-Padiri Mai-Mai fighters, Hombo, 2005.

Many Mai-Mai groups are fairly small-scale – typically between 20 and 200 fighters – and do not control large swathes of territory in a durable fashion. Their headquarters frequently relocate and their spheres of influence fluctuate. Many groups also lack specific organizational structures to rule civilians, such as courts and administrations. In light of these characteristics, scholars of rebel governance might be tempted to conclude that Mai-Mai groups do not really govern civilians.

Indeed, much of the existing literature on rebel governance holds that rebels must control territory, build governance structures and provide public goods to qualify as actual rulers. In a recently published article in *African Affairs*, we contest this view of rebel governance. In particular, we argue that it is grounded in the same "centred" understanding of power that can be found in Weberian understandings of the state. That is, it sees power as situated or concentrated in rulers and the governance structures that they create. From there it is exercised over subjects within a finite territory.

Michel Foucault's concept of *governmentality* rejects such a view of power.

From a governmentality perspective, power is not concentrated in institutions or rulers, but diffusely dispersed throughout the social body. It works on subjects subtly by changing the ways they see, know and conduct themselves. To govern, in this sense, is in Foucault's words 'to structure the possible field of action of others'. This occurs through a multitude of micro-practices, discourses and procedures that are enacted by a myriad of subjects.

By studying the micro-practices, rationalities and discourses of Mai-Mai groups and populations in their areas of influence, we show that these groups do in fact govern civilians. They do so by deploying a heterogeneous cluster of *techniques of power* that, to a large extent, work by shaping people's ways of understanding and governing themselves. This does not imply these groups do not rule through force or compulsion. They do, but this is only one modality of rule. In fact, coercive and direct forms of rule often coexist, complement and reinforce those that work through what Rose and Miller call "regulated freedom".

Judith Verweijen. Members of the Mai-Mai Kapopo and village elders, Lubumba, 21 November 2011.

Adopting a governmentality perspective opens up a whole range of intricate ways through which Mai-Mai and other armed groups govern civilians. We distinguish four different clusters of techniques of Mai Mai rule, relating to ethnicity and custom; "stateness"; spirituality and patronage and protection, respectively. The invocation of discourses of "indigeneity" (or "autochthony"), which is part of the first cluster, is a particularly effective technique of power. These discourses establish an opposition between "sons of the soil" – or the first or original inhabitants of a particular place – and "foreigners", "newcomers" or "immigrants".

The use of autochthony discourse is not merely rhetorical bluster. On the contrary, these discourses shape how people understand the ongoing insecurity in the region and how they act upon it. By evoking existential threats, these discourses constitute justifications for taking up arms. Indeed, civilians often see contributions to Mai-Mai groups as a way to protect the "autochthonous" population from "foreign" invaders. This disposes them to support Mai-Mai groups in various ways, including by donating food or money, providing logistical support, enrolling in the group, or help with medical care. As such, autochthony discourses play a pivotal role in sustaining the evolving dynamics of conflict and violence in eastern Congo.

Another important technique of Mai-Mai government is their enactment of spiritual techniques of power, like prayers and rituals. Rituals are often practiced during initiation as part of the system of *dawa* (medicine), which is believed to empower and protect initiates from harm. Mai-Mai groups do not only engage in such spiritual techniques among themselves, they also enact or talk about them among civilians, thus showing they have sacred, secret and salutary knowledge. This shapes civilians' perceptions of them. At the same time, these techniques appeal to the ways people see themselves as spiritual subjects, invoking widely shared sets of beliefs.

Similar to autochthony discourses, the Mai-Mai's spiritual techniques resonate among civilians largely because they are informed by existing beliefs. Moreover, they re-enact and re-cast already existing forms of spiritual practice. Therefore, to grasp the workings of Mai-Mai government, it is necessary to understand the wider social order they are part of and identify its most salient rationalities, beliefs and practices of government. In addition, it is crucial to look at people's sense of selfhood, and how they see themselves in the world.

We do not deny the relevance of studying the degree to which rebels build governance structures, exercise territorial control, and provide public goods. However, we maintain that it is important to keep an open mind as to what other forms rebel governance may also take. To adopt a governmentality perspective is to open up the field of rebel governance to the study of actual rationalities and practices of power, thereby departing from well-established notions of what constitutes rule.

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