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From Rebel to Humanitarian: Military *Savoir Faire* and Humanitarian Practice in Eastern DR Congo

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the experience of ex-rebels who have become humanitarians in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. It describes how rebel-cum-humanitarians navigate a turbulent political environment, integrating the knowledge they acquired through military experience into a career in the humanitarian sector. 'Distinction' between combatants and humanitarians remains central to the humanitarian imaginary. However, rebel and humanitarian spheres are interlinked by individuals who do not just broker relationships between the two, but also move between them. They walk a tightrope: their rebel past is seen as a threat to performing a 'neutral' humanitarian identity, but at the same time, it constitutes a resource in brokering access with armed groups. Despite a focus on performing principles, humanitarian agencies in practice draw on their employees' *savoir faire* which is sometimes gained through rebel experience — the very identity deemed antithetical to a humanitarian status.

INTRODUCTION

Gloire[1] has worked in the humanitarian sector for over a decade in North Kivu, a province in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). One of the first things Gloire told me was that before becoming a humanitarian, he had been a 'military man'. As a result, he understood the 'attitude' of his armed interlocutors when negotiating humanitarian access and he was able to 'read' the context. Gloire's personal history was intertwined with that of the region over the last 20 years. He grew up in Rutshuru, a territory on the Congo–Rwanda and Congo-Uganda borders, and was recruited as a

1. All names of individuals have been changed.

soldier, first for the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) during the Rwandan civil war, then for L'Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Liberation du Congo (AFDL) rebellion during Congo's first war (1996–97) and finally for the Rassemblement Congolais pour la Democratie (RCD) during Congo's second war (1998–2003). Gloire rose in the ranks but described being given orders which went 'against his conscience', resulting in feelings of disorientation. Gloire deserted and eventually found what he described as 'a trade', or métier, in the NGO sector.[2]

Gloire was not unique in this regard. I was in North Kivu to explore how humanitarian agencies negotiate with armed groups for access to run aid projects in their zones of control. I focused on the experience of locally hired Congolese humanitarians who are central to these processes of brokerage and translation (Pottier, 2006). Whilst discussing negotiations with armed groups, I was struck by how many humanitarians had rebel experience themselves. Some mentioned this in passing; others highlighted their background as key to their ability to negotiate access as humanitarians. In so doing, they teased out the similarities, as well as differences, between military and humanitarian modes of operating, and stressed the advantages, as well as risks, that rebel experience brought to a humanitarian career.

This article explores how rebel-cum-humanitarians navigate a context of 'no-peace-no-war' (Richards, 2005a), balancing the knowledge they acquired through military experience with the expectations of a humanitarian career. I describe how rebel-cum-humanitarians position themselves between two categories of actors — 'combatants' and 'humanitarians' — whose distinction remains central to the humanitarian imaginary. On the one hand, military experience brought advantages: former rebels described the utility of their networks and *savoir faire* for navigating a militarized political landscape as humanitarians. On the other hand, rebel experience was seen as a threat to performing a 'neutral' humanitarian identity, not only by armed interlocutors, but also by their own colleagues. The article is based on 15 months of ethnographic research in DRC in the periods 2017–18 and 2020–21. It is difficult to quantify how many humanitarians have experience in armed groups; it remains a sensitive subject. Ten individuals openly discussed their past with me. In this article, I focus on the experiences of Faustin, Imani and Gloire,[3] who worked for different NGOs, and whose stories complicate the binaries embedded in humanitarian discourse, such as political/neutral, military/humanitarian. In order to examine these complexities, the article explores aid and conflict through the lens of the 'everyday', which allows closer understanding of the experiences and interactions of

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2. Interview, Gloire, NGO employee, Goma, 24 February 2018.
3. Out of 200 conversations with humanitarians, this article draws principally on four interviews with Gloire, four interviews with Faustin, and three interviews with Imani, all conducted in Goma (2017–18). They continued to share insights via Skype (2019–20), and on my return to Goma (2020–21). Conversations were in French. Translations are my own.

the actors involved, which in turn shape broader dynamics of intervention (Long, 2001).

The article comprises five parts. First, it outlines the relationship between humanitarianism and war, arguing that the performance of humanitarian principles and the distinction from combatants have become framed as central to humanitarian security management. The second section describes how power is negotiated between different actors in eastern DRC, and how dichotomies such as civilian/military, state/non-state, but also humanitarian/military, do not hold. Some humanitarians have histories in armed groups, some rebels have histories as humanitarians, and others move back and forth. The rest of the article then examines the experiences of Faustin, Imani and Gloire. The third section explores their life histories, from rebel to humanitarian. Humanitarian institutions encourage their employees to perform principles in everyday life in order to distinguish themselves from politico-military actors. Yet, a military background was not antithetical to a humanitarian career, and section four explores its advantages. As section five describes, rebel-cum-humanitarians negotiate a difficult position, because their rebel past is seen as a threat to performing a 'neutral' humanitarian identity. They endeavour to hide their histories not only from armed interlocutors, but also from their own colleagues. Behind the well-rehearsed discourse on humanitarian principles is a localized *savoir faire* that is central to how humanitarians operate in practice — knowledge that was sometimes acquired through rebel experience.

MILITARY HUMANITARIANS

Humanitarianism at War

Humanitarianism is an act aimed at saving lives and relieving suffering, carried out with a sense of urgency. War is central to the humanitarian imaginary. At the heart of international humanitarian law is the principle of distinction, which requires that conflict actors be distinguished between civilians and combatants: combatants can be legally targeted, but civilians cannot. Humanitarian actors who deliver assistance in conflict are also legally classified as civilians, and humanitarians distinguish themselves from military actors to construct this exceptional status. Whilst combatants take life, humanitarians endeavour to preserve it. Neutrality, impartiality and independence became the classical 'principles' of humanitarianism: the humanitarian act is supposed to be an apolitical one, carried out on the basis of need, independent from political contests.

The reality is, of course, much more complex. The shifting meanings and practices of humanitarianism are informed by the politics of the time, and although these principles are meant to guide action, in practice compromise is inevitable (Magone et al., 2011). Some organizations have dropped the

'neutrality' principle, and even organizations with the same principles make different decisions (Brauman, 2012). The relationship between humanitarian and military actors is also a topic of debate. In the early 2000s, some humanitarian practitioners and academics described a crisis in which a neutral 'humanitarian space' had become politicized to an unprecedented degree and subordinated to a Western security agenda (Stoddard and Harmer, 2006). UN peacebuilding merged political, military and aid spheres in order to 'stabilize' states in conflict, whilst aid became another tool for winning 'hearts and minds' in the war on terror (Gordon, 2011). Scholars argued that this co-optation threatened humanitarian safety by blurring the lines between military and humanitarian actors: combatants could no longer distinguish between the two. Consequently, humanitarians were viewed with suspicion and associated with Western foreign policy, and as a result, increasingly targeted (Stoddard et al., 2009).

Performing Humanitarianism

As a response, 'perception' became framed as essential to the security of humanitarian employees. The 'local' (citizens, state authorities and armed groups) was watching, and could become a threat (Sutton, 2018). Impression management was key to security management, because perception was key to 'local acceptance', which in turn was necessary for security. Analysing and managing how humanitarians were perceived became a new domain of expertise (Abu-Sada, 2012a; Givoni, 2016). Despite the limited evidence that humanitarian principles act as protective shields and the recognition by some agencies that humanitarian practice relies on compromise not principles (Benton and Atshan, 2016; Magone et al., 2011), on the ground, principles are still framed as important tools which need to be translated and then *performed* to onlookers (Givoni, 2016) through the behaviour of employees who are the embodiment of NGOs in practice (James, 2020). Codes of conduct became central to security management frameworks, and rules about behaviour also applied outside work hours (Beerli, 2018).

Distinction from armed actors became key to performing this humanitarian identity. Performances of distinction take place on several levels: humanitarians distance themselves from combatants (local and foreign armies, rebels, peacekeepers), but also from other civilian or humanitarian actors (Sutton, 2018). Civilian-ness is therefore a *spectrum* in which humanitarians endeavour to perform 'civilian plus' (Sutton, 2020). In eastern DRC, for example, many NGOs refuse protective armed convoys or guards from any party to the conflict. The NGO Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) even painted its vehicles fuchsia in an effort to distinguish its staff from UN peacekeepers (Abu-Sada, 2012b: 11), and it discourages its employees from interacting with civilian employees of the peacekeeping mission, even after work. Meanwhile, 'local staff' are given 'principles sessions' and reminded

that: 'Being seen as too close/in favour/connected to specific groups can be a potential risk'.[4] Even humanitarians working for NGOs which have dropped the 'neutrality' principle described the need to enact an exceptional humanitarian status — one that is detached and distinct from military and political actors — when working in a conflict context.[5] Principles become the new 'identity marker' (Hilhorst and Schmiemann, 2002) of humanitarians in conflict zones.

Evidently, such performativity of humanitarian identity or principles does not imply falsehood or deceit. As Goffman (1956) describes, all social interaction is performative, and these performances of social life are neither cynical nor sincere. Instead, identity is always inherently ambiguous, made through interactions with others, overlapping and multiple. There is no binary between the realms of what is 'real' and what is 'performed': practice and rhetoric entertain a complex relationship.

Beyond 'Blurring'

Nevertheless, the relationship between military and humanitarian actors is more complex than a simple distinction at risk of blurring. A 'humanitarian space' has never existed: it is a self-legitimizing construction which aims *symbolically* to separate humanitarianism from its political environment (Hilhorst and Jansen, 2010). The contemporary politicization of aid is not unprecedented, nor is its entanglement with Western global governance (Barnett, 2011). Humanitarians have always negotiated with agents other than the recognized state authorities (Jackson and Davey, 2014), and assistance is entangled in the political economy of war (Keen, 2008).

Rather than discussing interactions between 'humanitarians' and 'armed actors', this article challenges the distinction altogether. Humanitarian identity, or who counts as a humanitarian, has always been contested. Indeed, the use of military personnel to provide humanitarian assistance is not new (Weiss and Campbell, 1991). Both military and humanitarian institutions require a sophisticated logistics capacity to facilitate the movement of people and goods in a turbulent and militarized landscape. In DRC, aid and military infrastructures look remarkably similar — walled compounds patrolled by guards, filled with objects adapted for navigating a conflict terrain, such as satellite telephones, radios and 4×4 vehicles. Foreign military and humanitarian personnel both develop forms of 'liminal subjectivity' (Smirl, 2012): moving from one 'mission' to the next, wearing uniforms and following codes of conduct.

Personal identities further challenge the principle of distinction. Military physicians, for instance, are described as caught between the incompati-

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4. North Kivu MSF April 2011 security plan (in author's possession).
5. Interviews with Oxfam aid workers, Goma, December 2017.

ble roles of doctor and military professional, but they actually identify as *both* medical humanitarians and soldiers — a professional identity that 'delivers both healing and wounding functions' (Gordon, 2014: 428). Meanwhile, rebel groups establish humanitarian wings to facilitate aid delivery (Reno, 2011: 148), and humanitarian response is in the remit of many armed forces.[6] Some humanitarians have military pasts. In DRC, it was not unusual to find 'expatriate' humanitarians with military experience: these were people with experience of working in 'insecure environments'.

This article, however, shifts the focus away from the contested relationship between Western military and humanitarian actors to explore instead the experience of locally hired humanitarians who are operating in the same area where they were once rebels. Foreign aid workers in North Kivu were not surprised that some of their colleagues had rebel histories. It seemed to operate as a 'public secret': acknowledged, but not openly discussed (Taussig, 1999). Yet, there are few explorations of rebel-cum-humanitarians (Lombard, 2018), or of what their experiences show about how both citizens and intervenors navigate conflict contexts. Arguably, it is not a question of the blurring of boundaries between humanitarians and former members of armed groups, but rather a mirroring of skills and existences which are equally relevant to military and humanitarian organizations. For rebel-humanitarians, military *savoir faire* was a prerequisite on which their humanitarian role was built, and as a result, their rebel identity remained key to their humanitarian identity. It concerns concurrent identities rather than just a blurring of two spaces.

THE SETTING: EASTERN DRC

'No Peace, No War'

Eastern DRC has been at the epicentre of conflict in the Great Lakes region for 25 years. In 1994, Rwandan refugees fled across the border to the Kivu provinces. The Rwandan army subsequently launched attacks to eliminate former *génocidaire* elements.[7] In 1996, the Rwandan-backed AFDL rebellion, led by Laurent Kabila, invaded Congo and overthrew the President, Mobutu. The second war began when Kabila tried to expel his Rwandan backers: in 1998, the Rwandan-backed RCD invaded. The conflict escalated to involve eight countries and more than 25 armed groups. Although the war officially ended in 2003, violence continued, with the rebellions of the Rwandan-backed Congrès National pour la Defense du Peuple (CNDP) be-

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6. The US Army describes humanitarian assistance as one of its activities. See: www.army. mil/humanitarian/

7. Militiamen who had been involved in the Rwandan genocide.

tween 2006 and 2009, and Mouvement du 23-Mars (M23) between 2012 and 2013.

Since the end of the M23 rebellion, there has been a proliferation of armed groups, in particular 'self-defence' Mai-Mai — community militia groups who see themselves as defending 'autochthones' against Rwandan domination. There are rarely clear frontlines, but instead networks of alliances and rivalries. Governance is a negotiated process (Hagmann and Péclard, 2010) between state authorities, customary authorities, civil society organizations, rebel groups, churches, businesses, the army and NGOs. Within militarized networks, the distinction between state and non-state is artificial, because armed groups are embedded in networks which include both state and non-state actors, whilst individuals have been rotating between the army and rebel groups for years (Verweijen, 2016: 50). In practice, power is found in the alliances between armed actors and local authorities which partially stand 'in opposition and partially collaborate with the state' (Vlassenroot and Raeymaekers, 2008: 50). The ability to broker between overlapping authority structures has become important to everyday life (Vogel and Musamba, 2017).

War is not an exceptional phenomenon that interrupts 'normal' social and political life: instead, violence can be conceived as part of 'normality' (Richards, 2005a). Richards's concept of 'no-peace-no-war' challenges the 'categorical distinction between war and peace', thinking instead in terms of a 'continuum' in order to grasp the complex impacts of conflict dynamics on social life (Richards, 2005b: 5). Just as violence is an everyday social process, so are armed mobilization, demobilization and remobilization (Debos, 2008). Political elites and army commanders build connections with rebel groups as a form of political leverage and economic gain, with a 'revolving door' between the national army and rebel groups as individuals rotate back and forth (Eriksson Baaz and Verweijen, 2013). Meanwhile, the growing number of armed groups aggravates local conflicts relating to authority and land, which in turn feeds new mobilization (Mathys and Vlassenroot, 2016). Since 1996, at least 270,000 people have been going in and out of armed groups (Vogel and Stearns, 2018). This process has been described as 'circular return': the continuous 'mobility between combatant and civilian spaces … the semi-autonomous field of an armed group and their larger social context' (Vlassenroot et al., 2020: 839). Being part of two different social environments has become a permanent condition of life (Vlassenroot et al., 2020). The distinction principle, therefore, does not capture the complexity of these trajectories or affiliations to military networks.

Meanwhile, after the influx of Rwandan refugees in 1994, eastern DRC became the base for a plethora of foreign NGOs and the UN's largest peace-keeping mission. During the second Congolese war, social services were almost entirely provided by international aid organizations, and following the peace deal, there was a proliferation of NGOs. The number of NGOs in the country increased from 450 in 1990, to 1,322 in 1996, and to more

than 5,000 in 2019 (Barbelet, 2019: 6). This protracted aid presence has reshaped the political and economic landscape. As the base for NGOs in the region, Goma became a 'zone of opportunity', not only providing opportunities for a well-educated elite, but also creating a new form of social mobility in a context of cyclical conflict and high unemployment. The humanitarian sector has become the city's main source of economic employment, creating new sectors — one of which is 'security management'. A humanitarian class has formed, employed as guards, drivers and cooks. The presence of foreign organizations created a real estate boom, led to a proliferation of private security companies, and stimulated the 'dollarization' of the economy. Through these economic processes, local elites reinforced their dominance. The extended presence of NGOs and their preponderance in service provision also reinforced their political power in local government processes, reducing the bargaining position of state administrators (Büscher and Vlassenroot, 2010). This influx of foreign money, therefore, affected power relations between local actors and created conditions which drew new people into the humanitarian arena.

NGOs and armed groups are two significant employers in the region. They are two permanent features of the political landscape and have had to interact for over 20 years. In order to work, aid agencies must negotiate the terms of their access with armed authorities, maintaining a network to communicate with, and receive the necessary security reassurances from, all the relevant powerholders. Thus, the ability to broker and translate has become an important skill set for the job market.

Beyond 'Aidland' and 'Rebels'

In this context, dichotomies such as combatant/civilian, state/non-state, humanitarian/military no longer hold. Some humanitarians have histories in rebel groups, and some rebels have histories as humanitarians, while others move back and forth. In a region where networking with armed groups is a valued skill for the job market, former rebels have the necessary *savoir faire* to help NGOs analyse the security terrain. Meanwhile, graduates with networks are ideal candidates for both political wings of armed groups and for international NGOs. Rather than being distinct, the worlds of 'Aidland' (Apthorpe, 2005) and 'armed groups' are overlapping and interlinked by individuals who do not just broker relationships between the two, but also move between them.

One Congolese humanitarian from North Kivu, Arnaud, told me, 'I've been negotiating here all my life — just from different positions with different hats on'. Arnaud's different 'hats' had involved humanitarianism, the church, mining, AFDL and RCD rebellions, civil society, then back to the aid sector. 'I negotiate with the same people as before, but I've changed po-

sition'.[8] Whilst some decided to stay in the humanitarian sector, there was also 'circular return' between humanitarian and combatant lives. Some humanitarian employees held concurrent military affiliations and re-joined active combat, or were spotted in military uniforms, on their days off work. As one Congolese humanitarian summarized it: 'Some members of our team were always 50/50'.[9] Others left humanitarianism to return to a politico-military career. For example, the Administrator of the Territory of Rutshuru appointed in the M23 rebellion was a former employee of an international NGO. His former colleagues described needing to 'reset boundaries'.[10]

Meanwhile, rebels have humanitarian histories. The leader of the CNDP, Laurent Nkunda, had worked for MSF. As a rebel, he interacted with the same NGO that he had once worked for. A foreign MSF employee described meeting Nkunda: 'We started to explain the principles and charter, and he interrupted: "I already know. I worked with you"'.[11] The CNDP established a parallel governance structure, which included a Social Affairs Commission run by Dr Alexis Kasanzu. One humanitarian described Kasanzu as 'the rebel-doctor, a doctor with a pistol'.[12] Before the CNDP, Kasanzu had worked alongside NGOs MSF and Merlin at a hospital in Masisi. Later, he became head of M23's Social and Humanitarian Affairs Department. Ultimately, these life histories illustrate how humanitarian agencies do not occupy a bounded enclave but are just another actor in a web of relationships that determine how power is negotiated at a local level. The circular return between armed groups and NGOs is a microcosm of the political context at national level, with individuals moving between armed organizations and government, the national army and rebel groups. These forms of circular return are a feature of 'inter-war': 'the spaces and times which are affected by violence', where 'people are waiting for the next war while hoping that it will not break out' (Debos, 2011: 413).

In the following sections, I turn to the experience of three rebel-cum-humanitarians. Their trajectories illustrate how individuals mediate overlapping identities, repositioning themselves in periods of protracted violence to cope with uncertainty (Utas, 2005). This acts as a form of 'social navigation' — a concept which describes how people navigate through volatile environments where social positions and configurations 'are reconfigured and reshaped in relation to stable instability and chronic crisis' (Vigh, 2008: 13). Here, people continually assess their social environment as well as how they 'position themselves in relation to others' (ibid.: 20).

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8. Interview, Arnaud, humanitarian, Masisi, 4 September 2018.
9. Interview, humanitarian, Bukavu, 18 September 2018.
10. Interview, humanitarian, via Skype, 15 May 2018.
11. Interview, humanitarian, via Skype, 5 June 2018.
12. Interview, humanitarian, via Skype, 6 August 2017.

FROM REBEL TO HUMANITARIAN

Gloire

Gloire grew up in Rutshuru and described himself a part of 'the Tutsi community'.[13] Gloire was made to feel that he 'did not belong' in eastern DRC. These feelings of exclusion, he argued, were what led to his recruitment into armed movements. Gloire was recruited by the RPF in Congo, and then fought in the Rwandan civil war during the genocide. The RPF invaded Rwanda in 1990, sparking the civil war and eventually toppling the genocidaire regime. Gloire did not finish secondary school but received military training and rose in the ranks. He then returned to DRC to fight for the Rwandan-backed AFDL and RCD rebel forces. During our conversations, Gloire repeated that he had 'seen so many awful things', in Rwanda, and then again during conflict in Congo. He described feeling manipulated and abandoned as a soldier: 'It is once you become an adult that you understand that you have been used to serve the interests of politicians'. Gloire became disillusioned with the RCD: 'I was doing things that were against my conscience'. In 2001, he deserted whilst in Uganda, but was arrested on suspicion of espionage. Gloire spent several years in prison. There was a Bible in his cell, and in Gloire's words, he read it 'again and again, and over time, I decided to leave military life'. Humanitarianism eventually became a sector in which Gloire thought that he could use his existing skills 'for good'.[14]

At the time, however, joining the NGO sector was something of a last resort. After Gloire left the RCD, he spent time in refugee camps in Uganda, before travelling to Mali. There, he bought a passport with a Schengen visa and travelled to France. On arrival, however, Gloire spent a week in detention, where his asylum claim was refused. He then tried to claim asylum in the UK, where he has a mother and sister whom he has not seen for 20 years. His impression was that a military background reduced his chances of asylum. It was only after failed attempts that Gloire returned to Kinshasa: 'I failed to become a businessman, so I started to look for other jobs so that I could look after my family. I decided to leave Kinshasa after four long years of uncertainty. I spent eight months in the Orientale area searching for gold. Then, in 2008, I arrived in Goma and came across a job as a driver for an NGO'. He was subsequently promoted to logistics and security management. 'I remember being military, you are looking to make money on the side because your salary is nothing, and humanitarians are getting in the way. I recognize this attitude. I can help get past it', he explained.[15]

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13. Hutu and Tutsi are not fixed 'ethnic' categories; their meanings have changed over time.
14. Interviews, Goma, 24 February 2018, 29 August 2018.
15. Interviews, Goma, 15 September 2018, 5 November 2020.

Faustin

Whilst Faustin and I shared tilapia and chips in Goma, his three mobile phones rang periodically. Faustin specializes in humanitarian security and access — and he was busy. This role requires maintaining contact with a range of different armed networks, analysing the shifting political context and its significance for humanitarian programmes. Faustin had never intended to pursue a humanitarian career. He grew up in Rutshuru and joined the AFDL at 15, working principally in military logistics. After the AFDL marched to Kinshasa, Faustin returned home at the request of his mother. He had hoped to study at university, but after his mother died, he stayed to help care for his family.

Faustin described feelings of dislocation, 'I did not feel that I could rejoin military life, but I was unsure what else to do'. Faustin's dream was to pursue a political career but he found this difficult without a degree or political connections. In the end, he found a job as a guard for an NGO that had just arrived in his home village: 'it was an opportunity to be employed', he explained. Over time, however, Faustin realized that he had a competitive edge over his colleagues: he could use his personal networks to collect information about conflict dynamics and to help broker relationships for his NGO. Faustin had contacts within the RCD and, later, the CNDP from his time in the AFDL, and told me he had 'transformed his military background into a strength. It helped me to build a career in humanitarianism'.[16]

Imani

Imani came from a military family and moved around the country before eventually settling in Goma: 'we watched the city being built all around us', he explained, gesturing to the houses in the suburban neighbourhood where we met. 'I always understood the military, and I was attracted to a military career because it's what my family did. It was something you could really be proud of: there weren't many Swahiliphones in the army during the Mobutu era'. In 1996, Imani had just graduated from university, and 'life was turned upside down by the war'. In 1998, he decided to join the newly arrived RCD rebel group: 'Why join? It was about liberating the country from Kabila, who had become another dictator. It was about saving the country. It was a patriotic act'. Looking back with hindsight, he reflected: 'There were things we learnt later, about Rwanda's motivations and behaviour; it was disappointing'.[17]

Imani worked for an RCD official in Goma and then in military intelligence, networking and collecting information to guide operations. After the

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16. Interviews, Goma, 22 February 2018, 2 March 2018.
17. Interview, Goma, 27 August 2018.

war ended and a business venture in Kampala failed, Imani found himself back in Goma looking for a job. An old friend suggested that Imani look in the growing humanitarian sector. The CNDP rebellion had just begun, and NGOs were recruiting for new projects in the zone: 'People thought Nkunda was a war criminal and they were scared to work in his fiefdom, but I knew Nkunda from our time in the RCD, so I said I would go. I began as a driver and I came across people I knew from the RCD who had since joined the CNDP'. Imani saw an advantage to having a military past: 'I could help with security because I was quick to understand, and I knew people. I could gather information and analyse the situation, much like I had for the RCD'. Imani was promoted in logistics and, eventually, 'expatriated' to an NGO placement abroad.[18]

Navigation and Transformation

A humanitarian career was never the plan for these three individuals, but when NGOs arrived en masse in DRC, they reshaped the opportunities available in the region and provided forms of social mobility. Becoming a humanitarian was a means of social navigation: it enabled Faustin, Imani and Gloire to gain employment using their existing skills, because the ability to broker between armed and political authorities was an asset. However, former rebels also described their career trajectory as a social process (Debos, 2011): humanitarianism was a site of identity formation.[19] Former rebels described sensitization sessions which focused on humanitarian principles and on how to be an 'ambassador' for these values. In Faustin's words, 'I found a new purpose. Humanitarianism is the best school. I changed my attitude'. Through 'trainings', Faustin learnt to 'understand the ideology … it changed my personality. I built a humanitarian life'.[20]

Imani also described a 'transformation'. He 'hardly recognizes' the person he was before. He described learning what he called 'values' and 'codes' of a 'humanitarian life'; he has learnt to 'modify' his behaviour and 'see people differently', even in his personal life. Gloire summarized, 'I'm a humanitarian first, then a Christian'.[21] In Gloire's case, his career enabled personal social mobility: 'I had a limited level of education because I joined the RPF so young. I wanted to go to university and the NGO accepted. They let me leave work an hour early. I studied for three years and got my degree'.[22]

Ultimately, aid institutions have reshaped the political economy. Thousands of livelihoods are dependent on these global institutions (Ndaliko,

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18. Interview, Goma, 25 February 2018; interview via Skype, 26 September 2019.

19. I am not suggesting that this represents 'progress', but am recounting my interviewees' narratives.

20. Interview, Goma, 2 March 2018.

21. Interview, Goma, 29 August 2018.

22. Interviews, Goma, 15 September 2018, 5 November 2020.

2016: 5), whose priorities shape lives in DRC. However, the long-term presence of aid regimes has also had unintended social consequences — an impact on the 'identities, experiences and aspirations' of locally hired employees (Swidler and Watkins, 2009: 1182). Joining the aid sector is a means of social mobility, but it is also a way for individuals to pursue a broader goal, to obtain a new identity that is middle class and progressive (Swidler and Watkins, 2009). Aid work has become a site of identity construction. Yet, it seems impossible to distinguish between conscious strategic positioning (whereby people play or adopt a role), and instances in which self-conceptions are changed profoundly: the two processes are interwoven (Rossi, 2006: 30).

As Achille Mbembe (2005: 148) put it, war is 'the means whereby one creates a world, as well as the life-world that is itself created'. Armed mobilization is a process of socialization, a means of creating new forms of social capital and constructing new identities (Vlassenroot et al., 2020). After demobilization, humanitarianism became a new process of socialization, a new position ex-rebels could adopt. As Lombard argues, humanitarian careers provided 'new ways of thinking and doing' for rebels who embraced humanitarian 'attempts at social engineering' and, in the process, gained a new sense of purpose. In short, the sector became a 'new outlet' for ex-rebel 'skills' (Lombard, 2018: 240).

MILITARY *SAVOIR FAIRE* IN HUMANITARIAN PRACTICE

What were these skills, and what role did they play in humanitarian practice? Given the focus on performing an exceptional identity, how did rebel experience fit with the expectations of a humanitarian career? Gloire, Faustin and Imani described an advantage, an ability to 'read' security (Pottier, 2006: 176). Both humanitarian and military actors need to navigate a militarized political environment. Rebel-cum-humanitarians described a transferable form of *savoir faire* that enabled them to do so. In fact, their everyday practices as humanitarians drew heavily on the knowledge and contacts gained through their rebel past — the very history which was supposed to be antithetical to their new humanitarian identity.

Faustin

As an NGO guard in Rutshuru, Faustin learnt that 'security also meant information'. He had an advantage because he had personal networks in local armed groups. When his hometown was under RCD control, for instance, Faustin had a cousin in the group, who would warn him about impending attacks. At the same time, Faustin had family in the national army who also shared information with him. Not only this, but Faustin knew several RCD

commanders from their time together in the AFDL. He described bumping into one General whom he had known well on a personal level: 'He said "you escaped us!" He tried to get me to return'. Using these networks, Faustin was able to warn his colleagues when not to move in a particular area, 'they [expatriates] realized I was useful for security'.[23] Increasingly, Faustin acted as an informal intermediary. During the CNDP rebellion, Faustin's network in Rutshuru once again became a resource: the local customary leader — the *chef de groupement* — was an acquaintance of his father, and he knew several CNDP officials from their time in the AFDL. By chance, Faustin had also been taught by Nkunda when he was a teacher. Faustin described balancing his connections with both the national army and CNDP, sharing the information they gave him with his NGO colleagues in the utmost confidence.

Faustin described being able to broker between rebels and humanitarians:

> All I knew was war. I understood the military attitude. But at the same time, I came to understand the humanitarian attitude. My role became helping them to collaborate, facilitating understanding. I could do that because I had been on both sides. Beginning in an armed group can help you be a humanitarian, because you know what it is to be military. You understand how the military was trained; you have lived that. You know how to approach people, when to persist and when to stop. I changed my mentality when I became a humanitarian, so it is easier for me to change armed groups' behaviour, to get them to respect humanitarians, I can help get acceptance.[24]

According to Faustin, being an ex-military also meant: 'I do not panic in difficult zones, unlike city boys from the west, they panic like *mzungus*!'.[25] At an introductory training with the Red Cross on international humanitarian law, Faustin described how 'it was familiar: both military and humanitarian trades revolve around war'. In fact, Faustin described the biggest difference between humanitarianism and military careers as 'liberty of expression: in the humanitarian world you are allowed to speak your mind'.[26]

Imani

Imani began as a driver in Masisi during the CNDP rebellion. He travelled between different areas controlled by the CNDP, the national army, the Forces Démocratiques de Liberation du Rwanda (FDLR) made up of former Rwandan génocidaire elements, and Patriotes Résistants Congolais (PARECO), a collection of militias who collaborated with the national army and saw themselves as defending 'autochthonous' populations. Drivers are relied on for navigating politics at roadblocks in eastern DRC. Imani learnt

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23. Interview, Goma, 27 August 2018.
24. Interview, Goma, 2 March 2018.
25. Swahili word used to refer to white people.
26. Interview, Goma, 27 August 2018, interview via Skype 24 September 2019.

to navigate the roads, but also built networks among armed officials nearby in order to 'check' security before travelling. 'I realized there are similarities between humanitarian and military operational models, and they work in the same zones. For those of us in the military before, you have a better understanding of the situation, more insight, and you know how to take certain decisions', he explained. Imani also had important personal networks from his time in the RCD. In CNDP-controlled zones, Imani described bumping into old acquaintances, including Laurent Nkunda: 'the expatriates in my organization were confused as to how we knew one another, but we had spent some time together in Kisangani during the war'. His background helped with 'acceptance' among some rebel officials because 'the trust was already there'.[27] Building on these past networks, Imani was able to gather relevant information for his NGO.

Gloire

'When I began to work as a humanitarian, I noticed that there were quite a few aspects of military life which could be adapted to humanitarian life, which could become useful for my colleagues', Gloire told me. He explained:

> You can adapt easily to the humanitarian work, because it takes place in dangerous areas, and all my military life that was the daily routine. If you have had a military life, when you are in normal life with people who have never experienced it, you have an advanced understanding of the context. You are patient and calm in difficult situations.[28]

Gloire described this as 'reactivity, you know how to react in the face of danger. Even if you stop military life, the training is still there'. Gloire often helped in crisis situations, such as kidnappings of his colleagues: 'my colleagues began to ask for my contribution, and because of my experience, I could bring something to help resolve the problem'.[29]

Gloire described how his rebel knowledge helped with everyday activities, such as planning for an NGO convoy to travel through a particular area in Masisi territory:

> First it is necessary to find out about the context before authorizing a movement of our colleagues, so you contact your personal networks in the zone, mostly security forces and armed groups, and there you use your *savoir faire* from your military days to make sure that you do not ask questions which make it seem like you are spying, looking for sensitive information.

Next, Gloire needed to analyse the information that he gathered. 'During briefings with your colleagues, you need to talk honestly about what you

27. Interview, Goma, 27 August 2018.
28. Interview, Goma, 15 September 2018.
29. Interview via Skype, 15 September 2019.

know about the risks and what could happen, given what you know about recent events in the area, the character of the armed men you have talked to, their attitudes and objectives. Only then can you make an assessment'.[30]

Gloire described knowing how to interact with his rebel interlocutors, to understand the mentality and experience of rebellion:

> We had a project in Rutshuru which is controlled by a Nyatura militia group. The leader did not trust our NGO. Before implementing our project, we met with him, I talked about his concerns and we responded to his questions. My military experience helped, because it means you know what to say and not what to say. You have to keep calm and try to empathize. They all want to show you that their armed struggle is to help liberate Congo, that their fight is necessary so that the men leading the country care for their population.

A personal experience of rebellion meant that Gloire felt he could empathize, and also play the game strategically: 'you know what to say, you have a clear understanding of all the politics at play in this area. We are now two years into that project and the leader of the Nyatura group has become a key contact for us'.[31]

Gloire's networks also became a resource. Whilst working in Rutshuru, he described meeting with Bosco Ntaganda, a senior official in the CNDP and M23, for the first time since the early 2000s when they had met as combatants during the war. Gloire was recognized by a CNDP soldier at a roadblock, and subsequently brought to meet Ntaganda, who was shocked to see Gloire driving an NGO vehicle: 'he said something like, "what the hell are you doing driving for them? Come join us!". I awkwardly refused, but our history helped with my organization's movements in that zone'.[32]

Ultimately, being in an armed group is not just a means of expressing violent opposition. It is also a 'practical occupation', a métier. The activities conducted by armed men are not just violent, but also constitute more mundane social practices: rebels develop 'specific sets of knowledge and practical expertise' (Debos, 2011: 411). In the humanitarian sphere, former rebels found that this knowledge had some utility, particularly for 'security management'. Security is not an abstract notion but an everyday experience, with locally determined signifiers. Ex-combatants drew on their past experience in order to read these signifiers — to 'read' the context in order to navigate a particular political terrain. In short, they possessed a form of what Scott (1998: 316) describes as 'metis' — practical knowledge about how to navigate a shifting social structure, acquired through practice and experience in a particular locality. They combined this *savoir faire* with interpersonal networks from their rebel careers. People in eastern DRC described a process of 'recycling' — individuals 'recycle' over time in the zone, changing group affiliation, or geographical location, but continuing to work in the same social structure. Whilst some people recycled from one rebel group to

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30. Interview, Goma, 24 February 2018.
31. Interview via Skype, 15 September.
32. Interview, Goma, 29 August 2018.

the army, and back to another rebel group, others recycled from rebel groups to NGOs. They adopted a new social status in the process, but continued to interact with some of the same people as before.

RISKS AND DISTRUST

Despite this, rebel experience also had its challenges. Humanitarians are supposed to present themselves as blank slates with no history, no links or allegiances. Drawing from a colonial history, 'the field' is imagined as some faraway place distant from 'home', a liminal space, isolated from humanitarians' own political histories and interests (Redfield, 2012). But all humanitarians are situated politically and socially. Many locally hired humanitarians have complex histories and networks in the same area in which they are required to perform a humanitarian identity. Whilst wearing a humanitarian T-shirt, they are interacting with people they know personally and must perform overlapping roles in the same setting. 'We have our identity, but at the same time, we are humanitarians. It can be difficult to balance the two', one Congolese aid worker from North Kivu told me.[33] In Goffman's (1956) terms, we all play overlapping roles in life. However, this is particularly complicated for rebel-cum-humanitarians because their personal history is framed as a threat or contradiction to their professional identity. As ex-rebels navigate the social space of both humanitarian and military networks, the 'in-between-ness' of their position means they face distrust from both sides.

Performing Humanitarianism to Men-in-arms

Rebel-cum-humanitarians described the difficulty of presenting themselves as 'neutral' to conflict when interacting with armed actors who fought against their former movements. As Imani explained, 'it is difficult being a humanitarian because of the discourse of being neutral. Of course, experience with a certain armed group is useful in their zones or the zones of their allies, but everything here is always shifting. Allies become enemies'.[34] Faustin explained: 'I did not tell anyone about my background. It can help with associated groups, but it's a problem for working with their rivals'.[35]

In particular, employees with experience in Rwandan-backed rebellions endeavoured to keep their background a secret from Mai-Mai who had mobilized against such rebellions. They feared being directly associated with

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33. Interview, humanitarian, Goma, 8 February 2018.
34. Interview via Skype, 26 September 2019.
35. Interview, Goma, 27 August 2018.

the historical violence attributed to their former armed group. Gloire described the difficulties of being accepted as just a humanitarian when interacting with Mai-Mai: 'They don't look at the NGO logo on your T-shirt. We have a problem with *ethnicisme*[36] here'. Gloire described working in his home territory, when he was stopped by Mai-Mai who asked: 'What are you doing here? You're a Rwandan'. Given these tensions, Gloire stressed the importance of not disclosing his rebel background: 'When you are working in zones controlled by those armed groups, you are terrified'.[37] Imani also hid his background. Even though his contacts from the RCD were useful when interacting with the CNDP, Imani did not want to be perceived as 'pro-CNDP' among government loyalist forces. Even Imani's acquaintances in the CNDP were wary: 'I was no longer with them, and I could travel across the frontlines to the other side. I knew them, their families, some were worried what I might say'.[38]

Performing Humanitarianism to Colleagues

Despite these difficulties, however, the key challenge seemed to be performing a humanitarian role *within* the sector. 'There were tensions within the NGO team. To have military experience in the region where you work as a humanitarian can be difficult', Faustin admitted.[39] Imani described the topic of rebel pasts as 'taboo'. Whilst he was working in Masisi, Imani described 'a cold war between locals who saw themselves as autochthonous and associated with local Mai-Mai, and those who were branded as outsiders with the CNDP. This tension was reflected within the humanitarian team'. In this context, Imani feared that his history would become particularly sensitive.

Gloire also endeavoured to hide his military experience from his colleagues:

> When they discover your past, you become a subject of critique. Among my colleagues there are those who think that I am still working in espionage for my old bosses. They try to reveal my past to the security services, telling them I am a dangerous man, because some people who joined armed groups then became criminals. If you have a rebel past, there is less trust in your character.[40]

Faustin also described tensions: 'our humanitarian team was infected with politics. It was not accepted to talk about that past. I was lucky, I worked in the AFDL in a different area and I was not denounced to the expatriates by my colleagues'.[41]

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36. Referring to discrimination based on notions of ethnic identity.
37. Interview, Goma, 24 February 2018.
38. Interview, Goma, 27 August 2018.
39. Interview, Goma, 2 March 2018.
40. Interview, Goma, 15 September 2018.
41. Interview, Goma, 22 February 2018.

Being denounced to expatriates, then, was another concern. Rebel-cum-humanitarians feared losing their positions. 'It is hard to be perceived as neutral here if you are local — by armed groups, but also your colleagues. When you were military, it is even harder, you are perceived negatively', Gloire explained.[42] Imani described the advantages of military experience in his career as 'unofficial', because he did not disclose it to his colleagues. Although it was not unusual for their European and North American colleagues to have military histories, Congolese humanitarians thought that their own military experience was viewed with suspicion because it situated them in local conflicts. When I asked Faustin whether he had disclosed his past to 'the expatriates', he exclaimed, 'of course not! Why would I do that? They wouldn't understand'. Indeed, Faustin's impression was that his military network was at once his greatest strength, but also a limitation: 'expatriates saw me as too politicized'. Disclosing his background, Faustin explained, would only exacerbate the distrust.[43]

Indeed, there was a degree of distrust among foreign staff about the ability of their 'local' colleagues to be 'neutral' at all. Although foreign intervenors rely on the histories and networks of local employees, they do not fully trust local colleagues *precisely because* of these histories and networks (James, 2020). In response to rumours of Congolese employees being sympathetic to certain armed groups, for instance, one humanitarian told me they could 'never promise that this wasn't true', with another concluding, 'We don't know what our staff do in their free time'. 'National staff are part of the context', I was told by another senior manager, 'I don't pretend any of them are neutral'.[44] Foreign humanitarians described their unease at never knowing the extent of the links between their colleagues and armed groups. Senior positions were often reserved for foreign nationals. 'Expatriate-only' meetings discussed sensitive information, whilst trainings aimed to 'sensitize' locals. Ultimately, colonial echoes linger in who is assumed capable of embodying principles such as universality or neutrality, and who is seen as rooted with 'particular' loyalties (Mudimbe, 1988: 46).

The public secret that some local employees had rebel histories seemed to increase this distrust. 'It's not like our staff put it on their CV', one aid worker remarked.[45] For Gloire, the inability to talk openly about his past was, in fact, epitomized by this 'empty résumé': he could not add his military experience because human resources would not 'see him as neutral'. Gloire wanted to be 'expatriated' to somewhere his past would be less sensitive. However, Imani had worked abroad and still described tensions surrounding a rebel history in the humanitarian sector. He explained that some colleagues in Chad and South Sudan had asked him directly about his past,

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42. Interview, Goma, 15 September 2018.
43. Interview, Goma, 27 August 2018.
44. Interviews with humanitarians, Goma, October 2017 to September 2018.
45. Interview, humanitarian, 30 October 2017.

because 'they said I had the discipline of a military'.[46] Imani feared that revealing his history would influence their perception of him as a humanitarian, and a manager.

Reconciling Rebel-humanitarianism

How did these rebel-humanitarians reconcile their concurrent identities? Whilst all three described a process of personal 'transformation', implying a break between their military and humanitarian selves, they also described contradictory processes of continuity and rupture. Gloire, for example, described humanitarianism as a form of 'redemption'.[47] During our conversations, he described feeling manipulated as a rebel officer: 'you are made to kill by powerful people and then you are just forgotten'. Gloire saw becoming a humanitarian as 'part of the plan God set out for me': 'It was a way of doing good where I had done so much harm, a sort of redemption. It was never in my heart to do harm. I was always a Christian man'.[48] Faustin highlighted a degree of continuity: 'my aim was always saving lives, my countrymen. With humanitarianism, it's possible to save lives without killing'. At the same time, he emphasized the rupture of starting a 'humanitarian life': 'You are trained and you learn the humanitarian ideology. People change, they change their mentality'. To prove his point, Faustin explained that even though his contacts in the CNDP and then M23 had tried to recruit him, he had refused: 'I could never go back'.[49]

Despite descriptions of 'becoming humanitarians' with new identities, rebel-cum-humanitarians also described the challenges of this 'transition'. Gloire, for example, talked about the difficulties of adjusting his 'military mind-set': 'The problem you face is, if you have passed through the military before finding humanitarianism, you need to get rid of a superiority complex. The danger is you continue to see yourself as better than civilians, including your colleagues. Sometimes, it is difficult to remember that you have finished military life'.[50]

This was particularly a challenge when performing a humanitarian role to military figures: 'You have to treat them differently than you did as a military. It can be dangerous to forget which position you are coming from'. Faustin agreed that it is still difficult to 'change my attitude, it isn't easy'. Both described the difficulties of starting again: 'you look at people you fought with and where they are now, and you see how much you have lost',

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46. Interview via Skype, 26 September 2019.
47. Again, I am recounting the testimonies of my interviewees; I am not suggesting that a transition from rebel to humanitarian represents a form of progress or 'conversion'.
48. Interview, Goma, 25 February 2018.
49. Interview via Skype, 24 September 2019.
50. Interview, Goma, 15 September 2018.

Gloire explained, whilst Faustin commented that 'those who did not join humanitarian organizations, the people I knew, are now important men. If I had stayed, perhaps that could have been me'.[51]

Imani and Faustin described their humanitarian roles as the only career option available in the political economy in which they found themselves. 'In coming here, NGOs brought aid, but they also brought jobs', Faustin concluded. They both dismissed formal demobilization programmes as 'useless, money-making schemes', in Faustin's words. Instead, the aid sector was described as a sort of informal reintegration process, making new trajectories possible. For Imani, eventually leaving DRC as a humanitarian was seen as an opportunity to forget his rebel past. He used the skills gleaned from rebel experience on a daily basis but avoided discussing his past. In fact, he often wants to forget it altogether, 'I'm far away. It's a long time ago', he concluded.[52]

In talking about their experiences, it seems that Imani, Gloire and Faustin wanted to speak against subjectivities. Their narratives were not about *what* they were, but *who* they were — and who they were involved a complicated combination of rebel and humanitarian identities. In Faustin's words, 'it is both possible and not a bad thing to begin in an armed group and then become a humanitarian, to keep your military knowledge and to be a humanitarian. It's not a bad thing'.[53]

CONCLUSION

Humanitarians are entangled in processes of power negotiation in the settings where they intervene. Too often, scholars maintain a distinction between what is external and internal to 'Aidland', either exploring how authority is contested between different politico-military actors or describing the practices of (often foreign) intervenors (Harrison, 2013). But humanitarians are often inseparable from local political histories. Distinctions such as combatant/civilian, military/humanitarian do not capture the complexity of social experience. Just as there is 'circular return' between civilian and combatant life, and a 'revolving door' between state and non-state armed forces, there is also circular movement between the aid and rebel spheres. Armed rebellion was one métier available in the political economy, and aid work was another. The stories of rebel-humanitarians counter the idea of foreign aid agencies external to a political context. Instead, aid agencies are made up of people who are already 'insiders', integrated into the social and political fabric. The everyday practices of these staff, including rebel-humanitarians, further weave aid organizations into local networks of governance.

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51. Interview, Gloire, Goma, 15 September 2018; interview, Faustin, Goma, 27 August 2018.
52. Interview, Faustin, Goma, 2 March 2018; interview, Imani via Skype, 26 September 2016.
53. Interview, Goma, 27 August 2018.

The role that rebel networks and *savoir faire* play in humanitarian practice teases out some of the similarities between humanitarian and military métiers. Both sectors draw on types of knowledge about how to navigate a violent environment in order to work. Beneath the discourse on humanitarian principles or the managerial focus on risk management, a situated knowledge based on personal experience is essential to how humanitarians navigate a conflict terrain in practice. As a result, former rebels apply the social practices that were a non-violent part of rebel life (Debos, 2011) to a new career — one that also requires navigating a militarized political landscape. For many, this transition into humanitarianism was a means of renegotiating and navigating their own position in a no-war-no-peace context.

However, a rebel past was also a risk for a humanitarian career because humanitarian organizations demand that their employees perform an exceptional status *in distinction from* armed combatants. As a result, rebel-cum-humanitarians negotiate a difficult position: their military history is seen as a threat to humanitarian identity, to their employment and potential safety, yet at the same time, it becomes a resource for humanitarian practices of negotiation and security management. The difficulties of reconciling a rebel past and a humanitarian present illustrate how interventions reproduce binary subjectivities (Enria, 2019), such as combatant/civilian, military/humanitarian, neutral/implicated, which have complex effects on people trying to navigate their own position in society. Ultimately, despite the focus on performing principles such as neutrality and distinction in order to work in conflict, humanitarian agencies actually draw on the localized *savoir faire* of their employees, some of whom gained this knowledge through their own rebel experience — the very identity deemed antithetical to a humanitarian status. At a broader level, the stories of rebel-cum-humanitarians serve as a powerful illustration of the disconnection between the discourses, programme plans and imaginaries of aid institutions at headquarters, and the situated experiences, networks and *savoir faire* necessary to implement policies in practice.

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