Instruments of Identity:

***Médecins Sans Frontières* and Humanitarian Negotiations for Access in the Democratic Republic of the Congo**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how humanitarians negotiate access in conflict zones. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, interviews and archival analysis, it explores the everyday negotiations between *Médecins Sans Frontières* and armed groups in North Kivu, in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. I unpack what "negotiating access" looks like on the ground: a social and political process of brokerage, perception management and interest seeking in a complex web of relationships. I focus on people and their interactions, because they determine how abstract humanitarian principles (neutrality, impartiality, and independence) and predesigned interventions are translated into practice on the ground. I describe how humanitarians endeavour to *perform* humanitarianism and their principles during daily interactions.

The thesis examines how identities become central to maintaining humanitarian access, with ambiguity as their central characteristic. I argue that the personal and collective identities of different humanitarians become instruments for access. Humanitarians negotiate access together in symbiosis as a brokerage "club": different people in the team play different roles, because they have different perceived identities, access to different networks, have different experiences and *savoir faire*, as well as different personal histories, and therefore face different risks. The role of identity is central to the process of acquiring and sustaining access, which makes use of factors such as personal history, race, and gender, employing each where it confers particular advantage in performances of humanitarianism. This presents a paradox. Everyday humanitarian practice is shaped by, and reproduces, the very forms of difference that their egalitarian values seek to transcend.

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ACRONYMS

AFDL - *Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo-Zaïre*/ Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire

ALIMA - Alliance for International Medical Action

ALiR – *Armée pour la Libération du Rwanda*/ Army for the Liberation of Rwanda

ANR - *Agence Nationale de Renseignements*/ National Intelligence Agency

APCLS - *Alliance des patriotes pour un Congo libre et souverain*/ Alliance of Patriots for a Free and Sovereign Congo

AWDB – Aid Worker Data Base

CNDP - *Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple*/ National Congress for the Defence of the People

CRASH - *Centre de Reflexion sur l'Action et les Savoirs Humanitaires*

DPS - *Division Provincial de la Santé*

DRC – Democratic Republic of the Congo

FARDC – *Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo*/ Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo

FDLR - *Forces Démocratiques de Liberation du Rwanda*/Democratic Liberation Forces of Rwanda

ICRC – International Committee of the Red Cross

IFRC – The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent

M23 – *Mouvement du 23-Mars*/ March 23 Movement

MONUC – *Mission de l'Organisation de Nations Unies en République Démocratique du Congo*/ The United Nations Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

MONUSCO - *Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation en République Démocratique du Congo*/ The United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

MSF – *Médecins Sans Frontières*

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

NDC – Nduma Defense of Congo

NGO – Non-governmental organisation

OCA – Operational Centre Amsterdam

OCB – Operational Centre Brussels

OCP – Operational Centre Paris

PARECO - *Patriotes Résistants Congolais*/Congolese Patriot Resistants

RCD - *Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie*/ Rally for Congolese Democracy

UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

UNOCHA – The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

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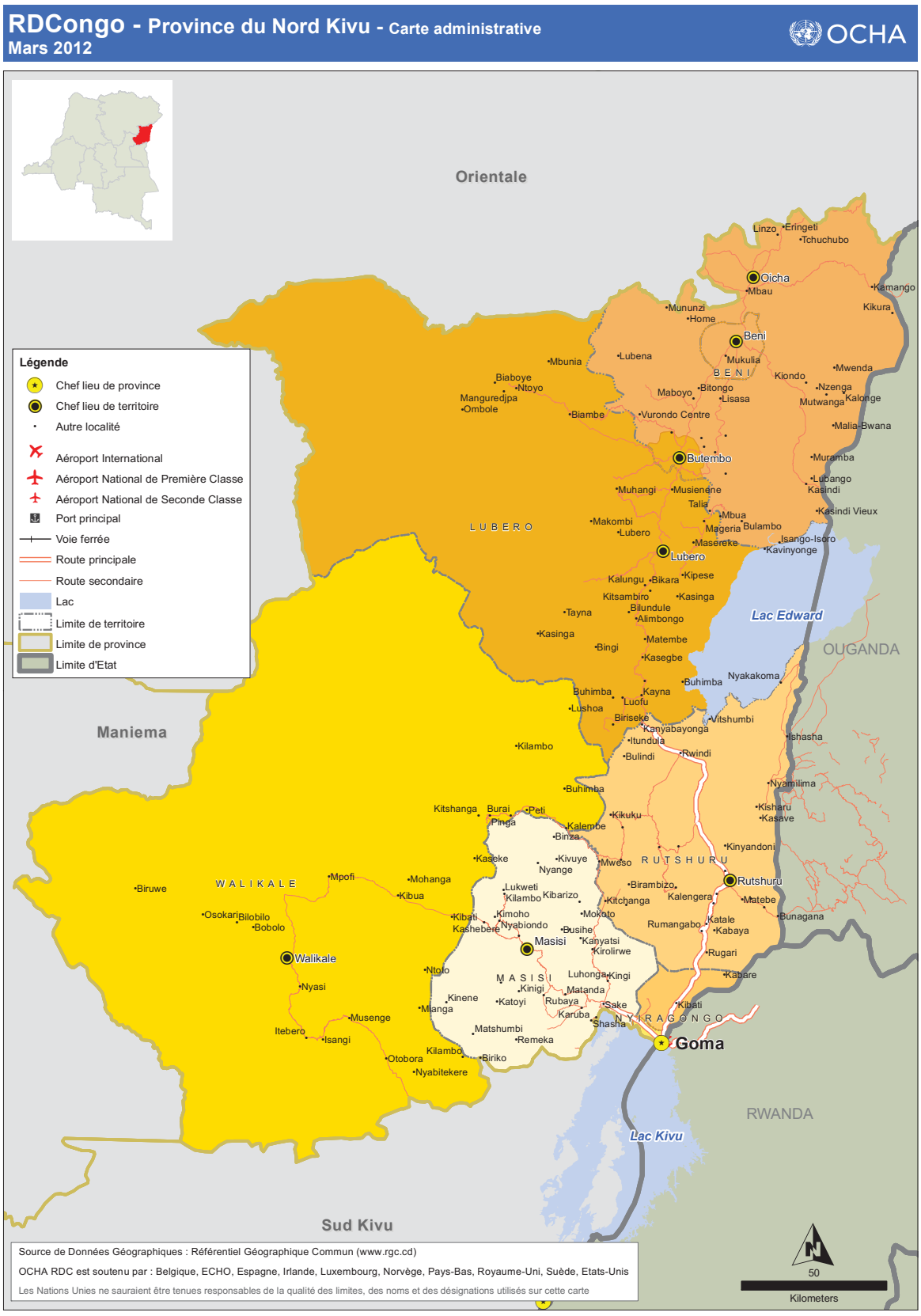


Figure 1: UNOCHA Map of North Kivu. Source: ReliefWeb.

1. INTRODUCTION

"My job here has always been negotiating between different actors," Yannick[1] told me, "I've been negotiating all my life - just from different positions, with different hats on." We were talking in a *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) office in a town nestled in lush mountains in North Kivu, a province in the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Yannick's different 'hats' had involved the church, business, rebel movements, politics, and civil society organisations. "Then, with MSF", he continued, "I was trained how to negotiate from a humanitarian standpoint. I now negotiate as a humanitarian." Humanitarianism was another sphere in which negotiation was central and in which his talents could usefully be employed.

North Kivu has been at the epicentre of protracted violence in the Great Lakes region for the last twenty-five years. Today, the region remains governed by a patchwork of different actors, including over one hundred armed groups. The humanitarian organisation that Yannick works for, MSF, has been providing emergency medical services in the region for decades. In order to operate, MSF needs to negotiate the terms of its access with a range of local powerholders who have shifted and evolved over time - a kaleidoscopic political landscape. MSF teams must build an extensive network in order to communicate with, and receive the necessary security reassurances from, the relevant powerholders in the areas where the organisation works and travels. I had come to talk to Yannick to learn more about how all this works in practice.

MSF's humanitarian work is characterised by speed and security: the ability to respond quickly to an "emergency" with high-quality medical care in conflict zones when few other NGOs stay. Yet, behind the poster images of doctors transporting the wounded across frontlines or providing emergency surgical care and vaccinations to people in need, there is another social, political and deeply personal practice of humanitarianism: a daily process of negotiating and networking, brokering and translating. Ultimately, the delivery of emergency medical care depends on this less visible work conducted by non-doctors, many of them local staff - employees who build and maintain a network of local contacts, and help negotiate the terms of MSF's everyday micro-practices in order to "manage security."

[1] All names have been changed.

MSF's office at this project site overlooked a courtyard, which was separated from a busy street by compound gates painted with depictions of patients on stretchers being guided into white MSF Land Cruisers. Nearby was the MSF "expatriate house," and down the street, an MSF-supported hospital which provides services ranging from surgery and paediatrics to physiotherapy and care for chronic diseases. As well as supporting other health centres nearby, MSF conducts outreach activities to provide healthcare to isolated communities, and in addition takes "referrals" – which involves sending out an MSF vehicle to transport critically ill patients to the hospital, including wounded combatants.

Yannick, I had been told, was key to understanding how MSF "negotiates access" in this area. Given the high turnover of "expatriate" project coordinators who manage day-to-day operations "in the field," they rely on their Congolese colleagues to help maintain a network of local powerholders, gather information, translate and guide. Yannick's profession is difficult to describe, his "expatriate" colleague told me: "He knows everyone here and has a lot of information, which is key to our security." Yet, Yannick's expertise relies not only on personal networks, but also on a form of local and situated knowledge, or *metis* (Scott 1998), about how to navigate a constantly changing, militarised social environment. This sort of *savoir faire* is acquired through experience. One morning, Yannick gave me the standard "briefing" for new, foreign arrivals – but weaved in his own personal history.

What emerged was a colourful life. Yannick grew up locally and knew prominent military and political elites personally. During Congo's "first war", he worked for NGOs which were responding to the mass influx of Rwandan refugees, and briefly for the political wing of the *Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo* (AFDL) rebel movement which invaded DRC in 1996. He became involved in business, and later joined the church. During the "second Congolese war", he briefly became involved in politics, working for the *Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie* (RCD) administration which controlled North Kivu. Subsequently, Yannick worked in civil society movements. It was during this time that he first came into contact with the MSF team: "I became an informal intermediary. People would ring me and say they needed an ambulance for an injured combatant, then I would inform MSF." Subsequently, Yannick was hired by MSF. "Today, I negotiate with the same people as before, it's the same network, but I've changed position. I am a humanitarian now," he concluded.

Stories like Yannick's are rarely given attention in studies of how humanitarians operate in areas of protracted violence. Scholars continue to portray humanitarians as somehow separate from the everyday processes of negotiating power at a local level. The literature largely maintains this distinction, either exploring how governance is negotiated between different actors in zones where the state is one actor of many (Vlassenroot et al., 2008), or exploring the enclaves of "Aidland" (Apthorpe 2005) and "Peaceland" (Autesserre 2014) as bounded bubbles of northern-based "expatriate" workers, whose everyday practices paradoxically isolate them from the local population they are supposed to help (Smirl 2015; Duffield 2010a).

In reality, humanitarian organisations are embedded in the messy social interactions which determine how power is negotiated at a local level. Humanitarian work does not take place in a bounded enclave, and not all humanitarians are foreign, nor are they socially and spatially isolated from the local political and social landscape. In North Kivu, a minority live in a compound: over 90% of MSF employees "in the field" are "local staff." Stories like Yannick's give an insight into the complex histories of the different people in a humanitarian T-shirt, and the importance of these personal identities to understanding how humanitarian organisations operate on the ground. Yannick's situated knowledge and personal networks - the result of his own experience in the area - were central to his own role with MSF, but also to MSF's ability to navigate the political landscape. "Security management" relies as much on encounter and interaction as it is does on distancing and bunkering. Such a perspective shifts our attention to processes of brokerage and translation, strategic positioning, and difficult mediation at a personal level amongst humanitarians. In short, stories like Yannick's are central to understanding how emergency healthcare gets delivered to those in need.

THE QUESTION

This thesis explores how humanitarians work in violent contexts. It examines one central question: how do humanitarian organisations gain and maintain access to operate in areas of contested authority and cyclical violence? In doing so, I focus on three sub-questions, which are interrelated and weave through the thesis:

1. How do humanitarian organisations build and maintain a network of contacts among armed groups, and how do fieldworkers negotiate their own position during brokerage?
2. How are humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence renegotiated, translated and then performed during everyday encounters "in the field"?

3. How does power operate during these interactions, and how are forms of identity among fieldworkers put to work in processes of negotiating access?

To explore these questions, I focus on the work of *Médecins sans Frontières* in North Kivu, eastern DRC, examining the everyday interactions and negotiations for access between employees of MSF and armed groups in North Kivu. I study this through the intricacies of continuous negotiation as to the terms of MSF's work with powerholders "in the field."

MSF has a long history in the DRC, and is renowned for working in "no-go-zones": providing medical services during armed conflicts has become an identity marker of the organisation itself. This thesis unpacks what "negotiating access" and "managing security" looks like on the ground: a social and political process of networking, perception management and interest-seeking in a complex web of relationships. I explore how MSF navigates a shifting political landscape in North Kivu, becoming entangled in relations of governance by implanting itself into a constellation of actors at a local level. In order to do so, I delve into the everyday experience of fieldworkers as they navigate the dilemmas and tensions of operating in North Kivu.

Thus, the research moves beyond the well-ordered policy truisms or rehearsed discourse on the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence, and instead shifts the focus onto the micro-politics of everyday humanitarian practice. In other words, I focus on people and their interactions because they determine how abstract principles and predesigned intervention policies are renegotiated, translated or given meaning on the ground.

THE ARGUMENT

I argue that humanitarian agencies use the different identities of their employees as a resource in order to negotiate access with armed groups in areas of protracted conflict. Humanitarians negotiate access together as a brokerage "club" (Bierschenk et al., 2000). Different people in the team play different roles, because they have different histories and perceived identities: they have access to different networks, possess different knowledge, and face different risks. Humanitarians work together in an attempt to reduce risk for everyone. Whilst negotiating access, different identities are *put to work* because they affect who can perform the role of a neutral humanitarian in practice, who can wield power and influence, and who is at particular risk of violence. In short, identities become *instruments* or tools for maintaining access.

What do I mean by identities? First, humanitarian organisations draw from the *personal* identities of their staff: some employees have personal, family, military, political and professional histories in the area, extensive interpersonal networks, and a form of knowledge that James Scott (1998) describes as *metis,* which is gained through experience in navigating a shifting social landscape. These histories enable humanitarian agencies to build networks and trust among different armed actors, to navigate the shifting political terrain, and to translate principles and pre-planned policies to the specificities of a given context. Second, overlapping, *collective* identities (such as gender, race, nationality, class, "ethnicity") are put to work by humanitarian organisations when negotiating access: these identities have unstable, historically contingent and politically salient meanings and associations in different localities, which can be put to work in various ways. As a result, these collective identities are understood through a security logic: influencing who in the team faces risk, whose life is perceived to be worth more than others, and who can perform the role of a neutral humanitarian in a turbulent political environment with most ease. These forms of collective identity hold specific *functions* in the context of delivery of healthcare in a violent context.

I describe how the process of drawing on identities takes place at three levels. First, at an institutional level, MSF recognises that the organisation's ability to maintain access in a conflict environment depends on *who* represents the organisation. As a result, MSF looks at personal profiles carefully during recruitment. As one organisational document articulates it, "MSF recognises that security threats on its members may vary according to their gender, nationality or morphology and that, under exceptional circumstances, MSF may profile its team composition according to such criteria."[2]

Second, at a team level, different staff perform different roles depending on their local situation, histories and networks, and also how their race, gender, nationality and ethnicity might be perceived or used strategically in that locality. As one Congolese employee in North Kivu told me, MSF already has the "lyrics" – principles and discourse – but teams on the ground have to decide, "who is going to sing the song." In other words, who can best perform a humanitarian role in that context.

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[2] "Risk taking and security management policy for MSF OCP staff." 2015. MSF internal archives, Paris.

Third, at an individual level, humanitarians become "identity entrepreneurs" (Bierschenk et al., 2002:28) when negotiating access within a web of different actors. In other words, they must learn to play on collective identities, casting and recasting themselves for different audiences whilst performing a humanitarian role. Humanitarians conduct creative processes of self-fashioning in order to negotiate access for MSF and manage their own security: they situate themselves strategically during encounters with armed actors using the identity markers assigned to them by others. Humanitarians are involved in these complex processes of impression management because access so often depends on the strategic deployment of different identities.

This use of identity-based resources presents a paradox for humanitarianism. In a context of violent conflict, humanitarians intervene with an egalitarian mandate, driven by the central principle of universal humanity. Yet, at the same time, they rely heavily on the strategic deployment of identity - they adapt to the importance attached to the very forms of difference that their egalitarian mandates seek to transcend.

On the one hand, MSF is committed to the universal equality of all human life. It does not matter who you are, where you live, your political affiliation, or any other aspect of your identity – you are part of shared humanity and are deserving of emergency assistance. The first line of the charter explains: "*Médecins Sans Frontières* provides assistance to population in distress…They do so irrespective of race, religion, creed or political convictions."[3] MSF tries to transcend the importance of personal histories or political subjectivities: patients are humans who need help; humanitarians are just other humans there to help them. Humanitarians become embodiments of the organisation: their humanity, and being MSF, are the only identities that are supposed to matter. By focusing on humanity, MSF denies the importance of other forms of difference: the identity that matters is that of the human and this is considered to be universal. In short, the organisation's vision and work is *sans frontières*: it rejects the important of social and political borders.

On the other hand, in order to be able to work in practice, MSF recognises that not all its employees can perform a humanitarian role with the same ease: identity markers other than being a human need to be taken into account. In order to maintain its presence, MSF picks the

[3] MSF charter: https://www.msf.org/msf-charter [Accessed April 2020].

employee who can best perform the humanitarian role, exercise power, or work without risks in that particular context. Personal identities become instruments for maintaining access, and this produces several dilemmas. At an institutional level, by using these identities as a resource, MSF's everyday humanitarian practice is shaped by, and partly reproduces, the very forms of difference that its egalitarian values seek to transcend. At a team level, only some members of the team occupy top positions in the brokerage club: inequalities are reproduced between "local" and "non-local", and sometimes, white and black employees. At an individual level, in order to conduct their work based on solidarity with universal humanity in a context of violent conflict, humanitarians use their own deeply personal identities, contacts, histories, networks and ties, and play on the very forms of difference that their humanitarian role seeks to overcome.

*

To unpack this central argument in more detail, I make several points. The first is an argument about how humanitarian organisations fit into existing relations of power and processes of negotiated governance. I argue that rather than bunkered in an enclave, humanitarians become entangled in a messy web of relationships in a context of fragmented authority: MSF implants itself into a complex constellation of governance actors in North Kivu, continually negotiating the terms of its presence. MSF is not just embedded in this web of governance actors, it is one of those actors *itself*: a source of governance, a form of authority that distributes goods. In short, humanitarian organisations become inherently entangled in relationships of governance in the countries in which they work.

The second argument is about the nature of humanitarian principles – neutrality, impartiality, and independence – and what they mean in practice. Compromise is inevitable, and the extent of acceptable compromise is negotiated through interactions with other actors. Humanitarianism is always political: how can anyone ever be neutral when delivering a public service within a context of conflict? Principles are slippery and abstract concepts, they have to be interpreted, translated to a specific context, and then performed in practice. Humanitarians negotiate with a network of actors in the context of fragmented, shifting arena of armed conflict. Any initial plans for MSF projects are continually reshaped through negotiation with other actors and their interests. How abstract humanitarian principles are translated during this

process is subjective, as fieldworkers construct their own interpretations. Through people and their interactions, humanitarian principles are translated to the specifics of a social reality.

Just because humanitarian principles are processes of interpretation does not mean that they are considered less important on the ground. Drawing on Erving Goffman (1956), I describe how humanitarians *perform principles* through interactions. Although inherently entangled in relations of power, MSF teams construct an image of exceptionalism: performing a symbolic "humanitarian" space and identity, even if such a space does not exist. MSF sees access as relying on the quality and relevance of its medical services and the negotiation of a political settlement based on shared interests with other actors. However, the behaviour of fieldworkers is also seen to be essential to prevent upsetting this negotiated arrangement. MSF must remain in contact with everyone, but be seen as close to no one. Principles need to be *performed* during everyday interactions: enacted through particular practices and behaviour so that they gain symbolic meaning, recognisable to armed actors. In other words, what is being done is crucial, but *how* it is done matters too.

How are these principles performed? Ultimately, through the everyday behaviour of employees who *are* the organisation – its human embodiment on the ground. Impression management is understood as key to security, because the organisation is literally what its employees, vehicles, and objects do in its name. In effect, employees are expected to become embodiments of MSF, presenting themselves as blank slates with no political affiliations, leanings or links – people without history, race, gender, ethnicity or class. The personal behaviour of every humanitarian employee is seen as crucial to the security of the team as a whole: they are involved in a team performance of principles. A slip-up – individual behaviour that suggests partiality in a conflict or damages the organisation's image – is perceived as a threat to the security of the team as a whole. In this way, MSF staff are "on duty" at all times.

The third argument, then, is about the nature of this performance. Although humanitarianism is built on the idea of universal humanity, not everyone can perform principles such as neutrality and impartiality with the same ease. Of course, no one is a blank slate. The universal human is a construction. All humanitarians have histories and are situated politically and socially. First, many humanitarians have complicated personal histories and networks, associations and alliances that situate them locally: whilst wearing the MSF T-shirt, they are interacting with people they know on a personal level. They are not easily viewed as embodiments of a

humanitarian organisation, because they are embedded in political and social networks, with political associations, links and histories, families and friends. Second, not everyone can perform a humanitarian identity with the same ease because overlapping, collective identities – such as gender, class, race, nationality – impact how people are perceived and related to, drawing from complicated political and social histories. We cannot abstract these facets of identity away. These identities are fluid and mean different things to different people in the places where humanitarians intervene, influencing who can perform a humanitarian role in different environments, who has access to power, and who faces risk. Who can position themselves as neutral is context dependent, it depends on the particulars of the setting. This is why identity becomes an instrument of access: working for the universal depends on the particular.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Humanitarian dilemmas in war

Humanitarianism is as an act aimed at saving lives and relieving suffering, carried out with a sense of urgency in the context of "emergency." It sees all human life as valuable, irrespective of who that person is. War is central to the humanitarian imaginary. According to its founding mythology, humanitarianism was born on the battlefield of Solferino in 1859, when Henri Dunant tried to organise care for the wounded. His experience set in motion the evolution of International Humanitarian Law which attempts to regulate armed conflict in the name of humanity. The International Committee of the Red Cross was created as the guardian of these new conventions, guided by the principles of universality, impartiality, independence, neutrality and humanity. According to this classical idea, the humanitarian act is supposed to be an apolitical one: an act of humanity in a scene of inhumanity, carried out on the basis of need, and independent from ongoing political contests.

The reality is, of course, more complex. Humanitarianism is a broad church of different *humanitarianisms*, with competing mandates and principles. Its historical foundations are more diverse than the neat story of Solferino suggests (Barnett 2011; Fassin 2012), with roots in religious traditions, colonial projects and the antislavery movement. The meanings and practices of humanitarianism have changed over time (Barnett and Weiss 2008; 2011), and are informed by the politics of the time (Scott-Smith 2020; Barnett 2011). An examination of how humanitarianism operates in conflict brings us to the heart of its inherent contradictions which derive from its entanglement with politics, violence and inequality. After all, how can anyone

ever be neutral when delivering a service within a context of conflict? What do neutrality, impartiality and independence mean in practice? How do humanitarians negotiate the terms of their work with combatants on the ground? How can humanitarian agencies provide security for all their staff?

Humanitarian action faced growing criticism in the late 1980s and 1990s after interventions in Bosnia, Kosovo, Rwanda and eastern Zaire (now the DRC). This period revealed the contradictory effects of humanitarianism in practice when confronted with mass violence in a context of armed conflict. It led to a soul-searching process within the sector, and triggered widespread reform (Macrae 1998; Stockton 1998). Essentially, this literature pointed out that humanitarianism can do harm whilst trying to do good (Anderson 1999). Aid delivered in conflict always has political effects. Indeed, humanitarians can even exacerbate conflict (Shearer 2000), as aid becomes inevitably entangled in war political economy (Keen 2008), aggravating existing tensions and sparking new contests over resources (Anderson 1999). Aid can inadvertently strengthen or legitimise violent actors, boosting the economy and reinforcing capacities for war (Polman 2008). During the 1994-6 refugee crisis in eastern Zaire, for instance, perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide controlled the refugee camps, and started to launch cross-border attacks against the new Rwandan regime. NGOs were divided as to whether they should continue working, with critics later arguing that humanitarian presence helped perpetuate violence (Lischer 2003; Terry 2002).

The humanitarian principles themselves came under scrutiny. By aiming to remain neutral, it was argued, humanitarians become complicit in the crimes committed by those in control (de Waal 1997; Chandler 2001; Fox 2001). This revived a much older debate: should humanitarians speak out about the atrocities they are seeing, or remain silent in order to continue providing assistance? After war in the Balkans, Great Lakes and Somalia, humanitarianism as a form of "lite" intervention was seen as an "alibi" in the context of a lack of political will in Western states to take more meaningful action (Rieff 2002). In a context of mass violence, humanitarians could not protect civilians (Bradol and Le Pape 2017): they provided assistance, but watched in horror as the recipients of aid became the "well-fed dead" (Rieff 1999).

Ultimately, there remains disagreement about what the appropriate scope of humanitarianism's moral responsibility should be, and the relationship between principles and ends. What matters - intentions, or consequences? (Slim 1997). Several humanitarian agencies began to reformulate

their relationship with politics. "New humanitarianism" emerged, adopting a "multi-mandate" or "rights-based" approach which rejected notions of neutrality and broadened the scope to tackle the root causes of suffering (Fox 2002; Hilhorst 2005). Whilst the literature from this period explored how humanitarianism becomes entangled in politics, it did not explicitly explore how humanitarianism is a political act: the distribution of resources and the negotiation of governance with other powerholders is always political.

Political Economy of Humanitarian Assistance

One foundational approach to the study of humanitarianism adopts a political economy perspective, examining how assistance becomes inextricably entangled in the economy of war, but also global structures of power and governance (de Waal 1997; Keen 2008; Duffield 2010b). This perspective redirects the focus onto how power is distributed and employed in the delivery of assistance, both in the operations of aid organisations and also in how international donors and institutions dictate assistance according to their own interests. The concept of "complex emergency" encompasses a range of different actors implicated in "crisis," and encourages an examination of their strategic interests. In this section, I highlight several important contributions of this literature and how these approaches informed my thesis, before then explaining how my approach differs.

The key feature of this literature is that it explores humanitarianism as inseparable from the broader political economy. It stresses that war is not a contest, but a system with specific political and economic *functions* among the groups involved (Keen 2008). Extreme violence or famine is not irrational, nor is it unpredictable or sudden – these events are processes that have emotional, political and economic functions for different groups. Scholars have examined how aid organisations also become part of this system, analysing the reasons why different groups might facilitate relief, block relief delivery, or provide it in a manner that seems unproductive. In effect, these studies often conclude that failure may be *functional* (Keen 2008). The hijacking of emergency aid for political purposes is not exceptional, but the norm (Keen 2008:143). By focusing on political and economic interests – from international donor governments, powerholders at a national level, warring groups, and aid organisations themselves (de Waal 1997; Marriage 2008) – this literature explores how groups may benefit from relief "failures," helping to understand the strategies of those who are in a position to help or hinder those who are suffering (Keen 2008).

Academic work in this tradition has launched several important critiques of international humanitarianism. In *Famine Crimes,* for example, Alex de Waal (1997) argued that international humanitarian agencies have diminished the political accountability of African governments. Famine is preventable, he argues, but leaders may let it happen for political reasons. Famine alleviation is then outsourced to foreign technical experts who help strengthen authoritarian regimes and prevent the formation of a "political contract" that enables citizens to hold their governments accountable. In other words, NGOs undercut the political responsibility of leaders, which in turn undermines systems for preventing crises from occurring in the first place. De Waal concludes that the "disaster relief industry" has become the "human face" of neo-liberalism, contributing to the decline of state authority. Duffield builds on this work, arguing that relief NGOs have become key to what he terms the "internationalisation of public welfare." As the state withdrew from basic service provision in the 1980s, NGOs filled the gap, but without the same levels of accountability (Duffield 1992). In effect, the "humanitarian international" has become, in this analysis, a depoliticising force that helps fuel war and strengthens systems of exploitation. The idea that foreign aid can solve national political problems is simply an illusion. Instead, it helps perpetuate structural violence (de Waal 1997; Uvin 1998; Hagmann and Reyntjens 2016).

In addition, this literature highlights the strategic interests of donor governments and aid agencies, and the extent to which these diverge from, or are consistent with, providing relief for those in need (Keen 2008; Marriage 2006a; Pandolfi 2003). Despite the universalist rubric of impartiality, many scholars have argued that aid delivery is inseparable from the geopolitical calculations of donors which dictate the terms of the NGO funding marketplace (Duffield 2007), as well as being shaped by agencies' own interests, assumptions and priorities (Krause 2014). Marriage (2006a) concludes that decisions about intervention are guided by how donors can provide assistance in exchange for "political morality." In this way, intervention appears moral while serving donors' interests.

Finally, some scholars in this tradition have drawn on Foucauldian conceptions of biopower to describe the governmentality of humanitarianism (Fassin 2012). This sees aid as a new technology of power in a deterritorialised form of sovereignty, which is driven by Western security interests (Duffield 2007). In effect, the argument is that humanitarian and development intervention has become part of a networked system of global governance which aims to promote liberal peace in potentially risky "hinterlands" and manage and contain populations

faced with violence, suffering and war (Duffield 2001; de Waal 1997). Aid is another means for the powerful to regulate potentially "threatening" life, with under-development framed as a security threat in an increasingly interconnected world (Duffield 2007; Duffield 2010b; Andersson 2019). This negatively impacts on state authority and social protection, but it also helps maintain global structures of inequality by increasing the divide between "insured" life in the north, and "uninsured life" in the south (Duffield 2001). By presenting their work as distinct from the political sphere, humanitarians reproduce the isolation of "bare life", and therefore the "basis of sovereignty itself" (Duffield 2004:13; Agamben 1998; Agier 2010; Fassin and Pandolfi 2010). Consequently, the adverse effects of humanitarianism are not necessarily due to the inefficiency of a certain organisation but are intrinsic to the nature of humanitarian governmentality (de Waal 1997; Duffield 2001).

Many of these insights can be applied to the topic of this thesis. The "industry of disaster" dominates in eastern DRC, and international institutions and northern donors have become central to the region's political economy (Büscher and Vlassenroot 2010). In North Kivu, humanitarianism has been described as a form of "charitable imperialism" (Ndaliko 2016): a set of foreign institutions and their projects are imposed on communities, silencing local agency, ideas and capacity whilst enacting a form of imperial power in the name of "charity." In line with Duffield's work, too, humanitarianism in DRC could be conceptualised as one part of a broader system of global governance. Service delivery is outsourced to international institutions, which gain strategic influence in shaping the political economy in the region (Marriage 2010). Meanwhile, international donors are deeply implicated in processes of economic liberalisation and the extension of presidential power in DRC, with disastrous consequences (Marriage 2018). Liberal interventions hold functions for their northern donors, but reproduce existing hierarchies in DRC, supporting a neo-liberal and presidential expansion, which is politically and economically exclusive, and in the long term, aggravate sources of insecurity at a domestic level (von Billerbeck and Tansey 2019; Marriage 2013; 2010). Given that MSF is a medical organisation, it also operates biopolitically (Redfield 2013), taking an important role in the political economy of the region.

Humanitarian projects are inseparable from, and embedded in, the local political economy, but my aim in this thesis is to move beyond this analysis of institutional-level interests, focusing instead on the diversity of organisations and people employed in the humanitarian sector and the complexity of their work on the ground. My starting point can be summarised by the idea

that "we know much more about aid work than we do about aid workers. The vast majority of examinations of humanitarianism concentrate on system-level analysis" (Weiss and Hoffman 2008:284). This thesis, therefore, pays attention to the lived experiences of the people representing these institutions, especially locally hired employees, who learn to navigate the shifting political landscape carved out by the institutional interests described above. Foucauldian approaches, to a certain extent, acknowledge the way that institutional power can be enacted through multifarious micro-level practices, but the power of humanitarian intervention is often not as dispersed and capillary as such approaches assume (Scott-Smith 2014). My aim in this thesis, therefore, is to move beyond the idea of humanitarianism as a coherent, homogenous bloc or a form of global governance, to adopt instead an actor-oriented approach, focusing on the micro-histories and everyday experiences of individuals working for a specific institution. Their situated experiences can speak to the themes addressed in the political economy literatures, whilst also moving beyond them. Aid workers' identities, stories and histories have received less attention, and while fascinating on their own, they also shape how interventions unfold.

Shrinking humanitarian space?

The debate about how humanitarians work in conflict has moved on. The new buzzword became "access", with increased attention on how humanitarian organisations can try to "stay and deliver" in conflict zones at all (Egeland et al., 2011). In 2015, the United Nations concluded that obtaining "sustained humanitarian access" is one of the key challenges in responding to contemporary armed conflict (UN 2015:13). There is a widespread perception that in the contemporary era, it has become more difficult and dangerous for humanitarians to work than ever before. Since the late 1990s, much of the literature has focused on declining humanitarian access to, and a shrinking of, a supposed "humanitarian space" (Stoddard and Harmer 2006), where humanitarians can operate without political interference and in accordance with the principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence (Spearin 2001:22). Scholars and practitioners alike describe a "crisis" in which a neutral "humanitarian space" has been subordinated to a Western security agenda in the wake of 9/11 and the global war on terror (Donini et al., 2004:3; de Torrente 2004).

This literature makes several arguments. First, it argues that humanitarianism has become politicised to an unprecedented degree. As "failed states" were increasingly securitised as a hotbed of terrorism, humanitarianism became another "tool in the tool-box" to be utilised by

Western donors in their pursuit of "stabilisation" (Stoddard and Harmer 2006; Macrae and Leader 2000:9). Humanitarians lost their operational independence and neutrality as UN peacebuilding missions merged political, development and humanitarian spheres in order to consolidate peace and "stabilise" a central state in an ongoing conflict (Metcalfe et al*.,* 2011; Bradbury 2010; Duffield 2002). Humanitarians have been reduced to "force-multipliers" in the war on terror in contexts like Afghanistan, where counterinsurgency strategy dictated the distribution of aid (Zyck 2012) – to win "hearts and minds" and strengthen the central government (Gordon 2011).

Second, humanitarianism itself has become securitised. Western donors reject humanitarian neutrality and impartiality: antiterrorist legislation now restricts humanitarians' ability to negotiate with "terrorist" armed groups or distribute aid based on need (Mackintosh and Duplat 2013; Bradbury 2010). In Somalia, for instance, organisations were unable to respond to growing needs in Al-Shabaab territories without the risk of criminal prosecution (Menkhaus 2004; 2012). In sum, Western donors follow a strategy of "containment and engagement," either co-opting humanitarians into security strategies, or identifying them as second-order threats vulnerable to terrorist exploitation (Howell 2014:152).

Third, scholars argue that this has threatened humanitarian safety: aid workers are increasingly targeted in deliberate attacks by armed actors (Stoddard and Harmer 2006). According to this interpretation, maintaining access has become more challenging because armed groups can no longer distinguish between humanitarian and political Western actors (Donini et al., 2008; Hammond and Vaughan-Lee 2012; Shannon 2009; Christie 2012). Humanitarians are viewed with suspicion, associated with Western foreign policy and increasingly targeted (Jackson 2014; Stoddard et al*.,* 2009). Between 2004-2014, the reported total number of humanitarians attacked more than tripled (AWSDB 2016), leading some to argue that humanitarians are at greater risk today than ever before (Stoddard et al., 2009).

Taking these heightened risks as a given, scholars have turned their attention to how humanitarian agencies manage security in the field (Schneiker 2015; Stoddard 2020). According to this narrative, the way to gain access is remaining "principled" and clearly distinguishable from other political or military intervenors (Haver and Carter 2016; Stoddard and Harmer 2006). The *perception* of neutrality has been framed as essential to humanitarian security (Givoni 2016; Abu-Sada 2012). Neutrality has been redefined as a "utilitarian instrument rather than an

ethical position": a means to an end in order to access populations in need (Gordon and Donini 2016:18). In contrast to "new humanitarians", scholars argue that MSF and ICRC obtain better access because they stick to a "clear-cut humanitarian mandate" and demonstrate their neutrality and impartiality (Gordon and Donini 2016:100; Terry 2011). This interpretation has been supported by interviews with armed groups who consider adherence to the principles of neutrality and impartiality as essential to permitting NGOs access to their territories (Jackson 2016; Brabant and Vogel 2014).

From Humanitarian Space to Humanitarian Arena

This thesis, however, draws from the idea of a "humanitarian arena," rather than "space" (Hilhorst and Jansen 2010). Humanitarian negotiations have become a topic of more detailed exploration as the myth of a past, golden age of humanitarianism has been dispelled (Collinson and Elhawary 2012; Hubert and Brassard-Boudreau 2014). This literature argues that humanitarian access has always been the outcome of negotiation and compromise, the product of the "interplay between competing interests, institutions and processes" (Collinson and Elhawary 2012:3) in an "*humanitarian arena"* of "negotiation, power-games and interest seeking" (Hilhorst and Jansen 2010:116; Magone *et al.,* 2011:2). Aid intervention is always a socially negotiated process (Long 2001): negotiating humanitarian access has always meant "adapting, adapting means compromises, and what compromises are made depends on the diverse…interests and perceptions of all actors involved" (Collinson et al., 2013:27). In this humanitarian arena, aid practice is not dictated by policy models, but shaped by the interactions between different actors (Mosse 2005). A "humanitarian space" isolated from these political negotiations has never existed. The concept is a "fragile fiction" (Redfield 2011:62), a self-legitimising construction which aims to *symbolically* separate humanitarianism from its political environment (Hilhorst and Jansen 2010).

This literature challenges the perception that working in conflict has become more difficult. Negotiating with armed actors is not a novel, unprecedented challenge in an era of increasing intra-state conflicts (Keogh and Ruijters 2012:6), nor does the post-9/11 context spark new questions about "whether and how humanitarians are to engage with state structures, political actors and militaries" (Stoddard and Harmer 2006:24). Instead, humanitarians have always engaged with these actors through negotiation and compromise in intra-state wars, from the late nineteenth century onwards. Indeed, the dilemmas of negotiating access with armed combatants are as old as humanitarian action itself (Jackson and Davey 2014).

The contemporary politicisation of aid is not unprecedented either. Humanitarianism has always been entangled with forms of Western global governance (Barnett 2011). The histories of humanitarianism and empire are intertwined (Skinner and Lester 2012). In the 19th century, humanitarians strengthened empire by promoting it as benevolent, and supported imperial annexation in order to improve the lives of "natives" (Porter 2001:207; Drayton 2013:218). Threads of imperial thought can be traced throughout the 20th century: for example, the founders of the League of Nations saw it as a means of protecting imperial interests (Mazower 2009; Pederson 2006). During the Cold War, NGOs did not operate in an apolitical "space" - many became "conscious agents" in the fight against communism (Baitenmann 1990:83). In the 1990s, "new humanitarians" embraced Western military action to protect civilians (Porter 1999), and more recently, NGOs relied on the "integrated" peacekeeping mission in the DRC for access (Metcalfe et al., 2011:28). Humanitarians also faced similar challenges in negotiating with armed groups labelled as "terrorists" during the Algerian war of independence (Jackson and Davey 2014).

Aid work is dangerous. But despite the widely held perception that there has been an increase in attacks on humanitarian actors in recent years, the data available is too sparse to assert that aid work is getting *more* dangerous (Weissman 2016). As exploration of the ICRC's archives have shown, there have always been deliberate attacks against aid workers - from the 1870 Franco-Prussian War, World Wars to the Cold War (Dandoy and de Montclos 2013). According to the "Aid Worker Security Data Base", the number of victims quadrupled in absolute terms over the last fifteen years, but in relative terms, it has remained remarkably stable (Weissman 2016). Although the global average incidence rate rose from five victims per 10,000 aid workers in 1997–2002 up to six in 2003–2005, this increase was concentrated in six countries. Excluding attacks in these six, the overall security incident rate actually declined (Stoddard et al., 2009:4; Weissman 2016; Dandoy and de Montclos 2013). The motivation for these attacks is also unclear. It seems unlikely that humanitarians are simply targeted because of their "Western" identity or their conflation with a peacebuilding mission or foreign intervention, or that humanitarians are being punished for a "breaching" of principles (Fast 2014:11; Brauman 2019; Weissman 2016; Hammond 2008; Marriage 2006b). In fact, in the country with most risk, the majority of attacks were "common banditry" (Stoddard et al., 2009:5), and overall, the overwhelming majority of those attacked are "national staff" (AWDB 2018). Instead, risks and

the causes of violence are often linked to the behaviour and actions of humanitarians themselves (Fast 2014:145).

The emphasis on the importance of principles in the "shrinking humanitarian space" narrative also fails to unpack what being principled actually means on the ground. Principles are not inherently protective. They do not exist in and of themselves, but have myriad interpretations (Brauman 2019). How these abstractions are translated to the specificities of messy social interactions is subjective, as fieldworkers construct their own interpretations of principles, depending on their interpretation of the situation in front of them (Hilhorst and Schmiemann 2002). As Zoë Marriage (2006a) has argued, whilst aid organisations profess universalist principles, these are rarely fulfilled in the realities of running aid programmes. Compromise is inevitable, and the extent of acceptable compromise is negotiated through interactions with other actors in the humanitarian arena (Magone et al., 2011). Even humanitarian organisations using the same principles as a "compass" make different decisions in the same context (Brauman 2012).

Rather than trying to determine a link between principles, security and access, scholars have turned the attention to how humanitarian principles such as "distinction" from military actors are *performed* by aid workers during everyday interactions "in the field" as a form of security management (Sutton 2018; Givoni 2016). This focus on everyday behaviour as central to security in humanitarian NGOs seems to recgnise that the actions of aid workers themselves are often a cause of security incidents (Fast 2014; Abu-Sada 2012). However, there has been less exploration of how neutrality is interpreted and performed through everyday behaviour, or *who* in particular can enact these abstract humanitarian principles in practice. This overlooks the way that personal identities, networks and histories bring forms of situated power (or risks) for humanitarians working for the same organisation.

Ultimately, this literature argues that access and security depend on negotiating an acceptable compromise with political actors in the humanitarian arena. Humanitarians' ability to work depends on shared interests with local authorities: humanitarian work is inseparable from the broader political context (Magone et al., 2011; Acuto 2014; Benton and Atshan 2016; Marriage 2006a; 2008). In response to the "shrinking humanitarian space" narrative, MSF rejected the idea that risks had increased. Rather than relying on "protection" security management mechanisms, such as armed vehicles, compounds, or operating at a distance, MSF adopted an

approach based on negotiation which it described in written works. In *Humanitarian Negotiations Revealed*, authors from an MSF think-tank in Paris describe access as a *process* of continuous negotiation with a *mélange* of political actors and the need for constant evaluation of the costs of compromise, because "political exploitation of aid is not a misuse of its vocation, but its principal condition of existence." Ultimately, to remain present, humanitarianism needs to "make itself useful" (Magone et al., 2011:10). Through twelve, short case studies written by senior MSF staff, the book describes humanitarian negotiations with an armed actor or government in different settings. These narratives illustrate how humanitarian access is not black and white, but a spectrum of grey. Armed groups are not "gatekeepers" who either permit or block humanitarians from working along pre-planned lines (Glaser 2005; Beardsley and McQuinn 2009). Indeed, the question is not whether humanitarians can operate, but rather under what conditions (Magone et al., 2011), these being continually negotiated. Over time, "humanitarian windows" appear as a result of the shifting interests of different actors and the successful building of relationships (Crombé and Hofman 2011).

This perspective shifts our attention to how humanitarians fit into the local power contests: negotiations between NGOs and parties to conflict is "a crucial political territory" (Marriage 2008:12). Too often, violence against aid organisations is described as non-compliance with principles, which denies its political weight (Marriage 2006b:489). Rather than exceptional, violence against humanitarians must be understood within their "broader social and political contexts" (Benton and Atshan 2016:154; Abu-Sada 2012). Attacking aid workers is aimed at particular political functions (Crombé and Hofman 2011). For example, attacking aid workers might be a way to attract media attention, or send a message to an imagined "international community" (Hoffman 2004; Hammond 2008). Aid workers may also be attacked precisely because neutrality or impartiality becomes a political logic *per se* which works against other politics of life in an ongoing violent contest (Fassin 2007; Whittall 2011; Ponthieu and Incerti 2016). Not only this, but humanitarian projects become "politicized and shaped by the very conflicts from which they seek immunity" – violence against the delivery of healthcare becomes part of broader strategies of everyday violence (Benton and Atshan 2016:152). Attacking MSF clinics can be a way of depriving certain populations of healthcare (Crombé and Kruper 2019). In the words of one writer at MSF, the security of humanitarians depends on them being "more useful alive than dead" to those committing the violence (Weissman 2016).

In sum, this work was crucial in revising the understanding of "humanitarian space" as an arena of negotiation, with access based on shared interests. In particular, MSF's *Humanitarian Negotiations Revealed* lifted the shroud of secrecy surrounding the reality of compromise "in the field," unveiling the "public secret" (Taussig 1999) of how relief is really negotiated through compromise. Despite this, there remains less consideration of how programmes are implemented by a network of different humanitarians, the negotiation *processes* in the everyday, nor how relations are built over time with political and armed authorities. The focus remains instead on their strategic incentives for facilitating humanitarian access. What about the role of interpersonal relationships, and the histories and identities of different humanitarians? How do these relational and interest-based elements of negotiations interact? What role do the principles still play, and how are they symbolically performed? In sum, we know rather little about *how* negotiations are conducted in practice, apart from the fact that many organisations transfer risk to "local staff" and increasingly operate at a distance (Egeland et al., 2011).

The perspectives of these "local staff" remain notably absent from existing studies, which means they have not captured the complexities of negotiating access over the longer-term, nor the role played by personal relationships and networks. Indeed, the literature on humanitarian negotiations is almost exclusively[4] written from the perspective of "expatriate" workers (Magone et al., 2011; Acuto 2014), who describe their own experiences negotiating with specific (usually high-profile terrorist) armed groups (Belliveau 2015; Keogh and Ruijters 2012: Johnstone 2013). These accounts are rarely incorporated into a conceptual framework, as most authors "find refuge" in managerial examinations (Acuto 2014:259).

Since *Humanitarian Negotiations Revealed,* "access negotiations" have become a hot topic. In 2016, several agencies founded the Centre of Competence of Humanitarian Negotiation, which aims to foster interagency dialogue. Given the difficulties of working in contexts such as Syria and Afghanistan, a growing policy literature went on to examine "what works" for negotiating access (Jackson 2014; Haver and Carter 2016; Geneva Call 2019; Mills 2014; Galli 2013; Maxwell et al., 2014). The Humanitarian Policy Group, for instance, explored the relationship between armed groups' shifting strategic priorities, the conflict dynamics and humanitarian access (Loeb 2013; Jackson and Aynte 2013; Jackson and Giustozzi 2012). Like much of the grey literature

[4] A notable exception is Pottier's (2006) article exploring Congolese humanitarians' experience of negotiating at roadblocks.

(Keating and Lewis 2016) and MSF's book (Magone et al., 2011), they conclude that negotiations are "successful" when armed groups hold territory and see themselves as governments in waiting – aid delivery can be important to "hearts and minds" strategies as well as forms of international and domestic legitimacy seeking (Jackson 2014). This builds the "rebel governance" literature that describes how facilitating aid access can be a strategic element of armed groups' governing strategies and politics of legitimacy (Mampilly 2012; Coggins 2015; Arjona et al., 2015; Huang 2016; Jo 2015). Yet, questions about the everyday processes of negotiating access remain underexplored in such studies. Understanding these processes is crucial because they shape interventions more broadly, and provide an insight into how personal identities, relationships and histories interact with interest-based considerations to influence humanitarian negotiations.

Everyday Practices of Intervention

The anthropological literature has shifted attention away from "what works" to examine the day-to-day realities of how aid interventions are carried out in practice (Abramowitz and Panter-Brick 2015) and messy lived experience of the intervenors themselves (Bornstein and Redfield 2011; Malkki 2015). The literature on "Aidland" explores the cultural practices and ethical contradictions that are part of aid workers' lives (Apthorpe 2005; Mosse 2011; Fechter and Hindman 2011; Roth 2015). This framework was adapted to explore "Peaceland" in the DRC - international peacebuilding is also described as inhabiting a "separate world" with its own "time, space, and economics" (Autesserre 2014:5). This literature demonstrates the importance of examining everyday practices, habits and the social and cultural spheres of aid, because they shape interventions, and can generate larger problems (Weigand and Andersson 2019; Autesserre 2014).

These studies highlight the gap between intervenors' objectives or aims, and the reality of practice on the ground. Drawing from broader discussions about the paradoxes of humanitarianism (Ticktin 2011a; Fassin 2012), authors explore the complexities of implementing humanitarian values: these are revealed to be fragile, unstable and contradictory in practice. The supposed universality of humanitarian frameworks, tools and values is revealed as limited when they come into contact with the specificities of different milieux (Scott-Smith 2019). Everyday humanitarian procedures based on ideas of universal humanity can end up reinforcing and reproducing existing inequities amongst the populations they are meant to help, as well as between humanitarians themselves (Bardelli 2020; Fassin 2007; Benton 2016; Peters

2016; Marriage 2006a). To cope with the disparity between the universality proclaimed by aid organisations and what actually happens in practice, Zoë Marriage (2006b) describes how denial becomes central to sustaining the aid practice, whilst Geissler (2013) describes institutional public secrets.

In particular, interventions reproduce inequalities between "national" and "international" staff which reflect and reproduce global structures of (post)colonial inequity. These take the form of unequal access to opportunity, mobility and security provision and of pay differences, as well as a hierarchy of trust that imagines foreign workers as neutral, and "local staff" as entangled in particularistic attachments (Redfield 2012; Fox 2014; Roth 2012; Sundberg 2019; van Voorst 2019; Shevchenko and Fox 2008; Fassin 2007; Ong and Combinido 2018). Global health partnerships are built on inequalities between institutions in the "global North" and their "partners" in the "global South" (Crane 2010), whilst development interventions that seek to transform the social order end up reproducing inequalities between staff, often with a degree of blindness (Peters 2019). This literature fits into a broader postcolonial critique which describes the imperial traces that continue to shape aid intervention - embedded in aid discourses and practices, their imaginaries of the suffering "Other," as well as narratives about "progress" (Kothari 2005; Ticktin 2011a; Abu-Lughod 2013).

Rather than examining why humanitarians gain access or why they are attacked, this anthropological approach examines what security management looks like in practice, and its contradictory effects on intervention more broadly. Given the perceptions that things have become more dangerous, there has been a growing institutionalisation of managerial concern for the security of humanitarian staff. Western funders have leaned heavily on NGOs and the UN to enter, stay and "deliver" in danger zones (Egeland et al., 2011). Aid agencies have adopted vastly differing approaches to security management, with diverse understandings of risk and acceptable compromise. These approaches include a combination of: "acceptance/negotiated access" (negotiating with all actors based on shared interests and embedding with communities), "protection" (living in bunkers, operating at a distance or seeking armed protection from peacekeepers/armed actors) and occasionally, "deterrence" (hiring private security guards). In particular, the critical anthropological literature has examined the adverse effects of "protection" security practices that further reproduce inequalities by transferring risk to national staff, normalising the segregation of foreign intervenors from local populations (Smirl 2015; Duffield 2010a; Collinson et al. 2013).

Through an exploration of MSF's evacuation procedures in Iraq, for instance, Didier Fassin (2007) concludes that humanitarianism is a "politics of life": it gives specific meanings and value to human life, despite its egalitarian aims. First, when aid agencies decide to evacuate, humanitarianism distinguishes lives that may be risked (humanitarians), from lives that can be sacrificed (populations they seek to help). Second, through its unequal security provisions, humanitarianism makes a distinction between lives with higher value (expatriate humanitarian workers), and those that can be risked (national staff) (Fassin 2007:519). Paradoxically, humanitarians reinforce hierarchies of humanity.

In much of this literature, the ethnographic gaze remains fixed on the politics of distance – the "protection" security measures and their counterproductive effects. Ruben Andersson (2016; 2019), for instance, describes distance as the new norm: risk aversion has widened a gap between interveners and the intervened upon, as well as foreign and local workers. Parts of the world are being invested with fantasies of remoteness and otherness – they are considered distant, but also intimately close to Western states' security interests. Western intervenors therefore face a paradox: they are deeply concerned by the threats emanating from these "no-go-zones," but are reluctant to intervene directly. As a result, they intervene at a distance. This distance is both physical (remote control management or bunkerisation), but also social (intervenors outsourcing risk to local staff). In short, "contact points of a positive kind are decreasing, just as they are most needed" (Andersson 2019:20).

In this account, aid workers occupy an "aid archipelago" that stands apart from the local environment, both temporally, socio-culturally and physically (Duffield 2010a; Fechter and Hidman 2011; Autesserre 2014). Given the perception of heightened risk, aid workers have retreated from the frontline, subcontracting the delivery of aid (and the risks it involves) to local actors (Duffield 2012; Fradejas-García 2019). Everyday risk management procedures imprison foreign staff, giving the illusion of presence whilst producing counterproductive forms of intervention (Andersson and Weigand 2015). "Bunker politics" increasingly govern humanitarians' daily lives, further increasing the social and physical distance between the intervened and intervened-upon, as well as national and foreign staff (Weigand and Andersson 2019; Beerli 2018). The spatiality of Aidland reinforces this divide - "the field" is produced in "humanitarian enclaves" by compounds, cars and hotels (Smirl 2015). This "space of aid" is distinct from the local environment, with a spatiality and security policies which reflect colonial

regimes (Smirl 2015:6). Access to these spaces is restricted, as local actors (including employees) are increasingly posited as potential security threats, entangled in politics (Beerli 2018). In this account then, a *perception* of increased risk has paradoxically led to increased risks for humanitarians: foreigners are isolated, with limited understanding of the context and few relationships of trust. Meanwhile, risk is transferred to local staff (Collinson et al., 2013).

Security work beyond the bunkers?

This literature on everyday intervention illustrates the importance of exploring how intervention is carried out in practice "in the field." It provides an insight into how perceptions of risk have reshaped aid programming, with counter-productive effects. However, the focus remains largely on the experience of foreign "expatriate" staff, and the politics of distance – in other words, the tensions of "protection" security management approaches. There is a methodological reason for this: as Andersson (2019) points out, many researchers face the same security restrictions as the intervenors they are trying to study. The result is that too often, the social worlds of Aidland and Peaceland are depicted as bubbles of northern-based foreign workers (Harrison 2013), rather than an arena of interaction between different groups (van Voorst 2019). It reproduces and compartmentalises simplistic identities such as foreign aid worker and local beneficiary (Rossi 2006).

Yet, Aidland and Peaceland are inevitably linked to the local political environment by the large number of local employees, who are themselves embedded in local histories and networks (Rossi 2006). The literature overlooks the fact that many aid workers employed by foreign agencies are still "out there" operating outside of the bunker: the majority are national staff negotiating aid delivery in practice through a network of other actors. Too often, these humanitarians are only mentioned in descriptions of inequities (Fassin 2007), or the "transfer" of risk to local actors (Andersson 2019). But, what about local employees' everyday practices of security management, which involve brokerage and negotiation, rather than bunkering and distance?

Ultimately, there remain few, in-depth ethnographic accounts of humanitarian *encounters* beyond the bunker (Redfield and Bornstein 2011:25). In effect, anthropological studies of humanitarianism have not yet explored the politics of presence inherent in a "negotiated access" security strategy in the same detail as they have delved into the politics of distancing. This means that existing studies have not explored how personal identities, relationships and histories shape

how some humanitarian agencies maintain access on the ground, rather than work at a distance. The politics of presence illustrates how power operates in everyday humanitarianism, determining *who* in particular can stay and work, and at what risk. Andersson (2019:246) concludes by stating that there are more "daring" groups, namely MSF, who are "devising ways of staying put." So, what does that look like in practice?

These questions remain largely unanswered in existing accounts. Instead, "negotiating access" has become an expertise, with a growing number of trainings and guidelines that offer methodologies for "what works." The "interest-based approach," for example, suggests humanitarians map the compatibility of their interlocutors' interests and select a strategy from a "leverage matrix," based on either "charm, attack or insistence" (Mancini-Griffoli and Picot 2004:34). Another guideline describes access as the outcome of "adherence to principles…actor analysis and investing in relationship-building" (SFDFA 2014:62). In effect, these guidelines simplify the inherently social process of negotiating into a managerial framework, reflecting a broader trend in the policy literature of presenting negotiations as a technical process (Glaser 2005), solvable through "stronger" security management (Egeland et al., 2011:2).

After *Humanitarian Negotiations Revealed,* authors from MSF went on to criticise the growing industry of security management which relies on managerial frameworks in order to manage risk (Neuman and Weissman 2016). As they argue, security management is an inherently social and political process: it involves people, their perceptions, relationships and interactions. A managerial approach obscures these dimensions and ignores the impossibility of applying standard procedures to a complex and uncertain social process (Neuman and Weissman 2016). Despite this criticism, there has not yet been in-depth exploration of what this relationship-based, negotiation-oriented process of security management looks like on the ground. Such a perspective, which I adopt in this thesis, is crucial as it illustrates the importance of personal identities, histories and networks, in particular those of local staff, in shaping how interventions unfold in practice.

The "local", brokerage and translation

The thesis describes how a broader network of humanitarian employees *work together* beyond the bunker, in what I describe as a "brokerage club" (Bierschenk et al., 2000). Given the fact that intervenors increasingly rely on local employees, who are the majority "in the field" and the subject of the majority of violent attacks, it is surprising that scholars have not yet shifted

the academic gaze onto how local staff negotiate access with armed actors, practice "security management" in the everyday, and try to mediate their own position in a "field" that may also be their home (Crombé and Kruper 2019; Omidian and Panter-Brick 2015).

The literature on the anthropology of development, by contrast, has taken a closer look at the often "invisible" relational and interpretive work of local actors in aid implementation (Peters 2020). Aid workers are described as "brokers" and "translators" who negotiate the meanings of development discourse in practice through negotiation with a complex network of different actors, each with their own goals and interests (Lewis and Mosse 2006; Bierschenk et al., 2000). Aid workers are part of a broader network: a set of social interactions which determines how policy plays out in practice (Mosse 2005). In particular, this literature examines the work of local NGOs as a site of global/local connection: "development brokers" operate as intermediaries between local populations and foreign intervenors (Bierschenk et al., 2000; Watkins and Swidler 2013). Acting as an "interface" mediating between "development" and "peasant" languages (Olivier de Sardan 1995:165), they "play on collective identities" for their own advantage (Bierschenk et al., 2002:28). These actors broker relationships but also negotiate the meanings that abstract concepts gain in practice (Lewis and Mosse 2006), just as intermediaries of missionaries, explorers and colonial officials did not just translate words, but determined the localised meanings of European concepts on the ground (Lawrance et al., 2006; Hunt 2001; Levine 2006; Kennedy 2013; Osborne 2003). Scholars examine how ideas (such as human rights and gender equality) become "domesticated", "vernacularised" or "localised" as they circulate around the world (Bonacker et al., 2016; Merry 2006; Ostebo 2015) - contested, modified and appropriated when they are translated into local settings (Appadurai 1990).

In the field of humanitarian aid, however, few studies have explored the "invisible" brokerage and translation work carried out by local employees of humanitarian organisations on the ground, nor has there been the same exploration of the way these staff translate the meanings that humanitarian principles gain in practice. Few studies explore how diverse teams of humanitarians broker *together* as a team in order to work in insecure zones. Local humanitarians are not just strategic brokers between "foreign donors" and "villagers", but crucial members of humanitarian teams who shape the culture and practice of the organisations they work for. Thus, ignoring their perspectives overlooks the important everyday practices which shape interventions more broadly. In sum, processes of humanitarian brokerage and translation have yet to be framed as practices of security management – the realities of what maintaining access

looks like in practice through ongoing negotiations not just with "local beneficiaries", but also with armed authorities.

Instead, authors focus on the position of national aid workers who encounter different challenges precisely because they are "local" to the zone of intervention, and do not share the same security protections as foreigners (Omidian and Panter-Brick 2015). Of particular relevance to this study is the work by Peter Redfield (2012), who describes the "double binds" encountered by MSF as it tries to operationalise its vision of being *sans frontières*. Redfield describes the moral unease generated within the organisation, as well as the everyday tensions it encounters, as a result of the "unequal states of motion" between its "international volunteers circulating between missions" and the "national staff hired…at specific project sites." Ultimately, although MSF is based on fundamentally egalitarian ideals - that "human life should be equally valuable" – paradoxically, it appears to "reinforce the very inequities that inspire outrage" between mobile foreign "expatriates" and locally employed static employees (Redfield 2012:360-61).

Redfield's article suggests some benefits and advantages of "attachment" and "transience" for different staff in their everyday work. On the one hand, the "disconnection" of expatriates holds advantages: "in conditions of conflict…they might claim greater freedom of movement and access precisely because they had no ties" (Redfield 2012:363): expatriates' "foreign status partly insulates them from the outcome of both local politics and individual risk" (Redfield 2012: 370). In contrast, local staff are often "weighed down by their local connections": with additional pressures and expectations from members of the community and distrust surrounding their motivations and commitment to humanitarian ideals (Shevchenko and Fox 2008). Redfield's concept of "social attachment" has been used to describe aid workers who mediate ambiguous positions in the field, with complaints and demands from beneficiaries who are also their neighbours, friends and families (Jakimow 2018; La Hatte 2017).

I build on this work, but ask different questions in order to explore how humanitarians' personal identities, histories and networks hold operational *functions* for humanitarian agencies when negotiating access, and shape intervention more broadly. In what ways do humanitarian teams use these existing "social attachments" in strategic ways? What risks do local staff face exactly, and how do organisations try to balance those risks in the everyday? The term "social attachment" is rather vague. In what ways are these staff (differently) embedded locally? What

kinds of networks, histories and connections do they have? How exactly do these different histories impact on employees' safety? These attachments are not just social, but also political: humanitarian employees have diverse political (and sometimes military) histories. These personal experiences provide useful networks, but also forms of *savoir faire* which shape everyday humanitarian practice.

In other words, what does "being local" actually mean? Recently, authors have begun to unpack the ambiguity of the identity which, like "international", does not capture the diversity of different aid workers. Rebecca Peters (2016), for instance, illustrates how the "local" is socially produced by actors who are complicit in their own subjectification. Essentially, aid workers strategically position themselves within institutional hierarchies in order to access employment and further personal interests (Heaton Shrestha 2006). "Local-ness" is performed through practices such as translating local languages - which act as a marker in the construction of proximity (Peters 2016; Garrido 2017). In fact, many "local" aid workers did not actually grow up in the country where they provide aid, but in neighbouring countries (Peters 2016). This literature focuses on how aid workers strategically position themselves *within* the aid industry in order to gain employment, but I examine how humanitarians conduct similar, strategic forms of self-representation during interactions with armed actors as a means of security management.

The Politics of Difference

Anthropologists have critiqued the category of "humanity" that underpins humanitarianism and the liberal humanist tradition from which it descends (Asad 2003). They examine a politics of difference: how social categories of difference operate in an industry built on the idea of universal humanity. These studies reveal how different intersectional identities impact on experiences of aid work, whilst institutional practices reproduce hierarchies amongst different staff, reflecting and exacerbating global structures of inequity (Benton 2016; Kothari 2006; Peters 2020; Roth 2015). Too often, the literature still focuses on international/local as the primary category of distinction in intervention, overlooking the complex and intersecting hierarchies of gender, race, class, ethnicity, region which are embedded in humanitarian practices (Read 2018; Benton 2016). For instance, Fassin's (2007) "politics of life" describes a hierarchy of life between "national" and "international" staff, without consideration of how this politics of life is racialised (Benton 2016).

The categories of "international" and "local" need to be deconstructed, as does the assumed internal coherence of these bureaucratic labels (Martin de Almagro 2018). Just as the human recipient at the heart of the humanitarian enterprise is shaped by gendered and racial histories (Ticktin 2011a; 2011b; Abu-Lughod 2013), so is the imaginary of the humanitarian worker. The literature on peacebuilding, development and humanitarianism has begun to examine the experiences of different interveners from an intersectional perspective in order better to understand this politics of difference (Martin de Almagro 2018). Understanding these hierarchies is important, because "the structure of the work itself influences the outcome" of such interventions (Fechter and Hindman 2011:2). Crucially, these identities are not static or essential – their meaning differs depending on the political and social context and the specific encounter, and they are often constructed in strategic ways (Read 2018; Martin de Almagro 2018).

Gender has emerged as an important category of analysis: experiences of intervention are gendered and gendered power dynamics shape everyday aid work (McLeod 2015; Roth 2015). Read (2018:301) describes how gender is a form of embodied difference - women feel distanced from the imagined aid worker, and try to perform their aid worker identity to "pass as what they are assumed not to be" (Ahmed 2017:155). Crucially, gender intersects with race and nationality to produce forms of privilege, power, distance or disadvantage (Roth 2015; Martin de Almagro 2018; Higate and Henry 2009). In Afghanistan, for instance, race, gender and power intersect to produce the "third gender" – foreign women are seen as not entirely women, not men either, and operate in an ambiguous space in existing hierarchies. Foreign peacebuilders perform this hybridity in specific ways during their work (Partis-Jennings 2019).

In contrast to the focus on gender, fewer studies delve into the complexities of race, ethnicity, class, regional origins or religion - how these intersect to produce situated forms of power or risk amongst humanitarians in different environments. Language plays an interesting role, with linguistic skills operating as an index that brands staff either as universal and neutral ("international"), or particular ("local") (Garrido 2017:360; Silke 2018). Race remains largely absent from the existing debate. Indeed, several scholars have criticised the colour-blind stance of the aid sector which ignores how authority, expertise and knowledge remain racialised, with whiteness operating as a marker of power, prestige and progress (White 2002; Crewe and Fernando 2006; Pailey 2019; Kothari 2006; Roth 2015; Benton 2016). But, there are still few studies that explore how racial inequalities continue to shape the everyday practices of

humanitarianism (Benton 2016:270). Whilst academics have explored the hierarchies of class, caste and ethnicity within locally based NGOs and the ways these play out during implementation (Pigg 1992), there are fewer studies that explore similar dynamics in international NGOs (Pottier 2006). This silence in the academic literature seems to be a reflection of the commitment to colour-blindness in the aid sector itself (Pailey 2019).

This thesis then explores how different identities impact experience of humanitarianism, and how broader structures of inequality are reproduced through everyday practices. However, I make a slightly different point. I shift the focus onto how forms of difference are *put to work* strategically in processes of negotiating access and security management by teams of diverse humanitarian workers. Pottier's (2006) "roadblock ethnography" appears to stand out alone in exploring one aspect of these dynamics. He describes the importance of Congolese humanitarians working for foreign NGOs in Ituri, eastern DRC, in negotiating with armed groups at roadblocks. As Pottier (2006:151) explains, "relief workers in conflict zones do not (and cannot) shed their ethnic identities, instead they accept that a perceived ethnic identity brings strategic advantages as well as disadvantages" during this process. Local staff had no choice but to "position themselves politically", accepting that they had meaningful identities in the micro-politics of the zone (Pottier 2006:176). Foreign NGOs had to adapt to how their staff were perceived, and how these perceptions impacted their own access. Whilst travelling in convoy, for example, "deploying ethnically mixed teams became a major strategy to ensure that the 'correct' ethnic representation was on board" (Pottier 2006:172).

I examine how the different histories and networks of humanitarianism complicate notions of ethnic identity and impact on their ability to operate as humanitarians, as well as the risks they face. The thesis describes encounters at roadblocks, but also other processes of brokerage in everyday humanitarianism. In her examination of peacebuilding organisations in DRC, Martin de Almagro (2018) coined the concept of "hybrid club" to describe clusters of local and foreign actors with complex identities who chose to perform sameness or difference to different audiences depending on their particular goals in that context. As she illustrates, difference is "performative and relational", it is created through encounters, and the same "clubs" can present themselves differently in different contexts at the same time (Martin de Almagro 2018; Pechayre 2017). Similarly, this thesis examines how diverse humanitarian teams collectively perform a humanitarian identity in an ongoing process of negotiating access with armed actors. By doing so, this thesis provides an insight into how power operates in humanitarian security

practices, and how different staff use each other's identities in order to continue working in a context of violent conflict.

WHY FOCUS ON MSF AND THE DRC?

MSF's work in eastern DRC is a particularly relevant case because the Kivu provinces are seen as a classical "field" destination where humanitarians negotiate with armed groups and have done for a long time. Eastern DRC has become known as an archetypal site of Aidland and Peaceland (Autesserre 2014), and North Kivu is a "regional NGO-pole" (Büscher and Vlassenroot 2010). After the influx of Rwandan refugees following the genocide in the 1994, aid organisations arrived *en masse*, and the subsequent twenty-five years of protracted conflict has led to the continued presence of a large aid and peacekeeping infrastructure. Humanitarian organisations and armed groups are two permanent features of the social and political landscape, and have had to interact and negotiate in order to work in the zone for over twenty years. The extensive presence of humanitarian organisations has reshaped the urban landscape, as well as the employment opportunities and subjectivities of Congolese people in the area (Büscher and Vlassenroot 2010; Vlassenroot and Büscher 2013; Pech et al., 2018).

A focus on eastern DRC provides a different perspective from much of the literature on humanitarian negotiations. The complexity of how governance functions in North Kivu eludes the neat narratives for understanding intervention often applied elsewhere, with three discrete players, a government, "non-state" armed group, and a "humanitarian community" (Jackson 2014). Instead, the "state" is one actor among many, governing through collaborations with a range of other actors, including over one hundred armed groups (Stearns and Vogel 2015). Ultimately, humanitarian organisations have become another actor in a context where governance is a process of negotiation between an array of different actors (Hagmann and Péclard 2010). Despite the fact that humanitarians have been working in the Kivu for decades, there has not yet been in-depth academic exploration of everyday humanitarian negotiations in the region.

MSF was an obvious choice for this study: the organisation is known for its ability to work in high-risk environments, beyond the bunker (Andersson 2019:246). MSF has become a leading critic of the "shrinking humanitarian space" narrative, a risk-averse approach to intervention, as well as bunkerisation (Neuman and Weissman 2016). Retreating into a bunker or operating at remote control is considered a counterproductive, last resort. Instead, the organisation relies

on "negotiated access" and intervenes *directly* to provide health services, with diverse teams of foreign and national employees. MSF sees security as dependent not on "protection" mechanisms, but on political negotiation with all actors in the area where it works. I originally intended to contrast MSF's approach with that of other organisations in North Kivu. However, in practice, I found that other agencies were less open to research conducted by an external researcher, or were no longer directly running humanitarian assistance programmes outside of Goma.

There was no chapter on eastern DRC in MSF's *Humanitarian Negotiations Revealed,* despite the organisation's long history in the region and the fact that key debates about the paradoxical effects of humanitarianism in conflict have arisen from the MSF's experiences in the region (Terry 2002). In North Kivu, MSF has criticised other agencies for not negotiating access to rebel zones in order to respond to needs in rural areas (Healy and Tiller 2014). MSF directly provides health services and negotiates with a range of local powerholders in order to do so. The dynamics of the region and the characteristics of MSF's way of working make this an ideal case – they are discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

ROADMAP

The rest of the thesis is structured as follows. In the next chapter, I describe my method, positionality and ethics. The process of conducting this research resembled the topic of study: I describe my own process of "negotiating access" as a researcher to "the field." Acknowledging the specificities of my position is central to my claims, because knowledge is always situated and partial (Haraway 1988). This study was also shaped by interactions with other actors, rather than executed along pre-planned lines. I describe my research process in detail, because methods do not just describe social realities, but also help to produce them (Law 2004).

The third chapter, *Entangled Landscapes: Médecins Sans Frontières in North Kivu,* provides some essential context: it outlines the characters, their work and setting. I give a short history of MSF, followed by an overview of the conflict in North Kivu and MSF's medical work in the region. Then, I describe the landscape in which MSF becomes entangled, as the organisation inserts itself into an ecosystem of different actors. I set out to answer the following: Who is MSF negotiating with? What are they negotiating, and what interests do actors have in MSF's presence? What recurring challenges do MSF teams face? This process of negotiation is constant: the actors, their interests, alliances and settlements evolve over time. MSF must

negotiate its position within this shifting web, and endeavour to make use of shared interests, whilst avoiding actions that might tilt (or be perceived to tilt) the balance of power in favour of one party. This descriptive overview helps contextualise the stories and accounts of specific individuals in the rest of the thesis.

In the fourth chapter, *Theory,* I delve into the theoretical underpinnings of the thesis. First, I describe the broader power structure within which humanitarian organisations become entangled in conflict zones, employing the concept of negotiated governance. Second, I explain the key concepts of brokerage and translation, describing how my research is influenced by the interactionalist approach whereby practice is understood as a negotiated messy social process rather than an implementation of pre-planned policy. Third, drawing from Goffman's (1956) dramaturgical analogy of social interaction, I describe humanitarian encounters and practices as a performance of humanitarianism, which is framed as essential to security and access. Finally, I draw from a broader debate on difference and equality, as well as critical race studies, to think about who can perform neutrality. I explore how identity operates in everyday processes of negotiation for access, with ambiguity as its key characteristic.

The rest of the thesis weaves together the experiences of different MSF employees. Chapter five, "*Who can Sing the Song of Neutrality?" Humanitarian Fixers and Performances of Humanitarianism,* explores the brokerage and translation practices conducted by "local" Congolese humanitarians from North Kivu. The chapter describes a central tension: these employees' role in MSF is simultaneously defined and circumscribed by their "proximity" – personal identities, histories, networks which situate them at a local level in North Kivu. On the one hand, local humanitarians have diverse identities, histories and networks which are put to use in negotiating humanitarian access. On the other hand, local staff find themselves at risk, or perceived as a risk: they feel exposed to external pressures and acts of violence on the part of armed actors, and possibilities for promotion within MSF are limited precisely because of their embeddedness. In short, they face a tension between being politically and socially embedded, and needing to perform humanitarian principles in practice. As a result, MSF's security praxis relies on a model of complementarity: the presence of supposedly detached "expatriates" is seen as a counterweight to "locals." Different members of the team negotiate access together, in symbiosis, in a "brokerage club." This is designed to keep everyone safe, but nonetheless maintains hierarchies between foreign, mobile actors and their local colleagues.

Chapter six, *The Donkey Rule: Whiteness, Security and Detachment,* explores the functions of whiteness in interactions between MSF employees and armed actors. I argue that the way that different humanitarian staff are perceived is not *only* defined by nationality, but also by race. Race, security and detachment are understood as deeply interlinked in North Kivu. By focussing on these perspectives of Congolese staff, I describe how and why whiteness is perceived as a protective and facilitative mechanism for MSF field operations: as a signifier of neutrality and visible detachment; as a marker of "precious life," arousing local combatants' concerns for international repercussions/reputation; and through conjuring up colonial narratives of racial superiority, a form of imperial debris, thereby encouraging restraint or deference. The chapter explores the localised meanings of whiteness, how it is co-constituted, as well as the social functions it holds in the everyday for those who are not labelled "white." I argue that the importance whiteness plays in North Kivu presents a double bind for humanitarians: given its interrelationship with security, how should racial difference be treated so as to ensure that humanitarian organisations both provide security for *all* their staff, whilst valuing all lives equally? By instrumentalizing whiteness as a resource, MSF's everyday humanitarian practice is shaped by, and reproduces, the very racial hierarchies that its egalitarian values seek to undermine.

Chapter seven, *Doing Gender and the Third Sex: Gendered Humanitarianism and Negotiations for Access,* explores how female humanitarians perform their role as humanitarians in gendered ways as a tactic of humanitarian negotiation. Gendered and racial identities hold a set of unstable historically contingent and socially situated symbolisms, which fieldworkers endeavour to use to their own advantage. First, I describe the experience of Congolese women in MSF who possess a different form of *metis* knowledge, and are embedded in different networks. Whilst interacting with armed actors, Congolese women endeavour to use gender stereotypes as an advantage, portraying themselves as apolitical, maternal caregivers in order to carry out a radical politics of care. Despite this, Congolese women described continued vulnerabilities "in the field." Second, I explore the concept of the "third sex" – a term used to describe white women, whose authority, status and behaviour mean that they are not perceived as possessing the same social status as women, nor men. Race, gender and nationality were understood to intersect to produce systems of privilege and power, as well as "erotic capital" (Hakim 2010), which are historically and socially situated in the specific "field" of North Kivu (Green 2013). In sum, I explore the functions gendered identity holds amongst humanitarians navigating a context of cyclical violence.

Chapter eight, *In-pats as Betwixt and Between: Liminality, Ambiguity and Identity Construction,* describes the experience of "in-pats." Whereas "local" staff originate from near the project site itself and "expatriate" staff have been brought there to work from abroad, "in-pats" are national staff who have been "in-patriated" from elsewhere in their own country. I describe in-pats' position as "betwixt and between" (Turner 1967) in the institution: not local, not yet expatriate. First, I examine how in-pats negotiate their "in-between" status, which has become a defining feature of their role and experience "in the field." In-pats are understood within MSF to occupy a middle ground - supposedly harnessing the benefits of national proximity, whilst maintaining necessary distance from the political contests of the particular locality. As a result, they are trusted as crucial brokers and translators - between MSF and armed groups, as well as between employees within MSF itself. During this process, in-pats strategically position themselves whilst navigating a sea of complex relationships, casting and recasting themselves for different audiences whilst performing a humanitarian role. Yet, they also struggle to mediate their ambiguous status and to balance conflicting expectations and demands, encountering distrust and becoming embroiled in political contests surrounding *autochtony*. Second, I argue that humanitarianism became a process of identity formation. In-pats strategically positioned themselves as modern and progressive and became translators and enforcers of MSF's values and principles *within* the organisation. In practice, not only does MSF use different identities as a potential approach for negotiating access, but the organisation has the unintended social consequence of creating new forms of identity.

In the conclusion, I emphasise how humanitarians use instruments of identity to gain and maintain access to work in areas of protracted conflict. Then, I outline how this presents a paradox for humanitarianism - humanitarians leverage (and reproduce) the very social and political borders between people that they work to overcome. I revisit how this thesis speaks to scholarly debates about the localisation of aid; how humanitarianism operates beyond the bunker and becomes embedded in the fragmented authority structures; and how relationships, perceptions and trust intersect with broader institutional interests to shape humanitarian negotiation and intervention more broadly. Subsequently, I suggest how the insights gleaned from this specific case might be relevant to other contexts. I end the thesis with some final reflections on the importance of critical reflection in the humanitarian endeavour, and potential avenues for further research.

2. METHODOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

The first time I was asked to describe my research to an MSF team in North Kivu, I made a rather poor job of it. It was a morning team meeting in an MSF office in Goma. We had huddled into a *paillotte* in the leafy compound garden - it had begun to rain. The meeting began with updates about the evolving security context - acts of banditry and clashes between armed groups that might impact MSF's delivery of healthcare in particular zones. After this overwhelming array of information, the head of mission explained to the team that they had a visitor: "a researcher." All eyes turned to the stranger. I shifted in my seat. I was asked to describe my inductive research to a group of humanitarians who were busy coordinating the very real and difficult task of delivering healthcare in a context of protracted violence. What exactly was I planning to do? What was I looking for, and what were my hypotheses? Was my research going to help them in any way? My introduction was simultaneously convoluted, with phrases such as "complexities of everyday practice" and "the richness of personal experience," and vague - I wanted to "hang around", observe and chat. When I finished, there was a pause. What did any of this mean? Lillian, the head of mission – the most senior management post in the country - intervened:

> Basically, Myfanwy is working *on* MSF, not *with* MSF. We are like fish in an aquarium, and she is looking at how the whole aquarium functions. If you don't want to be a fish in her aquarium, go and tell her. Otherwise, you are one.

There were a few smiles, nods and some murmurs. I winced at the ethical implications at this point, but found the analogy useful in explaining my role from then on.

After the meeting, I asked Lillian an open-ended question about how MSF employees negotiate their ability to work in such a fragmented political landscape. She pointed out that MSF's approach resembled my own process of negotiating access to "the field" as a researcher: "you come with an institutional name, but your work depends on networking on the ground, as well as shared interests. You meet one person, you ask if it's possible to be introduced to another." Much like MSF, I had managed my own security by forming relationships and gathering relevant information about recent events. Lillian concluded: "This place is a large network of social ties,

forming them and navigating it is much the same for a PhD student as for MSF-ers. You should write that in your methodology when the time comes."

Lillian was not the only person to point out the similarities between my research topic and my research process. Both involved negotiating access, a ceaseless daily engagement, fraught with ethical dilemmas and practical security constraints. It involved proposing a project based on shared interests, followed by the personalised, improvised process of "fieldwork." If my research explores how MSF has become entangled in the complex web of relationships in North Kivu, then my research process involved becoming entangled in that web myself. This chapter describes my method, the challenges I faced, as well as some notes on my own position as a researcher. Ultimately, the production of knowledge during fieldwork is a personal process: the outcome of "strategic and ethical choices that are entwined with the mundane details of the researcher's daily existence 'in the field'" (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007:6). In this way, it "matters what stories tell stories" (Haraway 2016:35), so this thesis starts with my own.

NEGOTIATING ACCESS TO "THE FIELD"

Research design

My key research question was simple: how does MSF gain and maintain access to work in North Kivu? I decided to focus on the human infrastructure of MSF, because to capture the complexities of everyday practice, I needed to focus on what humanitarianism is on the ground: it involves people and their interactions. From the start, I needed to access several distinct, dispersed and yet interconnected networks. Three MSF sections – France, Belgium and Holland – work in North Kivu, running different clinics and hospitals. Each section has different leadership structures, staff, projects and offices. The thesis explores the messy reality of negotiating access – weaving together personal experiences - but there is not one MSF voice; indeed, the organisation prides itself on a culture of debate. MSF is a dispersed transnational assemblage of people, vehicles, buildings, flags, T-shirts and documents. It seemed that my "field" was simultaneously mobile and dispersed. The processes and experiences I was interested in were in the past for some, and still happening for others. "Expatriate" staff were mobile – after approximately nine months in North Kivu, most had dispersed across the globe, but many Congolese employees had remained in North Kivu for over a decade. The thesis focuses on several projects – some are still open, others have since closed – and draws on some of MSF's archives storied in various European offices. The topic of research, then, seemed both

mobile and immobile, dispersed and rooted. It required hypermobility as a researcher, but also immersive ethnographic engagement with localised processes. It involved tracking down some individuals online, and spending time with others in rural North Kivu. It involved learning about some locations through archives and interviews in Europe, but living with MSF teams for others.

The thesis is based on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork and 180 interviews, as well as exploration of MSF's internal archives and various documents at project sites. I conducted "deep hanging-out" (Geertz 1998) in some locations, and "shallow" hanging-out in others (Hannerz 2006). Over the course of the study, I spent five months at headquarters level in Paris and London, as well as eight months in North Kivu, at a provincial capital level in Goma and at a project level in rural North Kivu. I spent time in MSF offices and hospitals, spent periods living with MSF teams and spent time socialising with staff after work. I conducted open-ended, semi-structured interviews with current and former MSF staff at these different sites and via Skype. These staff worked throughout the organisational hierarchy: from senior managers in Europe, to locally hired drivers and guards. In North Kivu, I also talked with other aid workers, former rebels, fixers, priests, customary authorities, government officials and state healthcare workers. Interactions were in French, sometimes mixed with Swahili, or occasionally in English. My impressions, interview notes, and observations were written in a daily research diary. As I rotated between Paris, London, Goma and rural North Kivu, the process resembled fieldwork as "travel practice" (Clifford 1992) – I joined a privileged, "border-lite" elite (Amoore 2006:343), with a lifestyle that came to resemble that of an MSF "expatriate."

The "field" was trans-local not just because it was a collection of different sites, but also because it became a transnational network of relationships (Hannerz 2006). In other words, "the field" was not a spatially and temporally bounded "faraway place" (Tsing 2005; Gupta and Ferguson 1997), but a web of relations and practices. My entry into "the field" was more gradual than taking a flight from London to Congo. It involved being introduced to someone in Paris, who introduced me to someone in Goma, who introduced me to someone in rural North Kivu, who in turn introduced me to someone back in Paris, in a repeating pattern. As I traced existing relationships and developed my own in and between these geographical sites, I constructed my own "field": I "networked" myself "into a concept of the field through relations of ethnographic research all the way along" (Marcus 2011:28).

The story

My fieldwork began in a dusty room in the underground carpark of MSF France's former office in the eleventh arrondissement of Paris. This small room housed MSF France's archives from the 1970s to early 2000s: a treasure-trove buried beneath the office. Armed with a torch, I began to dig. But to get to this point, I had already been "negotiating access" for a year. In the first year of my PhD, I sent a research proposal to MSF France's internal think tank, *Centre de Reflexion sur l'Action et les Savoirs Humanitaires* (CRASH), which produces critical research to inform operational strategy. This is one of several internal MSF research centres, encapsulating the self-criticism, reflection and internal debate that are central to MSF's identity. From its formation, MSF has had a close relationship with the academy. The founders of MSF were from the 1968 generation in France – inspired by Sartre, and friends with Foucault (Kouchner 1985:86). Today, MSF's internal think-tanks produce academic research at the forefront of critical studies of humanitarianism. MSF researchers have doctorates and are editors of peer-reviewed journals. Many practitioners pursue a postgraduate degree as a form of reflection on their experience. Others leave MSF altogether and become academics, and it was not unusual to find staff "in the field" who had PhDs.

In my proposal to CRASH, I outlined the potential benefits of my research for MSF: at no cost to MSF, I would explore MSF's negotiations for access in eastern DRC, which were not covered in CRASH's recent books on negotiations (Magone et al*.,* 2011) or security management (Neuman and Weissman 2016). With the help of CRASH, I became a "validated" outsider, with access to archives and an introduction to MSF teams "in the field." But it remained the choice of each employee as to whether they wanted to take part in (or help facilitate) my research. In short, the rest was up to me – the process of negotiation continued.

The dusty files were fascinating, but I wanted to focus on the more recent past - projects where it might be possible to talk with a wide variety of staff and in some cases, maybe visit. MSF has been working in DRC since 1977, but projects open and close in North Kivu - they come in waves. New projects were established between 2005-2007 by the three sections. The archives were mostly digitalised by 2010 and dusty files were gradually replaced with hard drive folders (which were shared with me directly). I looked through an overwhelming number of daily *sitrep* reports written by project staff. They described meetings with a complicated array of local authorities, and evolving ethical and operational dilemmas. Security reports gave an insight into

the sorts of violence MSF teams regularly faced, whilst security guidelines, codes of conduct and training manuals gave an insight into how security was approached institutionally.

I examined MSF's archives "along the grain" (Stoler 2010), tracing the micro-histories of each project week by week, year by year. I mapped key events and debates at each project and I approached these documents not as a "source" but as a "subject" to engage with in an ethnographic rather than extractive manner (Stoler 2002b:87). No historical documents speak for themselves (Elton 2002). Rather than objective traces of the past, archives are the "outcome of human exchanges," with a purpose behind their preservation (Thompson 2000:118). Archives bring into question the politics of institutional memory: they are products of recording and remembering, but also forgetting (Stoler 2010:23; Baughan and Fiori 2015; Davey and Scriven 2015).

The documents were written by busy fieldworkers trying to convey the most crucial information about the project to headquarters. There were some detailed write-ups of meetings with local authorities, but the informal and personal processes of negotiating and networking were largely absent from the written record. The institutional memory concerning these messy social relationships lay with personal histories, rather than archives. Furthermore, the voices of Congolese staff were absent. I began to interview the former project coordinators and heads of mission who gave oral histories of their "missions" and highlighted the role of their Congolese colleagues, many of whom were still working in North Kivu. I began the visa process to visit DRC.

The first trip was six months - determined by visa-length. The MSF *prise en charge* letter offered "logistical support" - access to MSF accommodation and transport. However, I decided to live independently in Goma, the provincial capital. If I had lived with MSF, I would have had to follow their security rules. To a certain extent, I would have become indistinguishable from MSF, and I would have had to represent the organisation at all times. I felt that the ability to improvise and talk to a range of people was important. Living independently, I did not become a drain on MSF resources.

My first day in Goma was spent anxiously refreshing my email with an intermittent WiFi connection. Following my introduction from Paris to the MSF teams in DRC, one head of mission replied almost immediately. A European woman with over a decade of experience with

MSF, she was intrigued by my outdated Welsh name and asked whether I was part of a niche tribe of Francophone women from the valleys. She subsequently invited me for a drink. Over the next six months, I spent a great deal of time with MSF teams in Goma: observing in offices, socialising at weekends, and interviewing a range of staff – some working in Goma and others working in rural project sites and just passing through.

My access depended on personalities, on the personal interest of different staff, and on chance: who was busy, where there was less turnover, and on security conditions at different project sites. It was impossible to do a "balanced" approach with all three MSF sections. Indeed, the three heads of mission in DRC decided an "intersectional approach" would be best to ensure that I had a chance to talk with a wide range of people, recognising the unlikelihood of attaining adequate depth within one section.

My interactions with Congolese staff took place in a remarkably separate social sphere. Most Congolese humanitarians live with their families, rather than in the "expatriate" house. I spoke to a diverse range of 51 current and former Congolese MSF employees from North Kivu, and from other regions in DRC: doctors, nurses, guards, drivers, logisticians, head of mission and project coordinator assistants, and employees who had since been "expatriated" abroad. Congolese humanitarians are the backbone of this thesis, because they are the institutional memory and permanent human infrastructure of MSF. Over 90% of MSF staff "in the field" are local staff. Despite the fact they remain largely "invisible in the group's public profile" (Redfield 2012:364), Congolese staff are crucial to the story: essential to an understanding of how MSF works in North Kivu. Some have worked with the organisation for over a decade.

My independence in Goma meant that I could talk to a variety of people outside of MSF. I interviewed a range of aid workers from other organisations for a greater insight into the dynamics of international intervention. I negotiated my access to what one interviewee described as "the Congolese space of aid." This operates alongside the world of mobile foreign workers, and I first came across it in my second week in Goma when I accidentally walked in on a group of Congolese men in discussion around a table. There was an uncomfortable pause before I apologised and left the room. Later, an interviewee explained that this was the *Cercle de la Sécurité* (Circle of Security) – a group of Congolese humanitarians who work for a range of international organisations and meet once a week to analyse security issues. One of the founders later described to me how this "circle" represents a "Congolese way of doing aid." Congolese

MSF employees were part of this group. Four months later, I was invited to the *Cercle* as a "researcher/observer." Over time, I learnt about the experiences of a range of Congolese humanitarians in North Kivu.

As well as humanitarians, I talked to employees of the state health structure who work closely with MSF (such as a former *Médecin Chef de Zone*), members of customary authorities, priests, and members of local government. I interviewed several former rebels (from military and political wings), some of whom have since become humanitarians. Daily conversations and interactions with friends and acquaintances in Goma (who were students, teachers, guards, taxi drivers, academics) greatly aided my understanding of everyday life in North Kivu.

After six months, I returned to Europe – my visa had expired and I needed to take stock. Knowledge production is both an empirical and theoretical process: it involves the "interpretative process of tacking between theory and empirical detail" (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007:4), as the researcher switches from "observation and accumulated evidence to theoretical moulding, and back to collecting again" (Malinowski 1935:321). Having followed the links from Europe-based MSF employees who introduced me to their former Congolese colleagues, I traced these relationships back again, meeting new contacts in Europe after introductions from Congolese staff. I attended two particular events. The first was a security training for fieldworkers, which gave an invaluable insight into how security and negotiations were debated inside MSF. The second was a workshop on the role of anthropology in MSF, which gave an insight into how the organisation is trying to "mainstream" social scientists to solve operational questions. This offered a chance to offer feedback as someone still "outside" of the organisation's research remit.

I returned for a final three-month stay in North Kivu with refined questions in mind. If fieldwork involves "rushes of and lulls in activity and understanding" (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007:5), these three months were particularly rich and productive. Security conditions had improved, so I was able to spend three weeks living with a project team. This was an invaluable window into everyday life and work at a project level – I spent time at the hospital interviewing nurses and doctors and in vehicles talking to experienced drivers, as well as observing daily life in the office.

Relationship with MSF

MSF facilitated this research, my fieldwork in the DRC, and my access to archival documents. The MSF France think-tank, CRASH, read my research proposal and then forwarded it to the Operations Team in Paris. The approval was informal: I was never asked to sign a document defining what I could, and could not, write about or publish. But this approval was important – it meant that current employees of the organisation were encouraged, if they wished, to talk to me about their experience. This approval also meant that I was given a "letter of invitation" from MSF for the visa application to enter the DRC. Once in Goma, however, I lived independently and any contact with MSF was negotiated on an individual basis. The only time I stayed with MSF and came under the auspices of the organisation (including their security rules) was when I visited project sites outside Goma. This logistical support was the only way to visit projects in a manner that conformed with both MSF and Oxford's institutional risk assessments.

There was no formal censorship in my use of archive documents obtained through MSF. I informed MSF Holland and France that: "The archives may contribute to my DPhil thesis, and may also help form academic journal articles and eventually a monograph. The data will not be passed to any third party and will be stored on the Oxford University 'cloud' which is secured."[5] However, because the archives include sensitive and detailed information about past "security incidents," as well as the names of those involved, I agreed to the following:

- "First of all, anonymity of those mentioned in the archives will be assured. All participants in my research will remain anonymous.
- Second, if I am going to publish accounts of specific, detailed events mentioned in the archives, I will get back in touch with MSF so that the organisation can check the presentation of my work to ensure that no sensitive data is released.
- In any detailed descriptions of specific events deemed sensitive by the organisation, identifiable information can be removed. For instance, pseudonyms can be used, and specific details can be disguised if appropriate to provide individuals full anonymity."

Ultimately, I decided to use few detailed accounts from the archives in this thesis to ensure that no sensitive information involving individuals still working in the country was released. I removed identifying information about people and often the project location.

[5] The project had CUREC approval to use private archives.

CRASH has already written on the topic of security management and humanitarian negotiations (Magone et al., 2011; Neuman and Weissman 2016). In particular, *Humanitarian Negotiations Revealed* was a seminal work that revealed the reality of the pragmatism and compromise behind negotiating the delivery of humanitarian relief. This book was my opening: it demonstrated that MSF was interested in the subject, but there had been no chapter on the DRC. In the book, the authors (former and current "expatriate" staff) describe a *process* of continuous negotiation, in which compromise is inevitable and the extent of acceptable compromise is negotiated through interactions with other actors (Magone et al., 2011). MSF also highlighted the importance of networking, relationships and shared interests.

So, how does my approach differ? In this thesis I build on *Humanitarian Negotiations Revealed*, but from a different angle. Following a tradition of social anthropology, I have taken localised social engagement and experiences as my starting point and have focused in particular on the experience of *locally hired humanitarian staff*. Although MSF's writings and policies explore the importance of relationships and networking, there has been little examination of what this looks like in granular detail, in particular from the perspective of the employees whose own personal networks become so central. In this thesis, I describe how humanitarian institutions are represented by people who have their own identities, stories and histories, which in turn shape how humanitarian intervention unfolds.

However, this project goes beyond simply examining how MSF's policies operate in the DRC: I also critically reflect, from a position of distance from the organisation, on the paradoxes and double binds that emerge. By focusing on the different individuals in MSF and their experiences of trying to represent the institution, I illustrate how forms of difference operate in an industry that has the concept of universal humanity as one of its most central tenets. A focus on shared institutional interests between humanitarians and other actors can overlook the ways that personal identities, networks and histories bring different forms of situated power (or risks) for humanitarians *working for the same organisation*. I move past the discursive ethos of egalitarian universalism to reveal how power hierarchies remain embedded in aid implementation as well as how security is "practiced" on the ground.

CHALLENGES

There were numerous ethical and practical dilemmas to this study. Just like the process of humanitarian negotiation, there were no set guidelines that I could follow - I faced specific,

situational dilemmas. Fieldwork required improvisation: adjusting and constantly reassessing my everyday research practices in relation to the shifting context in order to judge what was ethical. In other words, fieldwork required "ceaseless, daily engagement with ethics as a *process*" (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007:4).

Consent

The first dilemma surrounded consent. Organisations are, ultimately, a collection of individuals. Although I had the stamp of approval from CRASH, it was the choice of every individual whether they wanted to take part in the research. I approached consent not as a tick-box exercise, but as an iterative discussion that needed to be renewed (not assumed) throughout the research process. And yet, ambiguities and challenges remained. For instance, the archives had not been prepared for researchers – the individuals mentioned in the documents were probably unaware that these might be examined in the future. In North Kivu, I was concerned about playing into existing institutional hierarchies – if I had been introduced to an employee by their boss, did that employee really have a choice as to whether they wanted to talk to me? In the end, I redacted names and specific details from the archives. I endeavoured to build relationships with staff outside of work, without the involvement of their bosses.

The question of consent was complicated further by the nature of ethnographic research itself. Participant observation is an ethically complex endeavour – the danger being that research participants are not fully aware when they are being observed. Consent becomes ambiguous: as researchers, are we every truly "off the clock?" (Thorne 1980). I became part of the furniture, part of the social world I was studying, and the personal and professional started to blur. Interviewees became humanitarian friends and humanitarian friends became just friends. In organised interviews, or in the office, things were less ambiguous. But, what about at weekends? I felt "off the clock", until someone said something that made me pause, think, and switched me back to "researcher mode." At times, it felt uncomfortable and extractive to switch between insider/outsider, friend/onlooker.

Sometimes, I was initially assumed to be an MSF "expatriate." This mistaken identity raised further problems of consent. The way academics position themselves in sites of "emergency", especially vis-à-vis aid workers, has been a topic of academic reflection for quite some time (Marcus 2010). Authors have written about the challenges of being assumed to be humanitarians in contexts with a history of extensive aid presence (Clark 2012), whilst recently others have

examined the dilemmas of partnering with humanitarian organisations in the DRC specifically: the advantages and disadvantages of "wearing humanitarian clothes" (Lewis et al., 2019). Partnering with a humanitarian organisation meant that establishing my status as an independent researcher was challenging: both inside and outside MSF.

To overcome some of these ambiguities, I regularly reminded people of my position. If someone said something I found interesting, I asked whether I could write it down for consideration. Other people helped remind their peers of my outsider status: sometimes, during conversations where I felt completely off the clock, something was mentioned which would lead someone to tell me that this was off the record. Outside of MSF, the fact that I did not have the same security rules and did not live with the team, helped to reinforce my status as an outsider.

Making the strange familiar and the familiar strange

Ultimately, work and life became entangled in fieldwork (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007:6): knowledge production is a deeply personal process. I faced the challenge of making the strange familiar, and the familiar strange. This balance during fieldwork was similar to the tension at the heart of the humanitarian practice I was studying: the balance between proximity and distance. My partnership with MSF was loosely defined - it required a constant re-evaluation on my part as to how much independence I should retain. As Chloé Lewis et al (2019) have recently described, humanitarian-academic partnerships in conflict areas such as the DRC are on the rise – the affiliation with an NGO has important (and often necessary) logistical benefits. For instance, it helps researchers access insecure zones and security logistics infrastructure. Yet, brokering such a "humanitarian identity" whilst at the project I visited (and being seen as 'MSF' in certain locations), inevitably shaped the dynamics of my research: restricting who I could talk to, the way I was perceived, and the information different individuals shared with me.

In terms of my own analysis, I was not searching for some sort of complete objectivity. But a lack of distance between the researcher and participants can make it difficult to think critically about practices that have become normal amongst a group of people familiar to the researcher. It can be difficult to make the familiar strange amongst NGO personnel who are already self-reflective and analytical, and share a similar way of thinking to the researcher (Peters and Wendland 2016:249; Lashaw 2012), or who conduct work which can seem almost "untouchable" because of its moral intentions (Fassin 2011). Within MSF, I also needed to

guard some distance in order to manage intersectional rivalries, personal disagreements and institutional politics.

In order to preserve some distance, living independently from MSF in Goma was important. Because of the culture of independent thought and academic research in MSF, I was able to retain full independence to define my research questions and conclusions. Unlike researchers who are integrated into MSF teams to answer questions defined by the organisation, I retained an outsider status that I renegotiated on a daily basis.

Do No Harm

The ethics of this research were complicated further by the context of protracted violence in North Kivu. I needed to ensure my research did not put any of my participants at risk personally, or jeopardise MSF's work in the region. Discussing current relationships with specific armed groups could be sensitive. MSF's working relationships rely on trust, confidentiality and the sharing of sensitive information with a range of interlocutors. The context is constantly evolving: alliances shift and change. What is not sensitive information today, could be tomorrow. In particular, it was important that my research did not put at risk Congolese participants, who described to me histories which were often crucial to their work as humanitarians, but could also be sensitive. When I was in North Kivu, tensions were high: elections had been delayed, and there were protests as well as shifts in the alliances of armed groups. In Goma, a meeting between a foreign, white woman and Congolese participants seemed to attract unwanted attention. I was particularly concerned that this attention would put my interviewees at risk, whilst I could simply leave the country.

I negotiated these risks through discussion with my participants. I purposefully incorporated a historical angle in the research design – interviewees were asked open-ended questions about their experience, leaving them to decide which examples or eras they discussed. The research focused on personal experiences and moments of tension, rather than on exposing specific details of ongoing negotiations. Everyone remains anonymous. In terms of interviewing or meetings, my research participants chose where they felt most comfortable to talk. Most did not feel comfortable with a recording device. Instead, I took detailed notes, and checked extended quotes afterwards.

Writing and exit

When studying institutions and their practices, the methodological focus is usually on the difficulties of the researcher's *entry*. However, as David Mosse (2006) has demonstrated, ethical challenges are accentuated, rather than resolved, when the researcher *exits* "the field" and starts writing: the process of "turning relationships into data" and publishing interpretations about daily lives can disturb the relationships of fieldwork (Mosse 2006:937; Hastrup 2004:456). If fieldwork is relational and social, then writing-up can be inherently "antisocial." In particular, researching powerful, professional communities disturbs the separation between the "field" and the "desk" (Mosse 2006). Researchers build close relationships with participants and these relationships persist after fieldwork. Importantly, participants read the research output and have the power to object. In this context, do we as researchers ever really exit "the field"? (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). And how does this impact on the process of analysis, critical inquiry, and consent? How do we remain honest to our own analysis, but also produce research with our participants' consent?

Unlike Mosse, I began as a clear outsider: I have never worked in the humanitarian sector, nor for MSF. Nonetheless, I faced ethical dilemmas when writing: would the research damage MSF's reputation? It was difficult to transform a deeply personal experience into academic "data." The thesis touches on some uncomfortable "public secrets" (Taussig 1999) within the organisation. What would the participants think of it all? Was consent the same as consensus in terms of analysis? Questions of anonymity were also complicated by the process of writing and publishing for a public audience. Pseudonyms are used, but given the in-depth nature of the study, full anonymity became difficult to assure (Fujii 2008). Although anonymous to most readers, for others, participants may be recognisable. I have not referenced the specific date and location of every interview in an attempt to further preserve anonymity.

To resolve this, I treated consent as an ongoing process. I endeavoured to be open with my participants about my developing analysis: with some, we discussed emerging themes and arguments. For those who showed particular interest, I sent them full chapters or extracts. Debates about my emerging ideas with different MSF workers were a way to sharpen my analysis, but also helped me to realise that it was impossible to please everyone: some agreed, others disagreed. In terms of consent, I continued the process of "checking" - I got back in touch. If the thesis focused on someone's life in-depth, we discussed which details could be included. In some cases, details were disguised or omitted in an effort to guard anonymity and

specific examples were stripped of some detail: the project, the location, the year, or the specific armed group in question. It was important to conduct this process of "checking", because in such a politically turbulent environment, details that were not sensitive at the time could have gained new sensitivity (Knott 2019). In this way, I never really "exited" the field – writing was both a social and antisocial process.

Politics of language

Writing also raised ethical questions about power and representation. In the thesis, only some stories are described in detail. This selection process was strategic – a question of word count and coherence. But, did I not have an equal responsibility to all the people who shared their experience with me? Too often, research participants are partners in the intersubjective experience of "fieldwork", but then excluded from the subsequent writing process (Fabian 1983). Not only this, but the research was carried out predominantly in French, and then translated into English – neither of which are the first language of many of my participants, but languages imposed during colonisation (Thiong'o 1986). Translation is also a deeply political process – meaning is slippery and exact translation is never possible. Although the research tries to give prominence to the voice and experience of Congolese participants, their voice is inevitably (and literally) filtered through my own. Because the thesis is in English, many of the participants will not be able to read it in its current form.

To manage this, I focused on the individuals who were happy for me to write about their experience in more detail. Nonetheless, I want to emphasise that the thesis remains informed by a much broader range of conversations: for the sake of clarity, I have not continually cited quotations from 180 interviews. In terms of language, I have kept some of the original Swahili or French used by my interviewees when I thought nuance was lost through translation. It is my intention to publish parts of this thesis in French, so that at least it is more widely accessible to those who contributed.

I faced a broader ethical dilemma surrounding the politics of language: as researchers, how do we write about the social categories described by our research participants, which hold political weight and functions in the worlds we are studying, without further reproducing them? In short, if all social categories are messy, unstable and historical, how do we write about them? Constructed categories such as race and ethnicity have important social impacts on the interactions that this thesis explores - they were highlighted by my research participants, and

sometimes described in an essentialist manner. I did not want to essentialise forms of difference, but at the same time, the research needed to convey the power such categories held. In particular, in the context of the Great Lakes region, I do not want to reproduce insensitive and polarising ethnocentric language surrounding "ethnicity" – a colonial frame which has too long shaped the depiction of African people as particularistic and traditional (Mudimbe 1988:75). As the Congolese philosopher Valentin Mudimbe (1988:44) argued, such ethnocentric concepts were introduced by Western anthropologists and missionaries and became part of a colonising structure of thought which did not only distort how outsiders viewed Africa, but also how Africans came to understand their own identities. There was also a politics of categories with MSF: "national", "in-pat" and "expatriate" staff. I did not want to adopt a form of methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Schiller 2002), or overlook the power of calling foreign nationals working in the DRC "expatriates" rather than foreigners (Pailey 2019), or homogenise groups as foreign or local, overlooking the heterogeneity within these categories and the importance of race, class and gender.

Ultimately, the way I resolved this was to emphasise that these categories are constructed, but this does not make them any less "real", nor does it undermine their social impact - after all, everything is constructed (Latour 2003). I try to convey the stickiness of identity categories, whilst remaining attentive to the fact that categories such as race and ethnicity are discursively and historically created and reworked, and are ambiguous in practice: unstable, relational and contextual. As I illustrate, such categories are also used strategically by actors to achieve certain ends and, rather than innate and fixed, identities become performative. As Anna Tsing (2015:29) aptly summarises:

> If categories are unstable, we must watch them emerge within encounters. To use category names should be a commitment to tracing the assemblages in which these categories gain a momentary hold.

Throughout the thesis, I emphasise the fact that identities are not natural: their boundaries and meanings are not fixed but fluid, continually shaped by the shifting historical and political contexts in which they gain significance.

THE RESEARCHER

My position as a white, British woman shaped the research process and my interpretations, and it also raises questions about ethics in social science research. Almost fifty years ago, Laura Nader (1972:289) called for anthropologists to "study up": to examine "the colonizers rather than the colonized, the culture of power rather than the culture of the powerless." Rather than studying a powerless "Other" in a faraway place, Nader called for explorations of power in all its sites, both at home and abroad. Yet, Nader assumed that who had the "upper hand" would be evident. When studying power in Africa and thinking about our own position as researchers, it is important to highlight that "up" is always relative and deeply contextual - our own positionalities (defined by race, gender, national origin, class) shape the nuances of "up" in different contexts (Peters and Wendland 2016:252). My research participants were a diverse group: from the founders and executive directors of MSF in Europe, to drivers from rural North Kivu. The power dynamics were not always obvious. For example, one Congolese employee was running to become a local government official (and has since won), whilst others were from powerful families in the area. Whether I was studying "up," "across" (Gusterson 1997), or whether I occupied a position of power, was ambiguous and not mutually exclusive. It depended on time and place.

If this thesis explores how power operates in North Kivu, and how different people hold specific situational advantages, then my position was no different: my ability to conduct this study was shaped by my own position. As Mama (2007:7) aptly summarises:

> Researchers…inhabit bodies that are perceived, received and related to in ways that convey histories and historical relations. Perhaps the best we can do is become more conscious of the ways which our identities, who we are, influence what we do and how we do it.

Positionality is also important because knowledge is always partial and situated: we can only ever understand something from a point of view (Haraway 1988). The process of "understanding" is inevitably shaped by our own situated-ness (Gadamer 1999:296). Acknowledging and understanding the contingency of my own position is central to the claims to knowledge that I want to make. In short, it was key to what I know and how I know it.

"*La jeune chercheuse Anglo-saxonne*"

I held an important form of embodied privilege by being white in the DRC. There remains limited discussion of white privilege in humanitarianism and development, or anthropology itself (Benton 2016; Peters and Wendland 2016). Whiteness has specific (and fluid) meanings and symbolisms in different contexts. In chapter six, I explore how whiteness is a form of power in North Kivu. I benefitted from these very same dynamics. I was "visibly foreign" and associated with the powerful European countries that had colonised Africa, and continue to exert power. I was perceived as someone of influence, rather than simply a graduate student. I was seen to "look the part" – conforming to the (racialised) stereotype of the humanitarian worker in the region. I became entangled within existing power hierarchies itself.

I was under the impression that my visible foreignness (and lack of personal or family ties) helped to construct me as an outsider to local conflict dynamics, facilitating my access to talk openly with a range of people in North Kivu. My nationality as British, or "Anglo-Saxon," was commented upon frequently by my interviewees. Despite the extensive involvement of Britain in the colonisation of central Africa, including the competition between Leopold II of Belgium and Cecil Rhodes to seize some of DRC's territory during the Scramble for Africa (Pakenham 1991:393), I nonetheless seemed to be *perceived as* somehow more detached from recent histories of domination and violence than Belgians or French citizens. I assumed the fact that I was not a native French speaker would only be a disadvantage. Yet, some interviewees were openly relieved that it was not my first language *either* – we were on an even playing field. My British passport meant I was able to join a mobile elite, capable of travelling between France, the UK and Congo in a "multi-sited" manner (Marcus 1995). This was a particularly pertinent form of situational power in eastern DRC, where several of interviewees discussed how they wanted to work in Europe, or visit family there, but were unable to. I held a degree of bargaining power at checkpoints or airports - there were potential international consequences of holding me up, or doing me harm.

Whilst the Oxford brand provided legitimacy and status, my age and gender seemed to construct me as unthreatening. My youth was frequently commented on – as one MSF guard used to joke, "where are your parents?" Amongst some foreign employees, I was the "little researcher," whilst for some Congolese employees, I was a similar age to their children. My position seemed to enable me to address uncomfortable topics and helped distinguish me from "expatriate"

superiors within MSF. The fact that I learnt conversational Swahili was an important element of the research process: it opened up new social spaces.

Just another extractive industry?

One evening in Goma, I was at an Indian restaurant with a group of foreigners who worked for international businesses, NGOs, the UN, and foreign news outlets. We were discussing the continued foreign influence in the region, when a Belgian businessman turned to me and said: "but research is just another extractive industry, isn't it?"

This chapter finishes, then, with a consideration of the broader ethical questions embedded in a research project conducted by a European dropping in, and then out, of one of the poorest countries in the world. The history of anthropological research is deeply embedded in a colonial history, and continues to be intertwined within structures of global inequality, as well as issues of objectification and power (Depelchin 2005:123). In this thesis, I explore how a foreign NGO works in North Kivu. I delve into the complexities of power differentials between outsiders and their Congolese colleagues. Yet, once again, there are parallels between the process and the topic of this research: academia contains many of the same power dynamics, reproduction of global hierarchies and ongoing debates about decolonisation as the humanitarian sphere. The recent explorations of the experiences of local research assistants in eastern DRC, for example, has striking similarities to the stories of humanitarians in this thesis (Nyenzi et al., 2020), as do discussions of the position of "native anthropologists" who negotiate their own "difference and familiarity" in the field (Unnithan-Kumar 2006).

Decolonisation is an ongoing process, not a historical event. An important element of colonisation was not just the domination of territory, but also the control of knowledge and representation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). Imperialism was total - not just economic or political, but also psychological (Thiong'o 1986:2; Fanon 1952). The history of anthropology is interwoven with that of colonisation, as Western anthropologists created discourses about the African Other as primitive and different from European virtues of civilisation (Mudimbe 1988:64). This "ethnocentric distortion", using European concepts and historical experience to understand African contexts, in turn impacted how people "perceive themselves and their relationship to the world" (Thiong'o 1986:153; Mudimbe 1988:75). Knowledge about the African continent continues to be produced by outsiders, who sometimes act as if they have "discovered" something previously unknown, silencing voices from the societies they are

studying (Depelchin 2005:144). Meanwhile, knowledge generated by African universities is marginalised from policy-making processes for the continent (Mkandawire 2015:52). Important questions remain: who has the authority (and power) to produce knowledge about whom? Why should someone from England win a grant to produce knowledge about DRC? What do the participants get out of this research, whilst I walk away with a doctorate? In other words, is such research just another extractive industry?

I tried to tackle these ethical questions by using my own position of relative power to explore the dynamics of humanitarian intervention in eastern DRC – there was a degree of "studying up" involved. Nonetheless, this does not diminish the fact that this research remains connected to existing global power hierarchies. After all, how many doctoral theses exploring humanitarianism in the UK are conducted by Congolese nationals, from a Congolese viewpoint? How would a "multi-sited" methodology work for those visa applications? In any case, the experiences of Congolese staff are foregrounded at the heart of this research – I attempt to do justice to the complexities of their experience as best I can, whilst recognising that who I am shaped both the stories I heard, and how I interpreted them (Jackson 2002). If nothing else, I hope that this research shifts the focus to recognising Congolese humanitarians' work and perspective as crucial to understanding the dynamics of everyday aid practice in the region.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the way I came to understand the research project was much like that of an MSF project: it held different functions for different people, and there were many reasons for others to take part. For some busy project managers, I conducted tasks deemed suitable for a researcher, such as producing historical timelines of a project. For some Congolese interviewees, the fact that I was specifically interested in their perspective was an opportunity to be heard or to "feedback" to MSF offices in Europe. This required some expectation management on my part – I did not work for MSF, and this research would not necessarily lead to change. Yet, I did try to feedback when I could. For instance, I gave a talk on the experience of Congolese staff to an audience in Paris that comprised senior MSF staff. For other Congolese interviewees, representation in the research was not a priority: they offered me their stories, and I offered them something else indirectly in return. For many, this took the form of English language learning resources online, or help with applications in English. Others asked for introductions – we swapped contacts in Goma, and continue to do so on *WhatsApp*. For others,

we became friends, and I earnt their trust over time. Ultimately, I became just another actor in a daily process of negotiation and networking in North Kivu, based on relationships and shared interests.

3. ENTANGLED LANDSCAPES: MÉDECINS SANS FRONTIÈRES IN NORTH KIVU

INTRODUCTION

I first visited an MSF compound in Goma, a city of two million people and the provincial capital of North Kivu, on a Monday morning. It was still early, but the city was already awake: Land-Cruisers driven by employees of the peacekeeping mission, MONUSCO, rattled past on their way to work, and outside a UN base, there was already a queue of military vehicles, manned by Uruguayan and Indian soldiers, waiting in line for petrol. Guards sat outside on plastic chairs in the morning sun, engrossed in their mobile phones, whilst motorbike taxis sounded their horns as they drove by. The MSF base was located on the shore of Lake Kivu. On one side of the road, the still water stretched out behind a row of palm trees. A car washing business was in full swing, hosing down motorbike taxis with soapy water which flowed away in small streams alongside the tarmac. On the other side of the road, the MSF base was nestled between a hotel and a red kiosk covered in Manchester United memorabilia. The compound walls' barbed wire was decorated with coloured clothes, washed and hung out to dry.

I knocked on the compound gates, and was ushered through a door cut out of the metal. Inside was a large one-story building with a *terrasse*, as well as several *paillottes* and a collection of white Land Cruisers. The open plan office was decorated with photographs of different team members from over the years, as well as maps of nearby rural territories. The MSF charter was painted in Swahili on one wall. By the printer, I found a memorial to staff who had worked in the DRC, and had since been killed. Plastic flowers framed their fading faces.

This was my first impression of an MSF office in North Kivu. Over time, the compound became one of several MSF facilities - houses, hospitals, and offices - in Goma and in *Petit Nord's* rural territories with which I became familiar. But, this particular morning was important: it was the moment when I came fully to appreciate how entangled MSF was in local networks.

Lillian, the head of mission, explained that she still had more telephone calls to make before she could talk to me. At eight, we would have a team meeting – there, I could introduce myself, and my research could begin. That morning, Lillian talked incessantly on the phone. At several points, she came to find her Congolese assistant who was ushered into her office to translate. Monday mornings, I was to learn, involved early rises both for heads of missions at the

provincial level and for project coordinators at the project level, who had to ring different armed actors to "check" that "movements" (MSF convoys travelling through specific "axes") would not encounter any problems. MSF's network is broad: from the national army, government authorities, customary authorities, armed groups, civil society activists, teachers and traders. In Goma, Lillian spoke to twelve different armed groups regularly each week. Lillian had inherited many of these contacts from her predecessors – yet, she had also to update the network and continue gleaning important information that might impact MSF's work. This was routine. Lillian explained: "They are used to us, we are used to them. It's about our arrogant wish to have the right to move around everywhere autonomously, which is key to our identity." Security is the "job of everyone" in MSF, and security means gathering information and networking. At a Goma level, this is what it looked like in practice: a busy Monday morning on the phone.

We piled into one of the garden *paillottes* for a team meeting. This was a chance for different staff members to talk about the happenings of the week - an update on the evolving situation. An experienced Congolese member of the team took the lead. Territory by territory, he gave an update on the clashes between different groups, acts of banditry, and political feuds or tensions. This was also an opportunity for different Congolese staff to share any information that they had gleaned through their personal networks which might impact on MSF's work. The discussion gave an insight into MSF's continuous contact with a complex ecosystem of different armed and political actors. This was not exceptional, it was the bare minimum required for MSF to work.

This chapter provides some essential background – a guide to help situate the rest of the study. It outlines the characters, their work and the settings. To begin, I give some background about the organisation *Médecins sans Frontières*. Second, I describe the conflict dynamics in North Kivu. Third, I describe MSF's work in North Kivu: the individuals and the projects they run. Finally, I describe the landscape in which MSF becomes entangled. Specifically, I set out to answer the following: Who is MSF negotiating with? What are they negotiating, and what interests do actors have in MSF's presence? What recurring challenges do MSF teams face?

MÉDECINS SANS FRONTIÈRES

The French Doctors?

MSF is a medical humanitarian organisation created in 1971 by a group of French doctors and journalists who had come of age during May 1968. Today, the organisation consists of a complex transnational network of offices, people, projects, research institutions and advocacy programs. It employs more than 35,000 people worldwide: doctors, nurses, logisticians, administrators, health promoters, mechanics, epidemiologists, laboratory technicians, drivers, guards, and even anthropologists. The majority of MSF fieldworkers are not French doctors, but "national staff" working in their own communities or countries of origin.

In 1999, MSF won the Nobel Peace Prize. In his acceptance speech, James Orbinski, the President of the MSF International Council, explained: "Humanitarian action is by definition universal. Humanitarian responsibility has no frontiers. Wherever in the world there is manifest distress, the humanitarian, by vocation, must respond" (Orbinski 1999). MSF aims to save human lives, irrespective of where they are. MSF's work is underpinned by an "emergency imaginary", the idea of a break from normalcy that requires immediate response in the name of shared humanity (Calhoun 2010; Redfield 2013). As the speech explained, humanitarianism is "an immediate, short term act" that "aims to build spaces of normalcy in the midst of what is profoundly abnormal" (Orbinski 1999). Private donations constitute almost 90% of MSF's finances, which means the organisation can spend where and when it wants. Its financial reserves and sophisticated logistics infrastructure are designed with immediacy in mind: "We can provide assistance quickly, when and where the need is greatest," the MSF website explains. The organisation is one of the largest players in the field – it raised €1.54 billion in 2018. It conducted over 11 million outpatient consultations, treated 2 million cases of malaria, admitted 74,000 severely malnourished children to in-patient feeding programmes, and conducted over 100,000 major surgical operations.[6]

Humanitarianism is a broad church – organisations have different (and sometimes conflicting) ideologies and mandates. MSF is seen as the "gold standard" of principled humanitarian action (Gordon and Donini 2016) in that it responds to immediate suffering and adopts the principles

[6] MSF International Activity Report 2018: https://www.msf.org/international-activity-report-2018/figures [Accessed April 2020].

of neutrality, impartiality and independence in order to do so. MSF defines independence as "freedom of choice in its operations", and impartiality as "non-discrimination and proportionality", responding to the neediest regardless of "politics, race, religion, sex or any other similar criteria." Finally, the organisation "does not take sides in armed conflict, and in this sense, adheres to the principle of neutrality."[7]

All organisations have their founding mythologies. MSF has the "myth of Biafra." The organisation was established by French personnel working for the International Committee of the Red Cross who came to criticise the organisation's mandatory silence about the abuses they saw during the Biafran war (1967-70). According to this version, French doctors saw this neutral silence as complicity in the abuses of the Nigerian regime, and they established MSF – an organisation that focused on "bearing witness" (or *témoignage*) in opposition to the "culture of silence" of the ICRC (Brauman 2012). The historical record, however, is more complex than this neat narrative suggests (Desgrandschamps 2011): in reality, ICRC personnel and French staff had been divided as to whether to denounce the atrocities. There remains to this day a tension in MSF between the desire to "speak out" and a more discreet approach needed to maintain good relations with political authorities (Weissman 2011). There has been some debate in the MSF General Assembly about scrapping neutrality all together. However, neutrality remains a core principle in the MSF movement. Security guidelines for DRC, for instance, describe the humanitarian principles as "key tools to enable the successful negotiation of our access or to maintain our access once it is negotiated."[8] In reality, MSF follows a version of the humanitarian principles which is not dissimilar to that of the ICRC (Brauman 2012). Nonetheless, MSF is renowned for its culture of internal debate as well as lively public criticism. The founding myth is central to MSF's self-image as a rebellious organisation - the Red Cross with more edge.

Today, MSF's structure is bewildering in its complexity. There are five operational sections that have "missions" abroad – France, Belgium, Holland, Switzerland, and Spain – as well as twenty national headquarters in Europe, the Americas, Asia and Australia. There are three hierarchical levels: project teams, country level management (usually in a capital city), and "desk" management at "headquarters" in Europe. MSF has become a "movement" of different

[7] "Who We Are": https://www.msf.org/who-we-are [Accessed April 2020].
[8] "MSF OCB Security Policy." 2018. MSF Belgium, in author's possession, p2.

sections that are committed to the same principles. Yet, even within the MSF movement, there are different interpretations of these principles, and heated debates about the appropriate course of action in different contexts. Each section has its own culture, and the disagreement between them – including surrounding compromises whilst negotiating access – is well documented (Magone et al., 2011).

A politics of solidarity

What about MSF's politics? Is humanitarian politics really an oxymoron? In his ethnography of MSF, Peter Redfield (2013) argues that MSF does not have a political vision, but rather an ethical engagement that focuses on a secular "value of life." He describes MSF's work as a form of "minimalist biopolitics": the organisation tackles threats to biological life by intervening directly with a technical capacity, but without addressing the root causes of social breakdown. In Redfield's (2013:21) words, "rather than seeking control and sovereignty, MSF carefully circumscribes its intervention whilst demanding governance from others." Yet, on the ground, responding to an "emergency" lacks the clarity that this concept evokes: priorities must be made, "crises" are protracted, and contradictions and compromises are inevitable.

Indeed, I argue that the defence of life is a political position in and of itself: an act of solidarity that remains hidden behind the cloak of humanitarian principles. As the Nobel acceptance speech described, MSF is committed to an "ethic of refusal", a refusal to tolerate suffering or inhumanity (Radice 2013). This political vision is often disguised by the organisation's technical engagement with that suffering, a "humanitarianisation" which presents inherently political problems in terms of humanity (Scott-Smith 2013). Nonetheless, MSF's actions are aimed at furthering its political values - equality of life for everyone. They represent a liberal political vision, a solidarity with people as fellow humans. And, medicine is not an apolitical site of power. In the end, the definition of life is shaped by political cultures and personal views (Ticktin 2011a).

This becomes clear in practice. MSF's focus on all human life, no matter who the individuals may be, becomes a political position *per se* which stands in opposition to other ways of prioritising and categorising people, or other politics of life (Fassin 2007). For example, in South Africa, MSF's provision of "health passports" to all migrants so that they could access healthcare became a political act that countered the state policy (Pontheieu and Incerti 2016). In Pakistan, MSF's lobbying for neutrality and impartiality became a political position which

worked in opposition to the state focus on counterinsurgency (Whittall 2011). More recently, MSF's search and rescue efforts at sea despite Europe's tightening legal restrictions has clearly illustrated this politics of solidarity. In this way, humanitarian principles themselves hold a political logic. MSF's principles and its definition of life are political and particular. Ultimately, MSF's politics remain an expression of French values of universality, fraternity and solidarity (Taithe 2006:149).

"Being there": security, access and negotiation

MSF is defined by medical work and speed of provision, but also by its positioning in insecure areas. "When other NGOs might leave because there is conflict and it is dangerous, we become more relevant – it's our mandate," one Congolese employee summarised. The caricature is of French doctors in warzones – the "cowboys" who stay to work, despite the risks. "Speaking out" is an expression of the organisation's solidarity, but this can jeopardise perhaps its most important manifestation: "being there." As one French MSF employee told me, the organisation "fights injustice through access, we reach remote populations and provide what they need." The ability to access populations in need, provide medical care, and make independent choices about where to work and the compromises and risks involved, is central to MSF's "cosmology" (Givoni 2016; Magone et al., 2011).

In fact, "proximity" is one of MSF's operating principles: "Proximity has been and remains a fundamental part of our security management," one DRC security guideline summarises.[9] Rather than relying on international treaties, MSF's access depends on personalities, interests and a fragile web of continually negotiated local agreements. MSF teams need to build contacts and analyse the context in order better to understand how MSF fits into (or disrupts) local power contests, and can take account of the needs and perceptions of the people they are trying to help. As MSF France's former president summarised: "The first

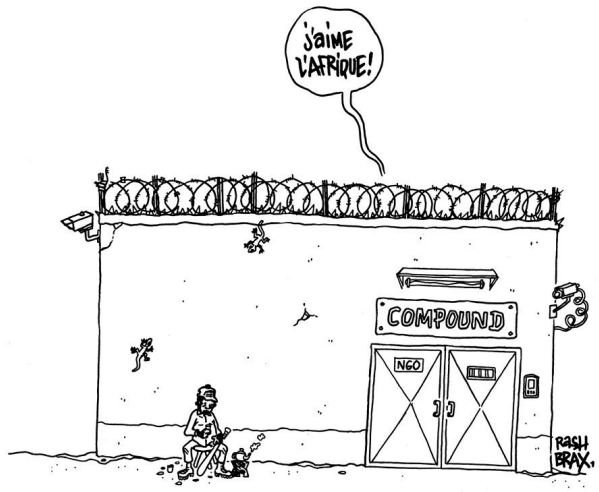


Figure 2: *J'aime L'Afrique!* By Rash Brax
Source: Google Images.

[9] "MSF OCB Security Policy." 2018. MSF Belgium, in author's possession, p3.

line of protection is our own position, our understanding of the context, our ability to forge links."[10] Retreating into a bunker or relying on managerial recipes to manage risk is considered a last resort: instead, MSF pursues risk reduction "primarily through political negotiation with all protagonists (military and civilian, local and international)."[11] MSF sees security management as an inherently social and political process: it involves peoples' interests, perceptions and relationships (Neuman and Weissman 2016). As one MSF fieldworker in DRC summarised, "security is about people, not procedures."

In particular, negotiating access to rebel areas of control has become key to MSF's political culture. In North Kivu, MSF sparked controversy when it published a report entitled "Where is everyone?" which criticised agencies for having "adopted a stance on security which is risk-averse" and having allowed the "practice of negotiating access with all armed actors to fall into disrepair" (Healy and Tiller 2014:4; Healy and Tiller 2016). As Rony Brauman, an early member of MSF summarised, choosing to work in opposition-held territories has become an "identity marker for MSF" (Brauman 2012:1533). MSF has become increasingly critical of other humanitarian agencies' bunkerisation. The sense of being the only one "out there" is central to the organisational identity. In North Kivu, MSF sees its role as being there: "our relevance lies essentially in our positioning and presence in unstable zones."[12] The essence of humanitarianism according to MSF, then, is being there to save lives.



Figure 3: Government zone isn't real MSF, by Rash Brax. Source: Google Images.

[10] "MSF France President's Report to the General Assembly." 2002. MSF internal archives, Paris.
[11] "Risk taking and security management policy for MSF OCP staff." 2015. MSF internal archives, Paris.
[12] "*Visite Nord Kivu, Mars.*" 2007. MSF internal archives, Paris.

The Other 92%

The priority given to access has become caught up in dilemmas about power imbalances between foreign "expatriate" staff and "national" staff, and how these might be remedied. This will be a recurring theme throughout the thesis. Although there have been calls to shift power and funding to Southern-based NGOs since the 1990s, "emergency" humanitarian work remains largely dominated by Northern actors (Pechayre 2017). In 2016, the UN Secretary General argued at the World Humanitarian Summit that humanitarian action should be "as local as possible, as international as necessary", triggering a flurry of commitments and reform initiatives aimed at giving more support to local responders – a process termed "localisation." This was part of a growing sense that the "Western humanitarian system" was facing a "crisis of legitimacy": it was time to "let go" of power, and remedy North/South power imbalances and uncomfortable colonial continuities (Bennett et al., 2016:46). Localisation aims to remedy insensitive interventions that marginalise local actors, bypass their priorities and needs, and fail to build up the existing local capacity central to future disaster preparedness (Zyck and Krebs 2015; de Torrenté 2013).

In response, MSF reemphasised its "reservations" about a "blanket endorsement" of localisation (Schenkenberg 2016). Ultimately, MSF prioritises an ability to negotiate access, reach people in need and manage the security of its staff. In the politically volatile zones where it works and considers itself most relevant, MSF needs to pick the staff who are best placed to work despite local manipulation and pressures, and "safeguard" the organisation's (real or perceived) impartiality, neutrality and independence (Hofman and Heller Pérache 2014). Localisation, according to MSF, ignores the challenges and pressures faced by local actors in conflict settings, as well as the difficulty they may have in following humanitarian principles (Schenkenberg 2016). In effect, "detachment" or "distance" are framed as central to decision-making and security (Shevchenko and Fox 2008). MSF also has "conceptual" doubts surrounding the localisation agenda because the organisation's focus is on the immediate delivery of humanitarian relief, rather than on strengthening local capacity with the aim of societal transformation (Schenkenberg 2016). Therefore, MSF usually adopts "*la politique du cavalier seul"* approach, "going it alone" (Pechayre 2017:10). MSF avoids working through local partners or by remote control, and prefers a "direct action model" which involves mixed "national" and "international" teams (Hofman and Heller Pérache 2014). Decision-making power remains in Europe, with "international" staff in top positions (Pechayre 2017).

MSF has nonetheless had its own process of reflection. In 2006, the MSF sections held the *La Mancha* conference, an organisation-wide reassessment of MSF's *raison d'être*. *La Mancha* was part of a self-questioning about how "universal" or *sans frontières* MSF truly was, and the result of increasing discomfort at the way national origins dictated inequalities along North/South lines in an organisation that worked towards universal humanity (Redfield 2012). One of the central themes of the conference was diversity and inclusion. At the conference, it was emphasised that "national staff" accounted for 92% of MSF's field positions (Fox 2014:106). This led to a broader discussion about the identity of the organisation: given that key decision makers and headquarters are in "the West", attendees asked "are we French, European, international, global?" (Fox 2014:108). In effect, the organisation struggled with how to be both universal and multicultural. Contributors to an MSF perception study concluded that the humanitarian system has a "diversity problem." Whilst humanitarians think that they are "applying universal precepts", these in fact have plural understandings and need to be translated in practice (Stoddard 2012:149; Donini 2012:191).

The subsequent *La Mancha* Accords committed to "provide fair employment opportunities for all staff based on competence and commitment rather than mode of entry into the organisation (either through national or international contract)." This was an attempt to address discrimination and improve "inclusiveness in decision-making."[13] However, the fundamental structure remained the same: a group of foreign mobile staff in senior positions and a pool of locally recruited "national staff" with a different contract (Redfield 2012; Pechayre 2017). Rather than the promotion of staff in their own country, MSF has instead focused on providing better opportunities for "national staff" to become "expatriates" in other countries. As a senior manager of MSF France told me, "the number of expatriates who began as national staff has increased. The pool of MSF expatriates is much more diverse than it was." Yet, for some, reforms have not gone far enough. In 2009, several senior MSF staff left to establish Alliance for International Medical Action (ALIMA), an NGO which aims to develop a new model of emergency medical relief which decentralises power and operations to national actors, replacing MSF's "French Doctors" with "African Doctors" (Pechayre 2017:1).

[13] La Mancha Agreement, 25 June 2006, Athens: http://associativehistory.msf.org/la-mancha-agreement [Accessed April 2020].

NORTH KIVU, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

The setting

The Democratic Republic of the Congo is around two-thirds the size of Western Europe, and is home to some 84 million people - the most populous Francophone country in the world, yet one in which another 240 different languages are spoken. The history of the area in the last 150 years has been brutal. European exploration of the Congo region began in earnest in the late 19th century with the efforts of the Welsh explorer Stanley under the sponsorship of Leopold II of Belgium. During what has subsequently been termed the Scramble for Africa, the "Congo Free State" became Leopold's private property. It was stripped of vast amounts of wealth, with widespread atrocities committed against Congolese people (Hochschild 1999). After millions of people died from disease and exploitation, the Belgian government formally annexed the territory in 1908. The resultant "Belgian Congo" was a colony until 1960. Its natural wealth became central to the Belgian economy, but investment in healthcare and education was minimal.

In 1960, Patrice Lumumba became the first democratically elected Prime Minister of the DRC. However, almost immediately, secessionist movements began in the province of Katanga, with the backing of Belgian forces. After Lumumba was refused help from the US to quell the rebellion, he accepted unilateral Soviet aid in August 1960, at the height of the Cold War. The US and Belgium quickly acted to remove Lumumba from office. He was handed to Belgian-backed Katangan troops and executed in 1961. In 1965, after years of political upheaval, and the extended presence of a large UN peacekeeping force, the CIA-backed Mobutu Sese Seko mounted a coup and took control, later renaming the country Zaire. Mobutu's dictatorship lasted until 1997.[14] During the last twenty-five years of conflicts in the DRC, an estimated 5.5 million people have lost their lives. An account of the recent history of the DRC, which encompasses those conflicts, will be traced below through the perspective of the Kivu.

Stable Instability in the Kivu

The setting of this thesis is the province of North Kivu, which has been at the epicentre of protracted conflict in the DRC. The DRC is divided into twenty-six provinces - the Kivu

[14] For a more detailed history of DRC: Nzongola-Ntalaja (2002), Depelchin (1992), Reyntjens (2009), Vlassenroot and Raeymaekers (2004), Turner (2007), Clark (2002), Lemarchand (2009).

provinces (North and South Kivu) are in the east, bordering Rwanda and Uganda. I focus on MSF's projects since the early 2000s in the North Kivu's *Petit Nord*: Masisi, Rutshuru and Walikale territories, in which armed groups have become a crucial part of the political fabric. In order to understand the negotiations taking place between humanitarian intervenors and armed groups, it is important to have at least a basic grasp of dynamics in the region.

In the early 1990s, in the context of transition to multi-partyism, violence erupted in the *Petit Nord* between populations who defined themselves as native to the land (Nyanga, Hunde, Nande and Tembo), and those who were branded as foreign (Hutus and Tutsis). Conflict in the Kivus became regionalised, however, after the influx of Hutu refugees following the Rwandan genocide in 1994. The Rwandan army launched attacks against refugee camps, with the stated aim of eliminating former *génocidaire* militia elements. In 1996, the Rwandan army and Rwandan-backed *Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo* (AFDL), led by Laurent Kabila, invaded the Kivu regions. The AFDL tracked down the former Hutu *génocidaire* militias, who reorganised as *Armée pour la Libération du Rwanda* (ALiR) (and later the *Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda* (FDLR)), but also killed Hutu refugees who then fled westwards across the country or eastwards back into Rwanda. Kabila moved west and, in 1997, the AFDL arrived in Kinshasa and overthrew Mobutu.

The "second war" began after Kabila tried to expel his former Rwandan backers and, in 1998, the newly formed, Rwandan-backed *Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie* (RCD) invaded the Kivu. The RCD quickly gained ground. However, due to internal rifts and growing distance between the group's two foreign supporters, Uganda and Rwanda, the RCD split into several factions in 1999. RCD-Goma, which was supported by Rwanda, remained in control of the *Petit Nord,* whilst RCD-K which was supported by Uganda was based in Kisangani. RCD-K was then taken over by new leadership, renamed as RCD-ML, and took control of northern North Kivu and Ituri provinces. RCD faced opposition from *Mai-Mai* militias which formed as local defence forces against "Rwandan invaders." *Mai-Mai* were allied with Kinshasa, and often fought alongside the FDLR rebels. The conflict became known as "Africa's World War" (Prunier 2009): it escalated to involve nine African countries (and their military forces) and more than twenty-five armed groups. The conflict pitted Congolese government forces, supported by Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe, against different rebel groups and soldiers supported by Uganda and Rwanda. MSF teams worked throughout the country during the conflict.

In 2000, the UN authorised a peacekeeping force, MONUC. In 2001, President Kabila was assassinated by his bodyguard and his son, Joseph Kabila, became President. In 2002, Joseph Kabila negotiated a peace-deal which led to Rwanda and Uganda's withdrawal from the country, and a peace-deal with rebel groups which offered them power sharing in an interim government. In 2003, Kabila signed a transitional constitution, in which the main parties to the conflict were incorporated into a transitional government comprising of four vice presidents and one president – Kabila himself.

Although war officially ended in 2002, violence and insecurity continued in the Kivus. The region epitomises "no-peace-no-war" (Richards 2003) or "stable instability" (Verweijen 2016). After three years of transition, elections were held in 2006. The frontrunners were Joseph Kabila and Jean-Pierre Bemba, the leader of the *Mouvement de Libération du Congo*, an armed group backed by Uganda. When Kabila won the second round, there was violence between Bemba and Kabila supporters, and Bemba subsequently left the country on medical grounds. Meanwhile, the RCD lost its legislative power and the governorship of North Kivu. This fuelled existing fears within the RCD that they had entered an unequal partnership. Three years previously, in 2003, three senior military officers had defected. One of them was Laurent Nkunda, who had fought with the RCD, and had also once worked for MSF, apparently as a nutrition assistant.[15] In 2006, Nkunda launched the rebellion of the *Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple* (CNDP), drawing from ex-RCD officers. The CNDP had Rwandan backing and installed itself in the highlands of Masisi and Rutshuru. The group claimed to defend the rights of the Tutsi community and combat the FDLR.

In 2006, the government and Nkunda negotiated an agreement whereby the CNDP would be integrated into the national army. The process ended up strengthening Nkunda, rather than weakening him, and fighting restarted in 2007. The CNDP rebellion led to the remobilisation of at least a dozen more *Mai-Mai. Patriotes Résistants Congolais* (PARECO) was born: a collection of militias who saw themselves as defending *autochthonous* populations against Tutsi domination. It had three key factions: Hunde, Nande and Hutu. In 2007, PARECO began cooperating with the FDLR and FARDC against Nkunda. In 2008, however, the Goma peace conference took place, which integrated the CNDP and other armed groups, including many PARECO, into the

[15] "*Rencontre 31 mars 2007 avec le general Laurent Nkunda.*" 2007. MSF internal archives, Paris.

army. The conference sparked the creation of new armed groups who hoped to benefit from the peace dividend. In 2008, fighting restarted.

Most MSF projects in North Kivu during this period were in areas which had come under CNDP control, and fieldworkers negotiated between the CNDP, FARDC, FDLR and PARECO so that they could work and travel through all territories. CNDP formed a governance structure: a taxation system, a shadow administration, a communications strategy and an ideology that spread at a grassroots level (Scott 2009). The delivery of aid and social services became part of the CNDP's hearts and minds strategy and a means to promote a positive image abroad. CNDP had a sophisticated apparatus to work with NGOs. Their Social Affairs spokesman, Dr. Alexi, was a medical doctor who had experience in the international aid system. During this period, PARECO became divided and fractured. In particular, the PARECO-Hunde section splintered off from the group after the Goma conference. A new group, the *Alliance des Patriotes pour un Congo Libre et Souverain* (APCLS) was created, based in Masisi territory, and led by General Janvier. The APCLS draws on a discourse of (Hunde) *autochthony* and anti-Rwandophone sentiment. The group also figures heavily in the stories of MSF fieldworkers, some of whom have been in regular contact with Janvier since 2007.

The context quickly changed in January 2009 when a secret deal was formed between the Congolese and Rwandan governments. Bosco Ntaganda was announced as the new leader of the CNDP, Nkunda was detained by Rwanda, and the CNDP signed the March 23 Agreement which formally integrated the group into the Congolese army (FARDC). PARECO was also integrated into the army. Alliances shifted. Before, the FARDC had fought alongside the FDLR and PARECO against the CNDP. Now, the newly integrated army led by former-CNDP rebels led offensives against the FDLR. The CNDP maintained parallel chains of command and controlled mineral-rich mining areas. The offensive against the FDLR decimated the group, and had disastrous humanitarian consequences. In areas that saw brutal operations by army units dominated by ex-CNDP soldiers, support for *Mai-Mai* groups grew. The APCLS began to fight with the FDLR against the army dominated by ex-CNDP. In the memories of MSF fieldworkers, an accord between the CNDP and government did not bring peace, but led to confusion: it was a period of flux, with parallel command structures and deserting soldiers.

In 2011, in highly contested elections, Kabila won a majority, putting his rival Etienne Tshisekedi under house arrest. Meanwhile, rebellion in the east was not over. In 2011, the

government tried to get rid of the CNDP parallel chains of command and in 2012 former CNDP soldiers mutinied and created the *Mouvement du 23-Mars* (M23) rebel group, again allegedly supported by Rwanda. In November 2012, the M23 rebels took control of Goma, but agreed to retreat a month later. During this time, the troops of the UN peacekeeping mission (renamed MONUSCO) observed without intervening. In 2013, this changed: the UN Security Council authorised the deployment of an "intervention brigade" within MONUSCO to carry out offensive operations with the national army in order to "neutralise" armed groups. After internal division in the M23, a weakening of Rwandan support after international condemnation, and a UN-backed government offensive in November, M23 surrendered and signed a peace-deal.[16] Again, the M23 conflict features heavily in the stories of MSF fieldworkers, as MSF project sites moved in and out of M23 control.

Since the end of the M23 rebellion, there has been a proliferation of armed groups in the Kivus. There are more than one hundred active in North Kivu alone – a shifting patchwork of political alliances and armed networks. There are rarely clear frontlines, but instead complex networks of alliances and rivalries (Vogel and Stearns 2018). These factions compete and collude in constantly changing configurations. Just as violence is a complex everyday social process (Nordstrom 1997), so is armed mobilisation, demobilisation and remobilisation. Armed mobilisation has been fuelled by a range of elites who build connections with armed groups and feed insecurity as a form of political leverage and a source of economic gain (Vogel and Stearns 2018). In turn, the growing number of small-scale armed groups reinforces and aggravates local conflicts relating to public authority and access to land, which in turn feeds new mobilisation and further fragmentation (Mathys and Vlassenroot 2016). Since 1996, at least 270,000 people have been "living by the gun" in the region (Vogel and Stearns 2018; Debos 2016). Congolese youth have been going in and out of armed groups for several decades – a process described as "circular return" (Vlassenroot et al*.,* 2018), with a "revolving door" between the national army and rebel groups (Eriksson Baaz and Verweijen 2013). The UN peacekeeping mission, MONUSCO, remains a dominant presence in Kivu, with almost 19,000 personnel deployed in the region, including 16,000 military personnel, and a budget of over $1 billion in 2019-2020.[17] However, UN-led disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes have failed to address the reasons for cyclical mobilisation and remobilisation in the region (Marriage 2007).

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[16] Stearns (2012) has written in detail about the CNDP and M23 wars in North Kivu.
[17] MONUSCO Fact Sheet: https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/monusco [Accessed April 2020].

Perhaps paradoxically, maintaining humanitarian access seems to have become more difficult since the end of the M23 war. The landscape has become increasingly fragmented with an increase in criminal violence (Verweijen 2019). Kidnappings and robberies are increasingly committed by "bandits" - armed men who conduct criminal activity for economic gain. This poses challenges to MSF's security strategy based on negotiation, relationships and shared interests with warring parties in a conflict. The identities of these bandits remain unknown, and it remains difficult for MSF to differentiate between criminal activity and politically motivated violence.[18] The view amongst longstanding humanitarians was that "actual war" was "calmer" because it was clear who was where. One experienced Congolese employee summarised: "Things became more difficult and fluid after 2013. Armed groups here are not the problem, they know MSF, it is routine, we bring something useful. The problem is bandits, we cannot negotiate with them."

I spent time in North Kivu between 2017-2018, but the examples discussed by my interlocutors are based on memories of events that took place from the beginning of MSF projects in the area in the early 2000s, throughout the CNDP and M23 wars, as well as in the more recent present. Since I left North Kivu, the country has seen the first peaceful exchange of power since independence. After years of delaying elections - a process known as *glissement* (Nyenyezi Bisoka et al., 2016) - and consequent protests, elections were held and in January 2019, Félix Tshisekedi became President.

What is the conflict about?

How can we make sense of this protracted conflict? Jason Stearns (2011) described conflict in the DRC as like an onion, with multiple layers, without a discernible core. Violence in the Kivu is not just about local struggles, nor is it just the result of national or international meddling – the two are interlinked,[19] with armed groups increasingly integrated into elite networks, and the extent of foreign involvement (and profiteering from mineral rich areas) shifting over time (Vogel and Stearns 2018). Nor can violence be explained simply by "greed" for natural resources (Keen 2012; Vogel et al., 2019) or age-old "ethnic" antagonisms (Nzongola-Ntalaja 1999). Here, ethnic labels should be treated with caution – these categories are not the cause, but often a

[18] Mclean. "Impact of Violence on Medical and Humanitarian Services in North Kivu, DRC." 2017. Analysis Department MSF Brussels. p14.
[19] For more on this debate see: Autesserre (2008) and Stearns et al., (2017).

product, of violence. "Ethnic" identities are not fixed, but fluid and historically produced (Mathys 2017). Their meaning has changed over time, so instead we must explore how these categories have become politically salient "imagined communities" (Anderson 2006; Newbury 1995). Intertwined notions of identity, territory and authority are central to understanding conflict dynamics in North Kivu, and this "nexus" both shapes, and is shaped by, armed mobilisation, as violence continues to alter the meanings of identities and their relationship to authority and territory (Verweijen and Vlassenroot 2015). To understand contemporary struggles, we need to appreciate how territorial belonging became central to political order and access to the colonial and postcolonial state (Muchukiwa 2006).

In North Kivu, "mythico-histories" (Malkki 1995) about territory, identity, and victimhood have constructed a powerful discourse of *autochthony* (Mathys 2017:476). *Autochthony* links identity and space: it refers to the supposed natural belonging of people to the "soil", which establishes claims to authority (Hoffman 2019). In North Kivu, discourses of *autochthony* are central to excluding people from access to resources, land and employment (Mathys 2017). The Kivu region is a frontier zone, a melting pot, home to dozens of groups defined as "ethnic." Some speak Kinyarwanda (the language in Rwanda), but this group is not homogenous. It is made up variously of "Hutu" and "Tutsi"[20] who settled in Congo before the colonial period, immigrants who were settled in the Kivus by the colonial administration in 1937 as labour for plantations, and refugees who fled periods of violence in Rwanda since the 1950s. The position of this group in the Kivus has long been contested (Mararo 1997; Kambere Muhindo 1999). Violence between "*autochthonous*" populations and Rwandophones erupted in the 1960s after *autochthony* became a banner for political mobilisation, and again in the 1990s in the context of a shift to multi-partyism (Willame 1997). After the Rwandan-backing of armed groups such as the RCD, CNDP and M23, the identity of Rwandophone speakers in DRC became further politicised, with a resurgence of pre-existing discourses surrounding *autochthony* as a form of armed mobilisation.[21]

Autochthony is a slippery, flexible concept - easily politically manipulated, and itself a colonial import (Jackson 2006). Ethnicity, territory and authority became interlinked during the colonial era. Through remapping the fluid frontier zone of eastern Congo into distinct, ethnic

[20] Hutu and Tutsi are not fixed ethnic categories but their meaning has changed over time (Newbury 1995).
[21] For more on *autochthony* in North Kivu: Mathys (2017) Jackson (2006) Boas and Dunn (2014) and Hofman (2019).

homelands, Belgian colonialism transformed relationships between people and space (Hoffman 2019). In collaboration with indigenous elites, colonisers created *chefferies* (chiefdoms) – territorially fixed administrative units which were home to distinct "ethnic groups" and ruled by a *chef coutumier* through customary law (Mamdani 1996; Ranger 1983; Hoffman et al., 2020). These chiefdoms were "ethnic spatial fixes" (Newbury and Newbury 1982:35). Communities which were far from "neatly bounded" (Berry 1993:24) were reorganised into these mono-ethnic chiefdoms with specific territories and land rights, defining who belongs where and who gets what. In other words, territorialised ethnic identity became a means of accessing the state and resources (Muchukiwa 2006).

Ultimately, the colonial era profoundly reshaped political order, creating "ethno-territorial subjectivities" that have been continually reactivated and reproduced in the present day (Hoffman 2019). The institution of chieftaincy remains a powerful and important form of political authority in the Kivu provinces because of the belief in the "authenticity and sacredness of the institution of traditional chieftaincy and by the ethno-territorial imaginary of the Congolese political order" (Hoffman et al., 2020:126). Today, custom is a symbolic and identity-based political resource that has been termed "customary capital", enabling chiefs to exercise authority over people and accumulate resources (Hoffman et al., 2020:138). Rather than being timeless, chieftaincy is continually remade through power struggles as people compete to define "who embodies the community's authentic values" (Hoffman et al., 2020:138).

The "colonial toolbox" (Mathys 2017) continues to shape contemporary political disputes in eastern DRC. *Autochthony* defines who "belongs" at a territorial, provincial, national and even regional scale (Jackson 2006). At a territorial level, it pits "*autochthonous*" populations (Hunde, Nande, Hutu, Tembo, Nyanga) against Rwandophones (Hutu and Tutsi), although this is malleable, with the position of Hutus contested (Jackson 2006; Mahano 2002). In land-related struggles, *autochthonous* "ethnic groups" claim to have "arrived first", whereas populations lacking "tribal homelands" recognised during the colonial era are branded as "immigrants" (Jackson 2006). In North Kivu, Rwandophone communities arrived in eastern Congo before colonialism, but only some were organised into customary structures[22]: in other places, they settled on land bought by the colony from customary authorities (Stearns 2012:17). This fuelled

[22] Kinyarwanda-speakers already settled in North Kivu before the colonial period have their own *chefferie*: Bwisha in Rutshuru Territory. But, their *autochthonous* status is still debated (Kambere Muhindo 1999). In Masisi, Kinyarwanda speakers do not have customary representation.

a narrative of Rwandophones stealing land from *autochtones*, with waves of Rwandophone immigration and the violence committed by Rwandan-backed armed groups further politicising the issue (Mathys 2017). At a provincial level, *autochthony* refers to authentic provincial identity, which became increasingly politicised during the Mobutu era, as well as more recent processes of decentralisation (Jackson 2006:103). At a national level, *autochthony* has become entangled with debates about citizenship and electoral participation (Jackson 2007; Nzongola-Ntalaja 2007). The citizenship law has been continually altered since independence (Malengana 2001): changes have been made to the date when it was necessary that "peoples" and their "territory" were already within Congolese borders (Mathys 2017). Ultimately, long-term processes of politicisation of ethnic identity as part of broader political contests help explain why intensified land competition has become a source of ethnic discourse and violent mobilisation (Mathys and Vlassenroot 2016).

MSF IN NORTH KIVU

Goma is known as the city of rebellion, but also the headquarters of "peace": home to a UN peacekeeping mission and a range of foreign NGOs. After the influx of Rwandan refugees in the 1990s, the protracted conflict and deteriorating public service provision attracted a growing humanitarian presence. During the second Congo war (1998-2003), social services were almost entirely provided by international aid organisations, upon which the rebel movement in control at the time, the RCD-Goma, relied for such provision (Büscher 2011). Following the peace deal, there was a proliferation of aid organisations in the country, with much service provision still outsourced to foreign NGOs (Marriage 2010:364).

Goma has become a base for a range of foreign actors: researchers, journalists, peacekeepers and aid workers, as well as multinational corporations. The city has been described as the setting of "charitable imperialism", home to a series of enclaves inhabited by Western humanitarian workers living in a bubble which is disconnected from local realities and undermines local initiatives (Ndaliko 2016; Autesserre 2014). The long-term presence of foreign agencies has reshaped the urban landscape, as well as local social subjectivities, and economic and employment opportunities (Büscher and Vlassenroot 2010; Oldenberg 2015). Goma is a contact zone and the fixing business is on the rise. In order to operate, foreigners must negotiate the terms of their work with a complex array of armed actors and local authorities. As a result, the ability to network, translate and analyse has become an important skillset for the local job market. In this context, local actors use their social capital and *savoir faire* to pursue diverse career

trajectories, conducting a similar brokerage role for different organisations over time: mining companies, armed or political organisations, NGOs and researchers.

MSF: the characters

MSF has a long history in the DRC: the first project opened in 1977. In the 1990s, the response to Rwandan refugees was an important moment for the organisation - MSF chose to stop working in the camps that were controlled by former *génocidaire* militia members, arguing for the need to withdraw if aid is paradoxically helping to perpetuate violence (Terry 2002). Today, Congo remains central to MSF's "field imaginary" (Stellmach 2020). Many MSF staff are sent there on their "first mission" and many experienced fieldworkers have passed through the Kivu at some point in their career. In 2018, MSF ran 54 medical projects in 17 of the DRC's 26 provinces, employed almost 3,000 staff, had an expenditure of over €100 million, and conducted almost 2 million outpatient consultations, treating 800,000 cases of malaria alone.[23]

In the *Petit Nord,* three MSF sections run projects: the Belgians (OCB), Dutch (OCA) and French (OCP). Different sections operate in different places, and have historical experience in different areas. Throughout the study, I will explore the experiences of individuals operating at two levels: at a "coordination" level in Goma, and at a "project" level in different sites in rural territories.

Within MSF, there are three formal (and contractual) categories of employee. "National" staff are hired locally – they might be working in their village, territory, or province of origin. "In-pats/*délocalisés*" are Congolese staff who live in other provinces and have been "inpatriated" by MSF to work at a particular project. "Expatriate" staff are brought in from abroad.

There are lots of job titles to get used to. "Head of mission" is the most senior post in the country reserved for foreign staff who oversee programmes at a country level. Senior positions are partnered with a Congolese assistant: the assistant's role is to maintain a network, analyse and translate, and to act as the institutional memory given the high turnover of foreign staff. This partnered management structure is mirrored at a project level, with a foreign project coordinator and a Congolese assistant. Congolese assistants cannot become heads of mission

[23] MSF International Activity Report 2018: https://www.msf.org/international-activity-report-2018/figures [Accessed April 2020].

or project coordinators on a permanent basis – they are considered to be more vulnerable to pressures and violence from armed actors. Heads of mission, project coordinators, and most crucially, assistants, will be key voices in this study.

Each department is led by a foreign employee, with a team of Congolese employees. The logistics department deals with the hidden side of medical activities: energy, transport and mechanics, biomedical equipment, telecommunications and IT, construction, water, sanitation and waste disposal. The supply department ensures that pharmacies have the stocks that they need, procured from a sophisticated international logistics system. The administration, human resources and finance departments oversee the everyday running of the projects.

Then there are the doctors and nurses: experienced professionals from around the world, from different specialities, depending on the focus of the project. Whilst project coordinators and heads of mission are not medically trained, the Project Medical Referent at a project level, and the Medical Coordinator at the "coordination" level, are medical personnel who are responsible for defining, implementing and monitoring medical programmes, working closely with the project coordinator and head of mission, as well as the Ministry of Health partners. The majority of medical staff are Congolese – some on an MSF contract, others on a Ministry of Health contract but paid by MSF. The health promotion teams act as community liaisons, conducting *sensibilisation* (awareness raising) which aims to improve MSF's "acceptance," whilst outreach nurses travel in mobile clinics to provide health assistance and support to health centres in rural areas. Whilst doctors, nurses, Medical Coordinators and Project Medical Referents focus on medical operations, project coordinators and heads of mission described their role as security and networking – the number one job for non-doctor coordinators and the non-medical team is "to enable the doctors to do their job." I focus on this human infrastructure which supports medical staff and facilitates the delivery of healthcare in practice.



Figure 4: Downtime in an MSF base in Masisi territory. Source: Personal Photograph 2018

When presenting to an audience in the United States, one academic asked why I was focusing on "local staff" and even "support staff", rather than senior humanitarians running the projects. I explained that I was focusing, in fact, on both - but that these so-called "support staff" had important insights to offer and were key to the "running of projects." This exchange illustrates how the role played by local staff in aid intervention tends to be overlooked. Drivers and guards, for example, are crucial to how MSF navigates the political and security context in North Kivu. Some go on to become senior managers, a few are "expatriated" abroad, whilst others are from important local families or go on to become politicians. In short, the individuals who are most important to networking and negotiating are not obviously identifiable from their job descriptions: it depends on who they are, their contacts and *savoir faire*.

MSF: the projects

What medical work is MSF actually doing? As a motorbike driver in Goma joked one day, "everyone knows MSF, they are our health service." Whereas in other countries MSF's work is more specialised, in the DRC the organisation conducts a broad range of medical activities working in partnership with the Ministry of Health. MSF supports main referral hospitals as well as peripheral health centres in delivering basic and secondary care; it responds to cyclical outbreaks of epidemics such as measles, Ebola,



Figure 5: MSF supported General Hospital in North Kivu. Source: Personal Photograph 2018.

cholera, malaria; and it also operates mobile clinics in rural areas. Services include emergency and intensive care, surgery, nutrition, and maternal and paediatric healthcare, community-based healthcare, and outreach activities such as mass vaccination. The organisation runs a "referral" service, collecting severe cases in rural areas and bringing them to hospital. Often, this includes injured, armed combatants.

The imaginary of an "emergency" with a short, immediate response does not apply in North Kivu, where some projects have been running for over a decade. The organisation is faced with a chronic "emergency," taking on responsibility within a dilapidated health system in the context of cyclical violence and epidemics. Projects open and close in a cyclical fashion: some of projects in this study have closed, some are still running. Below, I draw from archival documents, staff experiences, and my own observations to describe several MSF project sites in North Kivu.

MSF France: Rutshuru and Nyanzale

This study includes stories from two of MSF France's projects: Rutshuru (2005-current day), and Nyanzale (2007-12). In 2005, MSF opened a project in Rutshuru to support the general hospital in surgery and emergency care. However, this quickly evolved into supporting all services at the hospital, as well as a referral system with ambulances and mobile clinics.[24] In 2006, there were 5,000 hospitalisations, but by 2016, the budget for Rutshuru alone was 6 million Euros: the team received 25,000 emergency inpatients and conducted 8,000 major surgical operations.[25]

Rutshuru changed hands multiple times. During the CNDP conflict, fighting broke-out between the CNDP and an alliance of the national army, FDLR and PARECO. In October 2008, the CNDP took control of Rutshuru. In 2009, the newly integrated FARDC regained control, but things became volatile, with acts of banditry and parallel chains of command. In July 2012, fighting erupted between the M23 and FARDC, and by September, Rutshuru was under the control of the M23. In 2013, things again became volatile. Rutshuru came under FDLR control, then army control, then M23 control again. The team sheltered in the hospital for four days during intense fighting. In December 2013, M23 was defeated, and the government authorities were reinstalled in Rutshuru. Since then, the FDLR have still remained

[24] "*Rapport Annuel de l'Année 2016*." MSF internal archives, Paris, p.98.
[25] "*RDC Fiche projet 2016*." MSF internal archives, Paris, p.2.

a presence in Rutshuru, and Hutu Mai-Mai groups known as Nyatura have become more powerful.

MSF France also supported health centres in the nearby zone of Birambizo. In particular, it worked in Nyanzale, a town in Masisi, about 150km north of Goma. The town grew rapidly with the arrival of internally displaced people from elsewhere in North Kivu. MSF decided to open a project in 2007, supporting health centres and running mobile clinics. The town was controlled sporadically by the CNDP, and continued to be encircled by the FDLR, PARECO, CNDP and FARDC. In 2011 and 2012, the team evacuated several times after two kidnappings, in the context of tensions within the team itself. After recurrent security incidents, in 2012 the project was closed.[26]

MSF Holland: Kitchanga, Mweso and Pinga

The study also includes stories from Kitchanga (2007-2013), Mweso (2008-current day) and Pinga (2010-13). Kitchanga is located in the hills of North Kivu, stretching across the border between Masisi and Rutshuru territories. In the 1990s, Kitchanga was a small village, but it developed into a town of around 80,000 people after settlement by displaced people (Mathys and Buscher 2018). It is one of the largest settlements of the Hunde majority in Masisi. MSF Holland opened a project there in 2007. During this period, Kitchanga was the fiefdom of the CNDP. Given this close proximity, MSF tried visibly to balance its presence by conducting outreach work in non-CNDP areas. This became difficult as security conditions deteriorated. In 2009, Kitchanga came under control of the newly integrated FARDC (dominated by ex-CNDP). The fault lines shifted, and again it became imperative for MSF visibly to work outside of ex-CNDP areas, in areas controlled by APCLS and FDLR. In 2013, fighting broke out in the town between the APCLS and the 812th brigade of the Congolese army. Over one hundred people died, and 500 houses were burned and destroyed – including the MSF base.[27] The project closed, and MSF Holland shifted its focus to Mweso.[28]

MSF originally began working in Mweso (a town in Masisi territory) as a sub-base from Kitchanga, but it became a project in 2008. MSF supported Mweso general hospital, as well as outreach in areas controlled by FDLR, FARDC and PARECO. In 2009, Mweso also became a

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[26] "*Rapport Annuel 2011 – Présenté à l'Assemblée générale juin 2012*." MSF internal archives, Paris, p.90.
[27] It remains unclear whether MSF was targeted.
[28] "Kitchanga reduction of activities report July 2013." MSF Holland, in author's possession.

stronghold of ex-CNDP FARDC. Project coordinators describe a period of increasing insecurity, banditry and unclear chains of command. Mobile activities were suspended, and it became more difficult to leave FARDC controlled areas.[29] In 2010, fighting intensified between the APCLS/FDLR alliance and the FARDC. In 2012, Kasongo, the leader of a Nyatura militia, became a key player. By 2015, the project was treating almost 200,000 patients a year, including 42,000 malaria cases alone.[30] Since 2015, MSF has faced kidnappings near Mweso and intermittent suspensions of its work.

Pinga is a small town on the border of Masisi and Walikale territories. The town is divided between Nyanga, Hunde and Hutu communities. Pinga was originally a mobile clinic destination. However, in 2010 MSF established a project there as part of an effort to work outside ex-CNDP areas. MSF supported a clinic and the hospital, and ran mobile clinics in the area. Pinga was a site of frequent violence, as control of the town changed between different armed groups. Each time, MSF tried to negotiate with everyone in order to continue working and travelling to reach the vulnerable and displaced. Between 2011 and 2012, the town was controlled by an alliance between two armed groups, the FDLR and APCLS. Across the nearby frontline was the national army, as well as an opposing armed group, Nduma Defense of Congo (NDC) – a *Mai-Mai* of predominantly Nyanga membership led by Sheka. During this period, MSF's 'mobile clinics' would cross the front-lines in order to provide basic health-care for displaced people in these areas. During 2012 and the first half of 2013, MSF assisted 1,790 deliveries, treated 1290 children for malnutrition and provided over 100,000 outpatient consultations.[31]

By 2013, however, violence had escalated, as Pinga changed hands between the national army, the NDC, and an alliance between APCLS and the FDLR. After several shifts in power, NDC strengthened control over the town. MSF continued to work in Pinga. But, once NDC had seized control, much of the Hunde population, including MSF staff, fled in fear. Negotiating access from NDC-controlled Pinga to nearby APCLS/FDLR zones became difficult. In the

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[29] "*Sitrep* Feb 2009 Week 8-9 Head of Mission." MSF Holland, in author's possession.
[30] MSF Press Release. 2016. "MSF Forced to close major humanitarian project in Mweso following abduction of staff." 20 January. https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/what-we-do/news-stories/news/drc-msf-forced-close-major-humanitarian-project-mweso-following [Accessed April 2020].
[31] MSF Press Release. 2013. "MSF suspends medical activities in Pinga." 9 August. https://www.msf.org.uk/article/democratic-republic-congo-msf-suspends-medical-activities-pinga-after-threats-staff [Accessed April 2020].

end, MSF received an anonymous letter accusing them of a "violation of principles" for only working in Cheka's "fief," and withdrew.[32]

MSF Belgium: Masisi

Finally, the thesis draws from MSF Belgium's project in Masisi, 60km from Goma. MSF has been offering primary and secondary healthcare in Masisi since 2007, when some of the heaviest fighting took place between the CNDP and PARECO/FARDC. During this period, Masisi was under control of the "loyalist" alliance (PARECO/FDLR/national army). Several times, the CNDP attacked nearby Katale in an attempt to take the town. MSF remained working, treating combatants from all sides of the conflict and negotiating access to continue transporting patients and running mobile clinics. Today, MSF continues to support the Masisi general hospital and health centre, as well as a centre in nearby Nyabiondo, and it conducts mobile clinics to provide assistance to populations in rural areas. The hospital is impressive in its scale, with services ranging from surgery, paediatrics, maternity, neonatology, mental healthcare and cholera treatment. The town remains encircled by a complex array of armed groups: the APCLS factions are based nearby in Nyabiondo, the NDC is also operating in the zone, and the FDLR remains present, as well as Hutu Mai-Mai groups such as Nyatura which are linked to local elites.

ENTANGLED LANDSCAPES

Who is MSF negotiating with?

In order to operate, MSF needs to negotiate terms of access with a range of armed actors and local authorities. In other words, MSF must build up and maintain an extensive local network in order to communicate with, and receive the necessary security reassurances from, the relevant powerholders in control of the zones where the organisation works and travels. Communication and negotiation is constant, focusing on the terms of the organisation's work and presence, the sharing of security information, and regular updates about movements of the organisation in a particular zone. In short, being well connected is an essential part of MSF's everyday practice. One head of mission told me, the "number one thing on the job description is networking. My job is to enable the doctors to do theirs."

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[32] "*Violation des principles humanitaires par MSF Hollande*." Letter received 6 August 2013. MSF Holland, in author's possession.

But who exactly are humanitarians negotiating with? The political landscape is fragmented. MSF joins a shifting ecosystem of actors and alliances, in which the state is one entity among many. Governance is a process of negotiation between local state authorities, civil society organisations, customary authorities, ethnic associations, churches, armed groups, businessmen, the national army and NGOs. In what follows, I briefly describe the character list of actors with whom MSF interacts regularly in order to function.

MSF negotiates with armed groups and the Congolese army. Armed groups splinter and change, their areas of control shift, and individual commanders rotate between different zones. Counter-intuitive alliances form and then dissolve between supposedly warring factions. The distinction between "state" and "non-state" is also somewhat artificial, because armed groups are embedded in social and political networks which encompass both state and non-state actors (Verweijen 2016). Paradoxically, national and provincial government figures maintain links with armed groups as a form of political leverage; army commanders derive strength from such collaboration (Verweijen and Wakenge 2015; Verweijen 2016:50). Individuals have been rotating backwards and forwards between the national army and rebel groups for the last twenty years (Eriksson Baaz and Verweijen 2013). In practice, then, 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).

Who are these "local authorities"? The state is not absent: it remains the central organising principle of political life (Verweijen 2016). In some respects, it is omnipresent, remade in the everyday through interactions between local state agents and citizens (Perazzone 2019). Each province is subdivided into territories and sectors. The highest administrative authority at the territory level is the territorial administrator. Within a territory, each sector is governed by a sector chief (*Chef de Secteur*). Rural areas have a parallel governance structure of both state and customary political leaderships. The relationships between these different authorities vary, but customary chiefs continue to exercise authority in a wide range of domains, and competition to occupy the position of chief is intense and chronic (Hoffman et al., 2020). Within each sector are several '*groupements'*, governed by a *Chef de Groupement* who is also a customary leader and can deal with both legal and customary matters at the *groupement* level. Within each *groupement,* there are villages, each of which has a *Chef de Village* who is elected by the village to serve as the

representative of the state for the village for several years. *Agence Nationale de Renseignements* (ANR) secret service agents are found throughout North Kivu.

MSF works within the government health structure. At a national level, MSF negotiates a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Health. At a provincial level, MSF negotiates more specific Memoranda of Understanding with the *Division Provincial de la Santé* (DPS) about specific projects. Each province is divided into health zones (units of around 150,000 inhabitants) with health centres (*centres de santé*) and general hospitals (*Hôpitaux Généralsde Référence*). At a zone level, MSF negotiates the terms of its work with the *Médecin Chef de Zone* who runs healthcare, and with *Infirmiers Titulaires* who run individual health centres. *Infirmiers Titulaires* are often well connected and can act as intermediaries, as well as important sources of information about security dynamics in their area. MSF also works closely with, and sometimes employs, community health workers (*rélais communitaires*) who help with health promotion.

What about the rest of the aid sphere? MSF has an ambivalent relationship with the array of other NGOs and UN agencies based in North Kivu. The UN Office for Humanitarian Coordination (UNOCHA) is no longer directly "operational", but plays a coordination role in the "cluster" system made up of implementing agencies. UNOCHA manages the UN's DRC Humanitarian Fund, which has been allocated more than $1 billion since it was established in 2006.[33] MONUSCO remains a dominant presence - the UN's longest standing multidimensional peacekeeping operation. In 2010, the mission's mandate shifted to focus on "stabilisation" as well as "civilian protection." The mission became "integrated": diplomatic, defence and aid spheres merged to help "stabilise" the state. MONUSCO supports the Congolese army in military operations against armed groups. Recently, the mission has withdrawn from rural areas, instead pursuing a "protection through projection" initiative based on flexibility to respond from Goma.[34] The UN mission endeavours to facilitate humanitarian access through logistical support and by "securing areas" where NGOs can work. However, humanitarian agencies have highlighted the risks of being associated with the politically aligned mission when trying to engage with armed groups (Metcalfe et al*.,* 2011).

[33] UNOCHA in the DRC: https://www.unocha.org/democratic-republic-congo-drc/about-drc-hf [Accessed April 2020].
[34] Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. 2 October 2017. S/2017/824.

There has been much criticism as to how this international aid system influences existing structures of power in the DRC. Since the peace deal in 2003, Northern donor policies have pursued a liberal peacebuilding agenda - economic liberalisation, democratisation and disarmament programmes. As Zoe Marriage (2011; 2010) has pointed out, this seems only to have strengthened the Congolese executive and reinforced existing power hierarchies in the political economy, whilst further excluding populations from decision-making processes and exacerbating processes that fuel insecurity. Processes of economic liberalisation, presidential elections, and an extensive UN peacekeeping mission seem to have enabled authoritarianism by extending presidential power, even when their stated aims include the promotion of democracy (Marriage 2018; von Billerbeck and Tansey 2019).

MSF has distanced itself from the UN, MONUSCO and the "international community" in the DRC: it is privately funded and is not part of the cluster system. Whilst MSF often collaborates with the ICRC, it considers distance from the broader "international community" as central to its ability to negotiate access with all parties.[35] In North Kivu, different MSF teams had reported being confused with MONUC,[36] and in nearby Ituri in 2005, MSF Switzerland even painted their vehicles fuchsia in an effort to distinguish the organisation from peacekeepers (Abu-Sada 2012:10). By 2006, an intersectional approach aimed to reinforce MSF's independence from the UN structure.[37] MSF discourages employees from being seen to interact socially with MONUSCO employees, even after work, in order maintain MSF's image as "independent from the larger Western or international intervention."[38] MONUSCO has become just another military actor in a broader web with which MSF maintains contact, whilst insisting on autonomy.

MSF interacts with an array of heterogeneous "civil society" associations. There are formalised "civil society" organisations, as well as *Jeunessee* youth associations, associated with specific communities or comprising inter-communal alliances at a territory level. *Jeunnesse* associations help people find employment, organise community labour for local projects, and help represent local groups within the formalised political structure. Ethnic associations, which were formed

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35 "Strategic Plan OCA 2011-2014." MSF Holland, in author's possession, p25.
36 "*Rapport annuel des activites medicales 2004. MSFF. Nord Kivu. RDC.*" 2004. MSF internal archives, Paris. "*Compte Tenu RDC Juin.*" 2007. MSF internal archives, Paris. "*Incident Secu Braquage de 2 Voitures MSF. 17 Janvier.*" 2009. MSF internal archives, Paris.
37 "*Minutes Reunion HOM MSF RDC 31 Aout.*" 2006. MSF internal archives, Paris.
38 "Strategic Plan OCA 2011-2014." MSF Holland, in author's possession, p25.

during the colonial period when political parties were banned, are part of this web: they often emphasise the right of "*autochthons"* in employment and development (Hoffman 2019; Gobbers 2016). MSF also maintains a network amongst a range of churches, who are often important intermediaries for local armed actors. Traders and transporters of commercial goods are useful contacts - they "know a lot about the roads and have the relevant contacts," one MSF employee explained.

Of course, the relationships between all these actors are complex and depend on the particular locality, time period, and the individuals involved. Armed groups often play an important role in protection and regulation at a local level (Raeymaekers 2010) and exert influence over the practices of local government authorities (Verweijen 2016:44). Their connections with customary structures vary from opposition to close collaboration (Vlassenroot, Mudinga and Hoffman 2016), and they have connections with local churches, businesses, and NGOs (Verweijen 2016:48). State employees in the health sector have varied relationships with armed networks - from passive to tacit tolerance, to direct family connections. Ultimately, the ecosystem is constantly evolving. In the words of one head of mission assistant, things are "*toujours changeant, jamais changé*" (always changing, never different) – MSF employees must negotiate in a shifting assemblage of actors and endeavour to make use of shared interests, whilst avoiding actions that might be perceived to tilt the balance of power in favour of one party. A former project coordinator explained: "You have to constantly follow how alliances are changing, and what that means for MSF."

Congolese employees described a process of "*recyclage*" – this referring to the idea that within this web, individuals "recycle" over time, changing group affiliation or geographical location, but continuing to negotiate in the same structure. Congolese employees pointed out how this recycling also happens on the "humanitarian side": the same individuals move between different agencies, they leave and return to North Kivu on different "missions" to find a shifting web of actors, some of whom they already know. Lillian, for instance, described meeting Janvier of the APCLS for the first time in 2007: "When I returned to North Kivu, I called people up to let them know I'm back." Relationships within this web are individualised between people who represent organisations. In the handover document for MSF head of missions, it is explained:

"Cannot emphasise the importance of relationships enough…in the DRC, relationships are generally based on persons and NOT institutions."[39]

In this context where people have such diverse trajectories and histories, labels such as civilian/military, state/non-state, but also "internal" and "external" to MSF become blurred: MSF is inherently entangled within the political landscape. Congolese MSF staff have their own diverse histories in the zone, as well as ongoing associations and networks. Some have been politicians and civil society activities. Other humanitarians have histories in rebel groups, and some rebels have histories as humanitarians. Indeed, both the leader of the CNDP and the head of their Social Affairs Commission worked for foreign NGOs. In a zone where analysis and networking with diverse armed actors is a resource, former rebels have the necessary *savoir faire* to help NGOs manage security. Meanwhile, educated individuals in urban centres with personal rural networks are ideal candidates for both the political wings of armed groups, and also for international NGOs (Buscher 2016). In sum, negotiation takes place not between "MSF" and "external actors", but also amongst MSF staff who are embedded in and inseparable from historical contests and ongoing power struggles.

Negotiating what? Everything is negotiable

So, what is MSF negotiating exactly? What does "negotiating access" really mean and how does it translate to everyday humanitarian work? "Everything is negotiable in North Kivu," one Congolese employee summarised. Rather than just negotiating physical entry to an area, MSF teams have to continually negotiate *the terms of their work* in this ecosystem: this is what maintaining "access" depends on. The term "negotiations for access" distorts the reality of negotiations between humanitarian organisations and armed groups. As a Logistician with experience in North Kivu summarised: "Negotiating access is not on/off, a binary, whereby armed groups are gate-keepers who say yes or no. Access is not black and white, but a spectrum of grey." It is not the case that organisations are either permitted to operate in a territory along pre-planned lines, or have access blocked (Glaser 2005). Instead, the question is often not whether humanitarians can operate, but rather *under what conditions* humanitarians can work, or are prepared to work (Magone et al., 2011), these being continually renegotiated throughout an organisation's presence.

[39] "Head of mission handover 2012." MSF Holland, in author's possession.

The "spectrum of grey" concerns the myriad of decisions MSF teams have to make about the minutiae of the intervention in practice. How does this fit with the humanitarian principles? After all, MSF teams are supposed to conduct their work neutrally, impartially and independently. In reality, however, these principles are not instructions, but require a process of interpretation. Compromise is inevitable, and fieldworkers must decide what compromises are acceptable in order to remain working (Magone et al., 2011). Pre-designed policies for intervention are renegotiated in practice. Through negotiating the terms of MSF's everyday practices with local actors, the extent of acceptable compromise and the meanings of principles in practice are also re-negotiated. Or in the analogy of one Logistician in North Kivu, "we come with our white MSF flag, but it gets dirty."

What does some of this dirt look like on the ground? To begin, MSF continually negotiates what (and how much) it will do: how much responsibility the organisation will take on in health structures, how its teams will work with existing ministry of health staff, who MSF will pay, and how much. Given widespread needs, they also negotiate issues such as what services will MSF take on? In which areas, with which populations? As one former head of mission told me, if MSF was to work on the basis of health indicators alone, it would work everywhere in the DRC. MSF also faces a tension between the principles of impartiality and neutrality: if MSF followed people's needs irrespective of who they are, then the organisation might end up predominantly or exclusively in areas controlled by one armed or political group, within a specific community – impacting upon its perceived neutrality. Therefore, over the last ten years, MSF has tried visibly to demonstrate its neutrality by "balancing" its presence by working in areas controlled by different armed groups, in a range of communities. Yet, with the context constantly shifting, this balancing act often resembles treading water, and requires repeated re-evaluation and adjustment.

Next, who will MSF recruit at a local level? Recruitment has become central to maintaining humanitarian access in eastern DRC. After accusations of partiality in recruitment procedures, several agencies received threats from local actors in the region, and were forced to withdraw (Pottier 2006). MSF brings resources and investment to North Kivu, becoming entangled in local power contests. Access to these resources can be an explosive subject: hiring is a sensitive process, and the cause of many security incidents or threats against the organisation. There have been repeated accusations of MSF favouring one "side" or "community" over another, as well as objections to the "importation" of staff from other provinces rather than hiring locally. In

effect, MSF's recruitment becomes part of ongoing conflicts about belonging and access to resources. In order to maintain access and remain working, MSF needs to balance its presence in different areas, but also balance its teams internally. "Hiring for acceptance" has become an important part of security guidelines and maintaining access.

Finally, negotiation focuses on the minutiae of everyday practices. In effect, MSF teams try (as far as possible) to negotiate the independence of their work. Teams establish some basic rules: armed actors cannot bring guns into health facilities; MSF conducts medical triage and treats whoever needs assistance. However, these basic rules are continually renegotiated in practice. For instance, during one mobile clinic visit to a village in Masisi, the MSF team was preparing to leave the health centre when a man arrived and asked to be treated. After the team explained MSF's triage process and informed the man that they were leaving, he became angry. The man returned with a senior figure of an armed group – it soon became clear that this man was a combatant. The soldiers became angry and accused MSF of discrimination. The senior commander began to pressure the Congolese team – asking them to treat the man, and adding that he would also like them to help him obtain a permanent position in MSF for one of his family members. The soldiers sat in the health centre with their guns. The Congolese team were in a difficult position; one of them even knew the commander from his childhood. As the team reported, "the triage system and MSF charter have been explained MANY times", but it has to be renegotiated in the everyday.[40] When MSF teams perceive that they are unable to work according to these minimum requirements, the organisation may suspend activities in order to put pressure on the local authorities. In extreme cases, MSF withdraws completely, the terms of presence being beyond the scope of compromise.

MSF also negotiates its movements: the ability to cross frontlines and roadblocks in order to operate mobile clinics and pick up serious cases. These are the archetypical negotiations for access. Teams negotiate the transfer of wounded combatants or civilians from "the other side" of a conflict to a zone controlled by their adversary. At different project sites, there were processes of adaption between MSF and armed actors. In one area, on the days MSF had mobile clinics, it was agreed that warring armed factions would not patrol, otherwise an "exchange of

[40] "Security Incident Report. 17 June." 2010. MSF Holland, in author's possession.

fire" was guaranteed.[41] Elsewhere, armed actors warned MSF in advance about attacks in zones where they worked.[42]



Figure 6: "*Nos Principles/Mipango Yetu.*" Leaflet for armed groups in North Kivu. Source: MSF Belgium.

Just as teams try to negotiate the equality of all their patients as valuable human lives, they must renegotiate the humanitarian status of MSF employees, no matter the perceived identity or political background of that individual. Recruitment is sensitive precisely because *who* can represent MSF in practice is contested. As the mobile clinic story illustrates, Congolese humanitarians face threats, demands and pressure from local actors, as MSF tries to exempt them from local contests of power. MSF must fight for its own political vision, the equality of all life, in opposition to alternative ideas about the categorisation of different people. The organisation holds regular "awareness raising" sessions with armed groups – re-explaining the "MSF charter, triage system", how they treat all sides of a conflict, the importance of military

[41] "Pinga project sitrep weeks 6-7." 2011. MSF Holland, in author's possession.
[42] "*Rencontre 31 mars 2007 avec le general Laurent Nkunda.*" MSF internal archives, Paris. "*Compte Tenu RDC Juin 07.*" 2007. MSF internal archives, Paris.

figures not coming to hospitals with arms, and the "independence of MSF hiring."[43] As one European MSF Logistician put it, MSF is entangled with local conflict dynamics, but tries to "change the rules of interaction" in its own facilities. These *sensibilisation* sessions are an attempt to "isolate part of the social structure and to submit it to control" (Bierschenk 1988:154).

Micro-politics of intervention

What interests do actors have in MSF's presence, and what recurring challenges do MSF teams face in maintaining access? These negotiations are influenced by the differing interests of the range of actors involved, and how MSF fits into (or disrupts) existing local power dynamics. As a former *Médecin Chef de Zone* from Masisi territory told me, "MSF's projects need to benefit everyone, or at least be understood to." MSF projects become a site where actors jostle for control over symbolic, economic and political resources. Rather than being immune from politics or surrounding violence, MSF's healthcare delivery is embedded in the political calculations of different actors – often, MSF becomes entangled and embroiled in the very conflicts from which it seeks immunity (Benton and Atshan 2016). The challenge, then, becomes ensuring MSF's activities are perceived as benefitting a multitude of actors rather than one side over another. Ultimately, to be able to work with everyone, MSF must be seen as close to no one.

What interests do different actors have in MSF's presence? Healthcare is an easy sell - something tangible. MSF has been working for a long time in North Kivu, and treats a broad range of people. The organisation's ambulance services and mobile clinics are also a stark reminder of the organisation's relevance. One Congolese mobile clinic nurse summarised: "We go to places where people are isolated, but MSF has come, our impact is visible." The organisation also conducts "mass casualty management" – a visible illustration of "being there" in desperate times. For instance, in Rubaya, the largest coltan mine in Masisi Territory, a night raid by an armed group in 2018 killed more than twenty people and wounded many more. MSF sent a medical team and ambulances to collect critical patients. It was the first and only medical NGO present after the attack. The Logistician who was part of the team explained: "The outcomes in

[43] This is frequently mentioned in *sitreps* and security guidelines: "*1201 Sitrep mois de Janvier*." 2012. MSF internal archives, Paris. "*1202 Sitrep NK Fevrier*." 2012. MSF internal archives, Paris. "MSF OCB Security Policy." 2018. MSF Belgium, in author's possession. "Local Security Plan Mweso." 2016. MSF Holland, in author's possession. "*Rapport de visite Rutshuru 11-12 Decembre*." 2008. MSF internal archives, Paris.

terms of acceptance are huge in events like these: people don't forget that you showed up as soon as you could, with the little you had."

Armed combatants also benefit from MSF's surgery and ambulance service. Claude, an experienced driver who has worked in North Kivu for a decade, explained: "Armed groups here trust MSF, they understand neutrality because we treat everyone, even their soldiers." Most people have a mother, sister, or relative who has been treated by MSF. One head of mission described part of her job as understanding family links and taking note of who was being treated in the hospital. At checkpoints, if armed commanders were being difficult, the head of mission would ask how their family member was doing in hospital, "just to remind them of our relevance." Ambulance trips to pick up armed combatants in rural locations can be days long – MSF teams, usually a driver and a senior foreign worker, sleep in rural health centres *en route*. On one such journey, a French Logistician, Jerome, described driving with Claude to a specific stretch of road where armed men emerged from the forest carrying an injured combatant on a *tipoye*. Jerome described his interaction with the combatants, and the bargaining power such referrals gave MSF: "I asked them if they knew who we were, what we did. They were thankful, so I told them not to thank me, but never to touch MSF, or we would never do this again." During the height of the CNDP conflict in 2009 at one project, as many as 80% of mobile clinic surgery patients were armed combatants.[44]

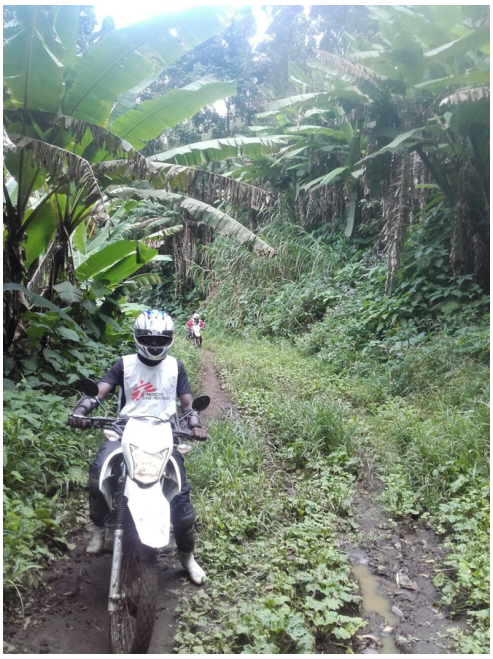


Figure 7: Motorbike convoy in North Kivu. Source: Private Photograph 2018

The delivery of MSF's medical services can also become part of armed groups' politics of legitimacy, both internationally and domestically. Domestically, MSF's healthcare is part of "hearts and minds" campaigns (Crombé and Hofman 2011), as armed groups establish governance structures as part of their political struggle with the central government (Mampilly 2012). MSF employees told me that they returned to the threat of MSF's withdrawal during difficult negotiations with armed groups. As one former head of mission told me:

[44] "*Fiche Pays RDC*." 2010. MSF internal archives, Paris.

> With armed groups, it's easy to negotiate: you have something beneficial for them, something that they can say to their populations: "Look, this is what we brought you," and they can't risk their popularity by being responsible for MSF leaving.

In fact, during my time in North Kivu, when MSF employees were targets of kidnapping or robbery by unknown "bandits", pressure was put on nearby armed groups to do something to resolve the situation by inhabitants who were fearful that MSF would withdraw. MSF itself also gets in contact with armed groups for help when such incidents take place: the groups have a responsibility for security in the zone.

Internationally, facilitating the access of an internationally renowned humanitarian organisation can be a way for armed groups to try to promote a positive image to the "international community" (Coggins 2015). To take one example, MSF fieldworkers described how their projects became part of the CNDP's political propaganda. The CNDP established a governance structure in its zone of control in North Kivu (Scott 2009), and its political discourse focused on the rights of the population and the failings of the central government.[45] One project coordinator from the time remembered meeting Nkunda, the leader of the CNDP, in 2007: "He wanted to improve his image vis-à-vis the international community, to present himself as a politician not just a warlord." CNDP soldiers had a specific code of conduct to guide their relationships with NGOs.[46] On a domestic level, MSF teams noted that Nkunda was trying to attract fleeing populations out of camps and back to CNDP areas of control in order to illustrate the groups' legitimacy as political leaders, and also to maintain a tax base. Having MSF installed nearby was a means of encouraging populations to return – a way to install a sense of normalcy.[47] In sum, one former MSF head of mission in North Kivu ended an interview with: "The term I use to describe relations between MSF and armed groups is opportunistic relationships. When there is a shared, equal interest on both sides, it works."

Yet, just as MSF's work may be perceived as in the interest of certain actors, at other times MSF may be targeted precisely because healthcare delivery works against the interests of a particular group, or in favour of their opponents. Indeed, violence or threats against MSF staff can be an

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45 "*Communique de Presse du CNDP. 14 Sept.*" 2006. MSF internal archives, Paris.
46 "*Rencontre 31 mars 2007 avec le general Laurent Nkunda.*" 2007. MSF internal archives, Paris.
47 "*Exploration Nyanzale 12/11-16/11 2008.*" 2008. MSF internal archives, Paris.

attempt to encourage the organisation to leave. Violence against the delivery of healthcare is "crucial and constitutive in the conduct of everyday violence" (Benton and Atshan 2016:154). MSF clinics have the potential to facilitate violence: a way of targeting specific people, or of depriving certain populations and authorities in control of healthcare services (Crombé and Kruper 2019). For example, in Kitchanga in 2013, FARDC soldiers shot at MSF cars heading for the hospital and which were carrying wounded APCLS – they wanted to prevent MSF from saving the lives of their adversaries.[48] In Rutshuru, the MSF-supported hospital became a site of violence as the town changed hands over time. When the CNDP took control in 2008, the group tried to intervene in the hospital – demanding a list of patients in order to identify wounded soldiers from the opposition, and even entering the hospital and demanding to see a wounded FARDC soldier.[49] When M23 took control of Rutshuru, they arrested patients against the wishes of medical staff.[50]

Finally, MSF injects money, resources and employment into the areas where it works. For the Ministry of Health, MSF helps support their structures and pays certain staff. Whilst driving through a town in North Kivu with the driver Claude, I commented on the fact that he seemed to know almost everyone we passed on the street. He laughed, and explained that most of them were MSF employees: "It is an MSF town here, everyone has a brother in MSF." In places like this one, MSF has become intertwined in the local political economy: people benefit through direct employment of someone in their family, or through the knock-on effect of the economy. In this context, even rumours of MSF's planned departure after so many years lead to tension.

Ultimately, there are a range of political interests in MSF's presence in this ecosystem of governance actors. The question for MSF then becomes: when do shared interests become manipulation? When does MSF's presence help support a system of violence that does harm? During an MSF security training I attended in Europe, one of MSF's members summarised it as follows:

> Don't sit there thinking: is our project neutral? Ask different questions. For impartiality: who do we exclude and are we comfortable with it? For neutrality:

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[48] "Security Incident March Kitchanga." 2013. MSF Holland, in author's possession.
[49] "*Nov 08 sitrep sem43-44 Rutshuru."* 2008. MSF internal archives, Paris.
[50] "*Arrestation de 2 patients par le M23 contre avis medical. 8/4/2013*." 2013. MSF internal archives, Paris.

whose interest do we serve and are we comfortable with it? For independence: which alliance do we rely upon? Are we comfortable with it?

CONCLUSION

The delivery of humanitarian aid during a conflict is meant to be an apolitical act in a highly politicised environment – an act of humanity in the midst of crisis. In reality, this humanitarian act is a political one, representing a political vision about the value of human life. It has political effects, and becomes inextricably entangled in the local political landscape and inseparable from ongoing contests of power. What began as an initiative of idealistic French doctors has become an internationally renowned movement of people working all around the world under the banner of *Médecins Sans Frontières*. Their aim is simultaneously minimal and expansive: to nurture life on the basis of universal humanity. In order to pursue this goal in North Kivu, MSF has become yet another "non-state" actor in a messy web of relationships that determine how power is negotiated at a local level. Within this shifting web, local actors have vested interests in MSF's delivery of healthcare in their zones of control. Yet, sometimes MSF may be targeted precisely because healthcare delivery works against the interests of different actors, as clinics themselves become a site of political struggle.

This is the scene within which this thesis is set. In the next chapter, I delve into the key concepts that help make sense of this scene. In the empirical chapters that follow, I shift the focus from an institutional to an individual level: exploring the experience of individuals who are, at that moment, representatives of institutions. This is important, because shared interests at an institutional level are the essential starting point for humanitarian access, but do not necessarily capture the everyday complexities of how it is maintained over time. As I was told repeatedly in North Kivu, shared interests are not the end of the story, but the beginning – the essential starting point and basis for MSF's presence. Interest matrices do not easily convert to a context where MSF is negotiating with hundreds of different groups. People are not always rational actors, nor are organisations made up of homogenous individuals who think, act and react in the same way. Even if shared interests have been found with the leadership of an armed group, interactions with *individuals* on the ground depend on personalities, relationships, perceptions and murkier personal interests. MSF's work takes place in a messy world of human subjectivity: individuals, their histories, backgrounds, identities and relationships matter too. One senior manager of MSF concluded that in North Kivu: "People don't just see the MSF logo, but the people that make up that organisation." In this thesis, then, I take a look at those people – the

ones negotiating and brokering so that MSF can remain present in this complex setting, the majority of whom are Congolese staff.

4. THEORY

INTRODUCTION

Humanitarians in North Kivu often used the same analogy to describe their interactions with armed and political authorities: that of a performance. On the one side, someone plays the role of humanitarian - they have the logo on their gilet, the rehearsed humanitarian discourse, the organisation's reputation to draw upon, as well as shared interests and their own identities and personality. This humanitarian must act appropriately in order to prevent any damage to their organisation's image or ability to continue working. On the other side is someone representing a political authority or armed group – someone with their own history and networks, interests and perceptions of the individual in front of them, as well as awareness of the impression that they hope to convey during the meeting. During this interaction, both individuals are representatives of their organisations, its interests and goals. But they also have their own complex personal interests and perceptions. Sometimes, the individuals already know one another from the past. At other times, they have never met before. The relationship between these two individuals has the potential to shape the way their organisations work in a particular locality.

The MSF head of mission, Lillian, described these kinds of interactions as "theatre," with "rehearsed lines, plays and attitudes. It is a sort of ritual. They have their role, and you have yours." This performance needs to be thought through in advance. Humanitarians must consider the worst and best-case scenarios, the interests involved, what must be considered essential and what can be renegotiated. As Lillian put it, "everyone has their own technique" based on their personality, their own analysis, and the way they may be perceived. There are no set recipes for success. In other words, people perform their roles as humanitarians in different ways, depending on who they are. An experienced Congolese MSF employee in North Kivu told me that negotiating access required a constant reflection on "who does what" – who can be the face or voice of MSF at a given moment, taking into account how that person might be perceived.

This chapter outlines the theoretical underpinnings of the thesis. First, I describe the broader power structure within which humanitarian organisations become entangled, employing the concept of negotiated governance. Second, I explain the key concepts of brokerage and translation, describing how my research is influenced by the interactionalist approach in which

practice is understood as a negotiated social process rather than an implementation of pre-planned policy. Third, drawing from Goffman's (1956) dramaturgical analogy of social interaction, I introduce the idea of humanitarian encounters and practices as performative – a performance of humanitarian identity and principles which is framed as essential to security and access. Finally, I draw from a broader debate on difference and equality, as well as critical race theory, to think about who can perform neutrality. I explore the central consideration of the thesis in more detail: how identity operates in everyday processes of negotiating access, with ambiguity as its key characteristic.

"THERE BE REBELS": UNDERSTANDING NEGOTIATED GOVERNANCE

According to the British Foreign Office travel advice, rural North Kivu remains a red "no-go zone": the British government advises against "all but essential travel" in areas outside Goma. Goma itself is coloured yellow – a lesser risk – given that it is controlled by the Congolese government with the presence of a peacekeeping mission. But permission to leave Goma involved an extensive risk assessment for the University of Oxford. Questions were raised about my safety and insurance, and in the end, I committed to only travelling with the "logistical support" of MSF, should I ever leave the relative safety of Goma and venture into the red zone.

In his new book, *No Go World,* Reuben Andersson describes how a map of danger governs Western imaginations and its ambivalent interventions in the "blanked-out spaces" on our maps. As he describes it, "the beasts are back" (Andersson 2019:3): the "dragons" that were drawn onto the blank spaces of Medieval maps denoting darkness and remoteness have now returned in the West's global geography of fear. DRC is one of these "danger zones" and still portrayed as a "heart of darkness," bound up in colonial imaginaries of remoteness and otherness, where exceptional savagery takes place (Dunn 2003:5; Mertens 2019). DRC is portrayed as a classic "failed state": mineral rich, but violent, plagued by an array of different rebel groups, and more recently, an Ebola epidemic. In Goma, mugs for sale at expat hang-outs are decorated with a cartoon depiction of the city, drawn by a foreign aid worker, who plays on this perception of North Kivu as a remote place of danger: the hills in the distance are labelled "There be rebels."



Figure 8: "Expat's-eye view" of Goma 2014 by Anne-France White. Source: Living in Goma.

How do I frame and theorise the scene where interactions between humanitarians and other actors take place? How do these encounters fit into broader processes of governance and relations of power? In *No Go World,* Andersson describes the difficulties of theorising (and studying) everyday intervention in regions of conflict. As he argues, it is not just Western governments that imagine such spaces as blank, chaotic, out of the reach: too often, academics also describe "failed states" or "ungoverned" territories (Rotberg 2004; Rabasa et al., 2007). "Non-state armed groups" are characterised as "spoilers", "international security threats" (Thompson 2014:8), or "war-lords" who prevent humanitarians from working (Glaser 2005). This depiction is underpinned by a Hobbesian assumption that only the state produces social order and prevents chaos. It portrays such spaces as inhabited by barbaric perpetrators (Verweijen 2015). These ("non-state") armed actors are framed as an obstacle which interveners must overcome.

This portrayal is part of a broader trend of "dangerization", of seeing the world "through categories of menace" (Lianos and Douglas 2000:110-111). In reality, these regions are not blank, nor are they ungoverned. Rather than falling into this conceptual trap, I wanted to

theorise the landscape where humanitarians are working, as well as their place within it, somewhat differently. I also wanted to move beyond the description of bunkerisation, socially and spatially distinct bubbles of Aidland and Peaceland (Apthorpe 2005; Autesserre 2014), enclaves where foreign interveners are isolated from the people that they are supposed to help (Duffield 2012; Smirl 2015). Whilst Andersson (2019) examines the politics of distancing and remoteness, I focus on the inverse: a politics of presence. I start from the assumption that humanitarian intervention involves interaction, proximity to and entanglement with a range of different actors in so-called "danger zones." I explore a different empirical reality, the humanitarians who *do* work "out there" where power is negotiated in the everyday. Humanitarians become (and often already are) entangled in this messy web of relationships, a constellation which changes over time.

To think this through theoretically, I draw from the work on the creativity of governance, or public authority. As Paul Richards (1999) argues, war is not a destructive force that disrupts normal functioning society, provoking chaos (Kaplan 2000; Collier 2000). Instead, violence is embedded in social life (Davis 1992; Nordstrom 1997). War and peace are not essential opposing states, but are two social processes on a continuum that are made through social action, and can become part of everyday life (Richards 2005). With this as a starting point, academics have turned their attention to better understanding "governance without government" (Menkhaus 2006) – recognising the coexistence of overlapping, multiple authorities that exert social and political power (Raeymaekers et al., 2008:2; Lombard 2016; Lund 2006). Rather than depicting chaos, or a neo-Tillyan process of state-building in which warring groups fight for territorial conquest (Kingston and Spears 2004; Tull 2005),[51] this approach examines how power is actually exercised and experienced: modes of political organisation are always "hybrid." The aim of conflict is not always to win - conflict may instead hold many functions, becoming a system in itself (Keen 2008). Over time, political settlements form between a range of different actors, straddling state and non-state networks, with shifting levels of cooperation, collusion and cohabitation between supposedly competing factions (Verweijen 2016; Staniland 2012).

[51] This simply replaces the "faltering Weberian state model with that of a 'neo-Tillyan' approach to political order" (Meagher 2012:1044).

This is how I theorise the web within which humanitarians become entangled. Power is negotiated through messy social interactions between a range of different actors who become "entangled in relations of governance" (Lombard 2016:253). Governing authority is not solely concentrated in state institutions (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014). The state is one actor among many, governing through collaboration. States are not readily formed entities, but are assembled during everyday interactions that embed the state into society (Migdal 2001). In practice, power is exercised through alliances between actors which "partially stand in opposition and partially collaborate with the state" (Vlassenroot and Raeymaekers 2008:50). Governance is not a static "thing", but rather a *process of negotiation* between customary authorities, ethnic associations, social movements, churches, armed groups, businessmen, the national army *and* national and foreign NGOs (Hagmann and Péclard 2010). These negotiation arenas are not formalised spaces, but are embedded in informal social relations and interactions. What emerges is an ecosystem of different actors who participate in decision making processes regarding the management of public services, economic regulation and resources (Raeymaekers et al., 2008:8). Power is found in the interactions between these different actors (Tull 2005:432). The concept of brokerage has been revived as a means of understanding how governance is negotiated between multiple groups and networks (James 2011; Koster and Leynseele 2018; Themnér and Utas 2016; Stys et al., 2019).

This theoretical lens has been used to counter depictions of "failed states." Rather than describing "crisis", which assumes a departure from normalcy, authors explore the everyday practices, relationships and negotiations in these zones which *is* the new normal (Verweijen 2016; Carayannis and Lombard 2015). Detailed ethnographic work describes how power, economic regulation and public service delivery are negotiated in the everyday through forms of hybrid governance (Raeymaekers et al., 2008; De Herdt and Titeca 2016; 2019), "rebel governance" and governmentality (Mampilly 2012; Hoffman and Verweijen 2018), as well as what the "state" looks like on the ground – how it is "mediated" (Menkhaus 2006), or acts as an "ecosystem" that is remade through everyday interactions between bureaucrats and citizens (Perazzone 2019).

Despite the long-term presence of humanitarian organisations, their own position as part of this broader political landscape remains undertheorized. Too often, the binary between

"external" and "internal" to "Aidland" is upheld[52]: authors either explore the "lands" of foreign intervention, or how power is negotiated amongst "local governance actors." This reproduces an unhelpful compartmentalisation of identities, such as foreign/local and aid worker/beneficiary. Rather than distinct and bounded, Aidland and the local environment are inherently interlinked by the significant number of local employees who are "inextricably intertwined with local politics and exchange relations" (Rossi 2006:46), with diverse histories and networks at a local level. Even the concept of a "humanitarian arena", in which the realities of humanitarian action are seen as the outcome of messy social negotiation, seems to frame this arena as somehow distinct from broader processes of power negotiation – from the broader arena (Hilhorst and Jansen 2010). We need to understand intervention as enmeshed in broader relations of power (Harrison 2013).

Humanitarian organisations are embedded in this web, and become just another actor in this process: a source of governance, service provision and local employment. Humanitarian agencies become a form of authority that imposes regulations and distributes public goods. Over time, humanitarian organisations negotiate with a shifting constellation of actors in a particular locality – by doing so, they become part of an ongoing process of how governance is negotiated. Louisa Lombard (2016:46) describes this process as "conventionalisation", in which conflict actors and "international intervenors" have *adapted* to one another, creating "new relationships and entanglements" of governance. Armed actors and humanitarians develop shared languages and modes of working in the same area, becoming entangled in unexpected ways. If governance is a web of alliances and settlements, then it is through these everyday interactions that these actors create and reproduce the social structure. Humanitarian organisations are not exempt from this process. I examine the everyday practices of brokerage and translation of individuals working for humanitarian organisations who are central to creating and reproducing this social structure. Rather than solely focusing on the international interveners however, I shift the focus to also include locally hired humanitarians.

BROKERAGE AND TRANSLATION

I mobilise two concepts to make sense of the world I set out in the previous section: brokerage and translation. I shift the focus to people and their interactions, because they determine how abstract principles and predesigned intervention policies are renegotiated, translated and given

[52] For more on this critique of Aidland, see Harrison (2013).

meaning on the ground. The concepts of brokerage and translation are rooted in an interactionalist or "actor-oriented" approach from the Manchester school of British anthropology which explores "social interfaces" where face-to-face encounters occur between multiple social "life-worlds" (Long 2001). This approach explores negotiations at social interfaces as processes of bridging different "social and cognitive standpoints", conducted by individuals who represent different groups with differing interests (Long 2001:243). The interactionalist approach explores the social dynamics and negotiated settlements that form between different actors. It calls for inductive, studies that document the situated, social practice of actors – the way in which they negotiate their way through difficult environments – by describing their everyday encounters (Long 2001:92). Interactions between individuals are shaped by a blend of actors' motives and interests, but also by their interpretations of the given context (Long 2001:13).

This anthropological approach emerged as a reaction to the more "people-less" studies that viewed development as a mechanical process (Long 1990; Ferguson 1990). Scholars shifted their focus from development as a category of *analysis* (Escobar 1995) to development as a category of *practice*, revealing the everyday "practice of politics" (Li 2007) that exists beneath the "anti-politics machine" (Ferguson 1990). By probing this relationship between policy and practice, ethnographies of aid have opened the black box of practice to reveal the "microsocial processes of policy" (Mosse 2006:940). Crucially, interventions are "ongoing, socially constructed and negotiated processes" that are shaped and transformed by actors and their interactions, rather than a simple execution of pre-planned policies (Long 2001:72; Long and Long 1992:35). Such an approach redirects the focus onto the everyday practices and politics of aid: it is important to consider the "social life" of policies, which determines the meanings they obtain in practice (Hilhorst 2003:232).

An interactionalist approach illuminates how development involves a network of actors. In his ethnography of DfID's work in India, David Mosse explores not whether development works, but *how*. He describes the dialectical relationship between policy and practice: practices are "concealed rather than produced by policy" and are instead shaped by different actors and their relationships (Mosse 2005:16). Aid projects become a field of negotiation in which different actors are brought together, competing for "economic, political or even symbolic resources" provided by the project (Biershcenk 1988:146; Olivier de Sardan 1995:178). Interventions are a "set of evolving social practices and struggles" (Long 2001:33) – a negotiation of different

interests, interpretations and understandings within a set of cross-cultural interactions (Lewis and Mosse 2006). Ethnographic accounts have explored different projects' participants, their goals and vested interests, perceptions and values, detailing how project implementation is a constant process of negotiation, mediated and shaped by all the actors it brings together (Olivier de Sardan 1995). In this way, aid interventions become a "project of the *projects*" of all the different actors involved (Bierschenk 1988:146). Policy does not shape how development is done, but becomes a unifying narrative that preserves and validates the network of actors (Mosse 2005).

This approach has opened up the study of the layers of brokerage and translation in aid work. The focus has shifted to the individuals who broker relationships and negotiate meaning (Lewis and Mosse 2006:10). Intermediaries and brokers have been a topic of sustained anthropological interest from the early days of the Manchester school (Gluckman 1949). The defining feature of brokers is that they straddle and connect social worlds. Their position is inherently ambiguous: they negotiate competing pressures, demands, and expectations, and construct strategic identity positions (James 2011). As historians have shown, missionaries, colonial regimes and explorers have all depended on such individuals in order to network with political actors and translate the meanings of supposedly "universal" concepts and predesigned plans to the everyday realities of specific contexts (Kennedy 2013; Lawrance et al., 2006; Osborne 2003; Simpson 1975). Brokers face risks but also often gain personally from brokering in regions where multiple forms of political authority coexist (Boissevain 1974; Bierschenk et al., 2000; Koster and van Leynseele 2018). The concept has since been revived to explore the fragmented politics of postcolonial governance (Bierschenk et al., 2002) and state power (James 2011).

Several Africanist anthropologists have examined how brokerage is central to the structure of contemporary African societies. They explore the work of "development brokers": individuals who are situated in-between aid funders and recipients in neoliberal fragmented governance in Africa (Bierschenk et al., 2000). Development brokers are individuals who "drain off" external resources from development aid whilst acting as "local representatives" of "*the* people", expressing its "needs to the structures in charge of aid" (Bierschenk et al., 2000:4), much like colonial mediators, interpreters and chiefs who acted as the link between colonial authorities and "native" communities. Development brokers operate at an interface: equipped with the necessary "cultural and linguistic skills", they strategically position themselves and mediate between "development" and "peasant" languages (Olivier de Sardan 1995:165). These brokers

possess fluid, ambiguous positions: they become "identity entrepreneurs" who learn to "change roles" and "play on collective identities" (Bierschenk et al., 2002:28). The position thus requires a degree of "dramatic competence" (Bierschenk et al., 2000) and development brokers are seen as an important political actor in the context of international aid.

British anthropologists describe how aid workers do not just broker relationships between donors and beneficiaries, but also translate across divergent frameworks, conducting complex processes of meaning-making. Drawing on the work of Bruno Latour (1993; 2000), David Lewis and David Mosse (2006:13) describe this process as "translation", the "mutual enrolment and the interlocking of interests that produces project realities." Project implementation is a process of "generating and translating interests", tying in supporters and creating consensus between them (Lewis and Mosse 2006:13). Brokers dictate how development projects are actually implemented in practice by translating between a broad range of actors: these actors' interests, perspectives and worldviews become tied together. As David Mosse (2005:232) put it, initial program designs "have to be transformed in practice. They have to be translated into the different logic of the intentions, goals and ambitions of the many people and institutions they bring together." Brokers translate discourses, concepts and policies so that they gain shared meaning. If interventions are an ongoing process of assembling – the amalgamation of different actors whose interests align for provisional unity (Li 2007:265) – then brokers are the key "assemblers" (Koster and van Leynseele 2018:804).

Brokerage and translation are essential to everyday humanitarian work. Humanitarians negotiate with a broad network of actors in the context of a fragmented, shifting arena of contemporary armed conflict. Any initial plans for MSF projects are continually reshaped through negotiation with other actors and their interests. An interactionalist approach helps move beyond the "reification of macro-concepts" (Long 2001:6), such as neutrality, impartiality or independence, to explore how these principles gain meaning in practice. Fieldworkers construct their own interpretations of principles, depending on their interpretation of the context in front of them (Hilhorst and Schmiemann 2002), and the extent of acceptable compromise is negotiated through interactions with other actors. In Chapter Five, for example, MSF's Congolese health promoters describe how they have learnt to "speak humanitarianism" and translate it into "local meanings" in order to help "communicate MSF's message" to local actors. In short, through people and their interactions, principles are interpreted and translated to the specificities of a particular context.

I draw on brokerage and translation to think through everyday practices of negotiating access with armed groups. I describe the way diverse humanitarian teams work together in order to negotiate access as a form of "collective brokerage" (Bierschenk et al., 2000), a brokerage "club" (Bierschenk et al., 2002:29), in which different members of the team broker together, in symbiosis. The club is built on a model of complementarity: humanitarians in the team work together in an attempt to reduce the risks for everyone, and different members specialise in different tasks (Mongbo 2000). Members of the team are reliant on one another. As Chapter Five illustrates, foreign positions in MSF are partnered with a Congolese assistant, who translates meanings of principles and policies from a global level to make them relevant to a range of actors locally. Whilst members of the Congolese team have useful interpersonal networks, identity-based capital and situated *savoir faire* (Scott 1998), foreign staff are a fleeting presence on the political landscape, but are often able to wield power and construct themselves as politically detached with more ease. Their role, therefore, becomes protective.

As the rest of the thesis demonstrates, some people face more risk than others whilst brokering "in the field" – practices of collective brokerage try to balance those risks by composing diverse teams, in which some members protect others. Nationality is not the only identity in play in the brokerage club: mobility, race, language, ethnicity, gender, as well as a range of other personal, family and professional identities become potential instruments for negotiating access, and are used strategically by humanitarian teams. Collective brokerage, however, is not an egalitarian process: those with specifically local contacts and knowledge are essential at particular project sites, whilst those with supposedly "universal" knowledge remain at the top of the organisation's hierarchy.

In particular, I examine the role of locally hired humanitarians who shape interventions by bringing together different actors and negotiating between their interests and interpretations. For instance, in Chapter Five, I describe the work of Maxime – a Congolese humanitarian who built a network amongst armed groups, churches and customary authorities in order better to analyse the political landscape. Maxime helped his colleagues articulate MSF's aims and principles, translating MSF's work so that its benefit was clear to armed actors. Other Congolese employees draw from their own interpersonal networks. For example, in Chapter Five, a Congolese employee, Emmanuel, describes how he drew from his networks in armed groups to help MSF teams build contacts and glean information about the evolving context. These

processes are central to understanding security management in conflict: helping provide the provisional unity amongst a range of actors, or "acceptance" of a project, in a shifting political settlement.

In order to broker and translate, Congolese staff draw from *metis* knowledge - a local and situated knowledge about how to navigate a specific, constantly changing social environment, which is gained from personal experience (Scott 1998:313). Individuals know how to adapt quickly to unpredictable events, and how and when to apply rules of thumb to real life situations, including human interactions. Doctors, sailors and taxi drivers all have this knowledge – they do not mechanically follow rules, but can "read" a specific context. For instance, in Chapter Five, MSF drivers describe an "instinct" about how to "read the road," based on their personal experiences of negotiating roadblocks as truck drivers. Drivers draw on this *savoir faire* in order to help MSF convoys travel safely to deliver healthcare. *Metis* knowledge stands in contrast to *techne* knowledge – which is supposed to be "universal" knowledge that you can implant anywhere. In reality, *techne* is codified from experience: the two knowledges are interlinked and work together. For instance, when a passenger liner approaches a major port, the captain usually gives control of the vessel to a local pilot. Whereas navigation on the open sea is a more general skill, piloting at a particular harbour is a contextual skill, gained through practice (Scott 1998:317). According to the MSF model, foreign employees often have thematic rather than geographically contextual knowledge. Congolese staff (despite occupying technical roles) often help to guide their foreign colleagues using know-how gained from diverse personal experiences in North Kivu.

An interactionalist approach is not without its shortcomings. In some ways, it suggests an unhelpful compartmentalisation of identities, reifying the very distinctions I hope to blur. For example, the concepts of "lifeworlds" and "interfaces" (Arce and Long 2000:13) suggest that the worlds of different actors, such as "aid workers", "beneficiaries", and "armed actors," are bounded and distinct, with a mediator in the "middle" who "bridges" them (Rossi 2006; Harrison 2013). This essentialises individual identities, simplifying the types of exchanges at the heart of intervention, and overlooking the strategic positioning and complex life histories of the actors involved. It risks strengthening the depiction of "Aidland" as a "bubble" of Western expatriate workers (Harrison 2013), with brokers "in the middle", overlooking the significance of aid workers who are key to humanitarian intervention, but are *just as embedded* in local social and political networks (Rossi 2006:46). It remains difficult to describe or conceptualise in-

between-ness without further entrenching the idea of two fixed points, or goalposts: in-between what?

In reality, roles are overlapping, and more strategic and performative. Rather than bounded and distinct, the worlds of aid, politics, armed groups and beneficiaries are interlinked. To explore these entanglements, I focus on individual people and their "eventful lives" (Hoffman and Lubkemann 2005:319). At this individual level, it becomes clear how the worlds of "Aidland", "beneficiaries" and "political/military actors" are overlapping and interlinked by individuals who do not just broker relationships between the two, but also move between them over time, and hold concurrent affiliations, links and connections.[53] In short, people are simultaneously aid workers, beneficiaries, and intermediaries, with complicated social, political and military histories. It is important to recognise how actors are not only strategically positioned by humanitarian agencies in processes of negotiating access, but how these actors also strategically position themselves whilst mediating ambiguous, overlapping identity positions and allegiances: they "adjust strategically and instrumentally to their ascribed roles" (Rossi 2006:29).

In this way, everyday aid work becomes performative (Lewis and Mosse 2006:17): aid workers are involved in complex processes of impression management. Some aid workers are so embedded in local histories and networks that they purposefully *construct difference* in order to distinguish themselves from the "local community" (Heaton Shrestha 2006). In other contexts, aid workers purposefully construct familiarity, performing a "local" identity, in order to access employment (Peters 2016). In Chapter Seven, one Congolese humanitarian, Yannick, describes strategically performing either localness or distance at different times to different audiences in the same location. Yannick grew up nearby to the project and had an extensive local network, but at times, he highlighted the fact that his family originated from the other side of the country in order to exempt himself from local histories of violent struggles. Life worlds are never bounded and separate. People always hold complex, overlapping identity positions and must strategically reposition themselves.

[53] Similarly, the binaries between civilian/military and state/non-state do not hold, as individuals shift between these categories in a process described as "cyclical return" (Vlassenroot et al., 2018).

PERFORMING HUMANITARIANISM

To make sense of this, I draw from Goffman's (1956) theory of social interaction as a performance. I argue that the humanitarians operating as a brokerage club in violent conflict *perform humanitarianism* during their interactions with armed groups, and that different collective and personal identities impact on who can perform the role of a humanitarian with the most ease. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,* Goffman explores face-to-face interactions using a dramaturgical analogy, arguing that when an individual comes into contact with other people, that individual tries to manage the impression that others might have of them by fixing the setting, their appearance and manner. By doing so, performances communicate information that confirms the identity of the actor in that situation. We are all simultaneously performers and audiences in our everyday interactions – influencing others' perceptions of us, whilst also trying to glean information about them. Most performances of social life are neither cynical nor sincere, but somewhere in the middle – we buy into our own performances and to some extent, conduct them subconsciously. We attempt to be believed and accepted by our audience, to be seen as valid in the role we have cast for ourselves in that interaction.

These performances of everyday life are like theatre: they take place in a "front region," where actors are onstage in front of audiences whose impressions they are trying to influence. In the "back region", however, individuals can step out of character – the audience is not there. The "front" is the impression the actor wants to give or what is communicated on the stage, and comprises three aspects: the setting in which the actors perform, the "manner" that they adopt (how they play the role), as well as their "appearance": clothes, props, but also characteristics that cannot be so easily changed, such as age, race, gender and class. Aspects of the appearance have socially ascribed meanings and communicate things to the audience. They become an "identity kit" that actors use in order to manage how they appear before others (Goffman 1961). Performances are conducted by individuals, but also by teams, whereby anyone in the team can ruin the whole performance. As a result, everyone is dependent on the good conduct of everyone else, with sanctioning backstage for anyone who jeopardises the group effort. Usually, there is a division of labour: some are more dramatically dominant, whilst others focus on the background staging.

In effect, face-to-face interactions are a continual process of "impression management." The priority is to prevent embarrassment to the individual or others by ensuring that all parties understand what is meant to happen and how everyone should behave. When a performer slips

up, everyone (including the audience) wants to "save the show." To prevent slipping up, people try to control their expressions, not to give too much away. This requires a certain "bureaucratization of the spirit" so that the performance is consistent. Some people misrepresent or hide things, others maintain a distance as a means of projecting an idealised image to the audience. Crucially, we all segregate audiences: people put on different performances, or emphasise different parts of themselves, for different groups of people. In other words, we all play multiple and overlapping roles in life. Different settings, which are usually bounded geographically or temporally, require us to adjust. For instance, few of us follow the same social script at work as when we are out with friends. Our identity is inherently ambiguous: made through interactions with others, overlapping and multiple.

Goffman's analysis offers a way of understanding the everyday encounters, practices and behaviours of humanitarian staff as performative. Negotiating access relies on a political settlement based on shared interests with other actors. MSF sees security and access as relying on the demonstrated quality and relevance of MSF's medical services and on negotiation based on shared interests. However, the behaviour of fieldworkers during everyday encounters and interactions is seen to be essential to prevent upsetting this negotiated arrangement. MSF's security guidelines describe "our behaviour and lifestyle"[54] and "adherence" to principles as essential in order to "maintain access once it is negotiated."[55] Interest-based and more relational aspects of negotiation interact and are interdependent on one another. In other words, what is being done is absolutely crucial, but *how* it is done matters too.

Impression management is understood as key to security management. The personal behaviour of every humanitarian employee is seen as crucial to the security of the team as a whole: they are involved in a team performance of humanitarianism. A slip-up in this performance – individual behaviour that suggests partiality in a conflict or damages the organisation's image – is perceived as a threat to the security of the team as a whole. One MSF Security Plan for DRC, for example, summarises: "Security is everyone's responsibility, inappropriate behaviour of one member of the team can compromise the whole of MSF's operations in the country."[56] In effect, humanitarian identity is performed in processes of organisational impression management, as

[54] "Risk taking and security management policy for MSF OCP staff." 2015. MSF internal archives, Paris, p.2.
[55] "MSF OCB Security Policy." 2018. MSF Belgium, in author's possession, p.2.
[56] *Ibid*, p.1.

humanitarians employ the *construction* of a "humanitarian space" as a form of exceptionalism, a legitimising strategy in order to continue working (Redfield 2011; Hilhorst and Jansen 2010).

What is this performance of humanitarian identity, and why is it seen as essential to security and access? MSF teams try to balance their proximity to and entanglement with political networks through this performance. Just because humanitarian principles are processes of interpretation does not mean that they are considered less important on the ground. In short, principles need to be *performed* to local actors who are audiences of principles in practice (Givoni 2016). Principles are interpreted and translated to the specifics of a messy social context, and then enacted through particular practices, behaviour and interactions so that they gain symbolic meaning - recognisable to others. Neutrality is in the eye of the beholder: the perception of onlookers is understood through a security lens (Abu-Sada 2012). According to humanitarian intervenors, the "local" – an audience that merges beneficiaries, authorities and armed actors - is watching, and could become a threat (Sutton 2018). Perception is key to "acceptance", which is in turn seen as key to security.

Perception became understood as central to humanitarian security after high profile security incidents in the 2000s. Humanitarian organisations recognised a "perception gap" between how they viewed themselves, and how they were viewed by those they interacted and worked with – this "gap" was understood as harmful to security (Donini et al., 2008; Abu-Sada 2012). In the context of the "war on terror" and integrated UN peacekeeping missions, there was concern that humanitarians were increasingly seen as part of a broader "Western" foreign intervention, with a "blurring" between different foreign (political, military, humanitarian) actors (Donini et al., 2004). "Perception studies" were commissioned: analysing and managing how humanitarians were perceived became a new domain of expertise (Givoni 2016). After five MSF employees were killed in Afghanistan in 2004 and MSF was confused for the politically aligned peacekeeping mission in the DRC, the organisation decided to "find out how it is perceived in the places where it works" (Abu-Sada 2012:11). After a three-year-long perception study, MSF concluded that humanitarians must "reinterpret the humanitarian imperative more effectively for local audiences" (Abu-Sada 2012:11). In effect, as well as shared interests, the performance of principles in line with cultural specificity was framed as essential to security: MSF needed a "more culturally grounded approach", in order really to perform "universal universalism" (Donini 2012:191; Abu-Sada 2012; Givoni 2016).

MSF security guidelines for the DRC stress the importance of safeguarding the organisation's humanitarian image. As one security plan states, "a good perception of MSF by the population, civilian and military authorities and non-state actors is essential…acceptance is the pillar of our security…the moment we've spoilt it, we'll be in danger."[57] Another security plan explained that: "the perception of MSF behaviour…is crucial. Our movements, attitudes, words, speeches, conversations are watched, analysed and interpreted, according to different groups, opinions and positions."[58] Therefore, MSF must "present an independent neutral and impartial image of our assistance to all parties."[59] In 2018, the Security Guideline for DRC explained that "even if MSF principles are properly respected in the field according to our own standard, they also need to be perceived as such by the population and actors that are able to inflict harm on our staff and patients." MSF "needs to proactively communicate" its principles.[60] In other words, they must be performed.

How are these principles performed? Ultimately, through the everyday behaviour of individuals who *are* the humanitarian agency "in the field" – its physical embodiment. If humanitarian principles mean nothing by themselves, then it is only through individuals' behaviour, practices and encounters that they gain meaning. The everyday behaviour of MSF employees is supposed to reflect the principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence, because the organisation is literally what its employees, vehicles, and objects do in its name. The humanitarian principles are the "script" that fieldworkers follow in order to be able to work. Principles become their new "identity marker" (Hilhorst and Schmiemann 2002): the part they are playing.

[57] "Mweso security strategy." 2012. MSF Holland, in author's possession.
[58] "Kitchanga security plan March 2009." MSF Holland, in author's possession.
[59] "Head of mission handover." 2012. MSF Holland, in author's possession.
[60] "MSF OCB Security Policy." 2018. MSF Belgium, in author's possession, p.1.



Figure 9: MSF Flag travelling in North Kivu. Source: Personal Photograph 2018.

"The field" is the "front stage" where fieldworkers remain in character. Employee codes of conduct are integral parts of security guidelines: they outline the rules of the interaction, the script to follow. For foreign workers, their manner changes in different countries – they must adapt their manner according to the "cultural codes" of the context. Congolese staff help set the stage and direct the performance for that specific setting and audience. In every setting, employees have the same humanitarian "identity kit", an assemblage of props, in order to "perform" a humanitarian identity and distinguish themselves from other actors – such as Western military actors (Sutton 2018). This kit includes the white T-shirt, Toyota Land-Cruisers, flags, buildings, hospital walls – all displaying the same emblem. This identity kit is supposed to communicate to the audience that these individuals are exempt from any broader societal conflicts. The T-shirt therefore becomes a symbolic symbol of the individuals' separateness – whatever the identity of the actor, it is supposed to communicate the part they are now playing. Because this assemblage of props is key to performing humanitarian identity, "misuse of MSF identification", such as wearing a T-shirt at a bar or club or whilst on holiday, is a "security

incident"[61]: you could potentially tarnish the reputation of the organisation as a whole. It is a disruption of the performance.

There is no off-stage: employees are on duty at all times, because personal behaviour can disrupt organisational reputation. "The field" is imagined as a place where humanitarians can remain in character, because they have few social ties, obligations or other roles to play. The personal and professional merge: rules about their behaviour apply to out of work hours as well as during work hours. This is made explicit in MSF's security protocols and codes of conduct. One code of conduct explains: "all actions and statements made by staff are seen by outsiders as representing MSF. All staff members should act in accordance with the humanitarian principles."[62] Employees must "act in the spirit of equality…both during and outside workhours, within and outside mission boundaries."[63] Another security guideline explained that "all expats need to be extremely careful to remain neutral, centred on the MSF mission and objectives to reach all vulnerable populations, they must not express opinions or judgements."[64]

Because MSF employees are MSF at all times, personal relationships are understood through a security framework. This translated into a culture of exclusivity: security rules include details about who employees can interact with in their personal lives. For example, employees are discouraged from going to the houses of MONUSCO employees, or travelling in their vehicles. To have someone stay at the MSF "expat" compound, or to stay the night somewhere else, employees must ask permission in advance. As one security strategy explained:

> We must correct the mistake within MSF of assuming we will be judged uniquely on the basis of our operational world…the challenge for our operational teams will be to engage in a social life…while at the same time minimizing the way these activities reinforce a perception of MSF as being part of, rather than independent from, the larger Western or international intervention.[65]

Foreign interveners are never "off-stage", however, they live together in compounds where they can be "backstage." There, out of view, they can have candid conversations about "hiding

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[61] "Expatriate code of conduct MSF Holland." 2004. MSF Holland, in author's possession.
[62] "Expatriate guidelines MSF Holland." 2006. MSF Holland, in author's possession.
[63] "Expatriate code of conduct MSF Holland." 2004. MSF Holland, in author's possession.
[64] "Kitchanga security plan March 2009." MSF Holland, in author's possession.
[65] "Strategic Plan OCA 2011-2014." MSF Holland, in author's possession, p.25.

certain parts of themselves," balancing parts of their own identity or social lives with the performance of humanitarianism. Although not "off-duty", they can at least compare notes, and correct those who slipped up.

IDENTITY IN PEFORMANCES OF HUMANITARIANISM

The central focus of this thesis is how identity becomes central to the performance of humanitarianism, with ambiguity as a central characteristic. As Goffman argues, identity construction is ambiguous: we all play overlapping roles in life. But, performing humanitarianism is based on the construction of a universal human. MSF aims to transcend the importance of the personal identities, histories or political subjectivities of its patients and employees: patients are just humans who need help, humanitarians are just other humans there to help them. MSF is committed to this universal equality of all human life, drawing from an ethos of solidarity - a shared sense of humanity. It does not matter who you are, where you live, your political affiliation, or any other aspect of your identity – you are part of shared humanity. As the first line of the MSF charter explains: *"Médecins Sans Frontières* provides assistance to populations in distress...They do so irrespective of race, religion, creed or political convictions." One of the early members of MSF explained to me that humanity is the "key principle" of the organisation – the other principles (in particular, neutrality) are just a *means* to an end. In his words, "humanity means we want to make ourselves useful to people we don't know, not because of their faith or ethnicity, but because they are samples of humanity." The identity that matters is that of the human and this is considered to be universal.



Figure 10: No Guns sign on MSF convoy.
Source: Personal Photograph 2018

Take the example of an MSF vehicle transporting an injured combatant across a frontline to hospital in the DRC. First, MSF removes the patient's military uniform: the patient is symbolically stripped of their political significance, they are just another human, a life to be saved. At checkpoints, MSF staff have to persuade armed actors to allow the vehicle to pass, even when it is carrying an injured adversary. Fieldworkers described their most common line of argument: it

is just a *blessé* (wounded person), MSF does not care who it is – we would do the same if it was you. In other words, they advocate for a shared human identity, whilst wearing an MSF T-shirt that is supposed to symbolise their humanitarian identity as representatives of MSF. In hospital, combatants and civilians from opposing sides are treated the same, as patients. In this way, MSF tries to construct its projects as symbolic sanctuaries, spaces where the rules of the game have changed. These spaces become stages, with symbolic ritualistic practices: an assemblage of T-shirts, emblems, and no weapons signs are supposed to help employees perform humanitarianism.

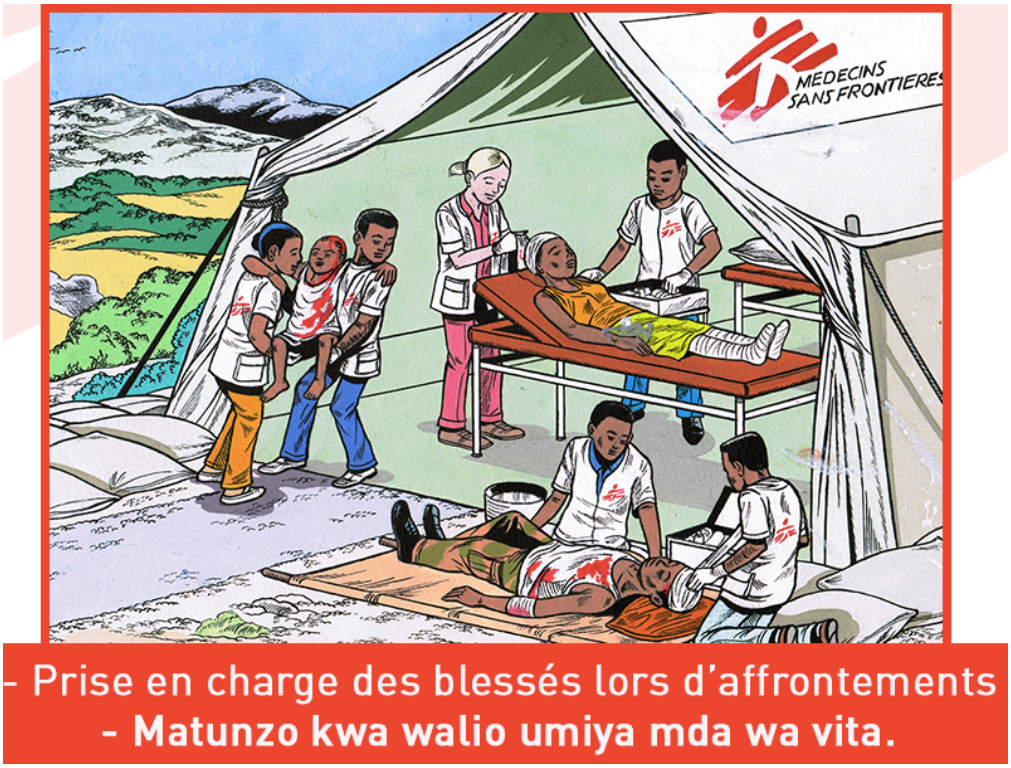


Figure 11: "Nos Principles/Mipango Yetu." Leaflet for armed groups in North Kivu. Source: MSF Belgium.

This abstracting away of political subjectivities, histories and identities is a tool to help MSF carry out a radical politics of care. Henry Radice (2013) aptly summarises MSF's politics as "a refusal to tolerate suffering." This politics is often hidden by a dependence on technical engagement, but it nonetheless represents a liberal political vision: a solidarity with people as fellow humans. MSF's focus on the equality of all human life, regardless of who the individual is, becomes a political position in and of itself in opposition to other logics about the value of life, based on political affiliation or another identity marker (Whittall 2011; Ponthieu and Incerti

2016). The organisation intervenes in conflicts across the world in the name of human solidarity, transcending any importance attached to different political ideologies, faiths, or identities. MSF's emphasis on the need to take action offered a "fresh way of expressing the specifically French values of universality, fraternity and solidarity" (Taithe 2004:149). "Being there" and gaining access is an expression of solidarity.

But what is this universal human? Can we abstract facets of identity away like this? Who can perform neutrality, represent MSF and negotiate access to carry out its work? Of course, the reality is much more complex. The universal human is a construction. This becomes evident in the realities of MSF's work on the ground. The depiction of patients as just humans in need of assistance is something that MSF has continually to rearticulate. Vehicles carrying patients and healthcare facilities are sometimes targeted as a way of denying healthcare to certain people. In reality, in order to safely provide care for its patients, MSF has to recognise the potential impact of a patient's personal, military or political identities on their safety in health facilities or travelling on the road.

Similarly, the humanitarian identity of MSF employees is contested during encounters with armed and political actors. Fieldworkers are supposed to present themselves as blank slates with no history, no links, or allegiances. This creates a tension, because no one is untouched by the messiness of life. All humanitarians are situated politically and socially, they have to try to ensure that this does not encroach on their performance of principles. No one can embody a universal human. Everyone embodies different forms of particularism. In practice, liberal universality has always excluded people (Marriage 2006b:480). Humanitarianism is built on the idea of universal humanity. However, as I will illustrate in this thesis, not everyone in the humanitarian brokerage club can perform this neutral, humanitarian identity with the same ease, because not everyone is an unknown quantity, and different collective and personal identities have an impact on how humanitarians are perceived.

To begin, the props of the humanitarian "identity kit" do not communicate a humanitarian identity when the actor is a known quantity. "The field" is not a "non-place" (Augé 2009) for most humanitarian fieldworkers. Many Congolese staff are not easily viewed as embodiments of a humanitarian organisation, because they are embedded in political and social networks, with political associations, links and histories, families and friends. Whilst wearing the MSF T-shirt, they are interacting with people they know. Yet, as the security guidelines explain,

Congolese staff are also required to act as "ambassadors" of MSF.[66] For example, in Chapter Five, Bahati describes the difficulties of working in his hometown, where he knew some of MSF's armed interlocutors personally, and had shared friends with others. Bahati struggled to present himself as "only part of the MSF team." Goffman's framework helps conceptualise how such individuals negotiate overlapping social positions. Congolese staff broker and maintain networks for MSF, drawing from personal histories and contacts. They must strategically position themselves, casting and recasting themselves for different audiences. They cannot segregate audiences easily because "the field" is not a geographically and temporally bounded space, but requires the ability to perform overlapping social roles in the same setting. In short, their everyday experience illustrates the tensions of embodying an institution in the messy politics of everyday life.

Second, not everyone can perform humanitarianism with the same ease because overlapping, collective identities – such as gender, class, race, nationality, ethnicity – have an impact on how people are perceived and related to. We cannot abstract these facets of identity away. Humanitarianism is implemented by people who embody forms of identity which have different fluid, socially ascribed and historically contingent meanings. The humanitarian "identity kit" – the T-shirt, logo, vehicles – does not neutralise the importance of these other "characteristics" (Goffman 1956). The meanings of whiteness, gender, ethnicity and different nationalities are not uniform but mean different things to different people in the different places, influencing who can perform humanitarianism in different environments. Who can position themselves as neutral is context dependent, it depends on the particulars.

The ability to maintain access therefore also depends on *who* in particular is representing the humanitarian organisation. When trying to deliver aid in a politically sensitive environment, who can perform neutrality during everyday encounters is seen as a matter of security. So, how can humanitarianism – an ideology based on the equality of all human life – approach these forms of difference to ensure that humanitarian organisations provide security for all their staff and maintain access, whilst valuing all lives equally? Ultimately, humanitarians have to adapt to the local importance attached to the very forms of identity that their egalitarian mandates seek to transcend. In 2015, a security guideline explained:

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[66] "MSF OCB Security Policy." 2018. MSF Belgium, in author's possession, p.1.

> "MSF recognises that security threats on its members may vary according to their gender, nationality or morphology and that, under exceptional circumstances, MSF may profile its team composition according to such criteria."[67]

Therefore, human resource decisions are crucial. Rather than seeing everyone as "samples of humanity", MSF accepts that in reality, the personal identities, backgrounds, histories and embodied forms of difference amongst individual employees influence their ability to perform a humanitarian role safely. In eastern DRC, for example, MSF does not employ Rwandans, because of a sensitive history of Rwandan-backed invasions in the region. In Somalia, Al-Shabab restricted access to staff with Somali ethnic background – they wanted foreigners who were perceived as more neutral (Hofman and Heller Pérache 2014). At a country level, this staging continues: different staff perform different roles depending on how their local situation, histories and networks, but also how their race, gender, nationality and ethnicity might be perceived.

MSF is a global movement, but it began in France. The French Republican approach to difference argues that the way to build a fair and just society is to focus on what we have in common. This model of citizenship treats everyone the same - as individuals not members of specific communities – based on a concept of universal humanity. The state institutionalises neutrality in public and political spheres in the form of secularism, or *laïcité*. Racial and ethnic terms have no official legitimacy. Instead, in reaction to colonial racial hierarchies, France is committed to a "post-racial" ideology (Stoler 2016): the state encourages colour-blindness, and it does not collect racial or ethnic census information (Escafré-Dublet and Simon 2011). In fact, the use of the word "race" itself remains contentious: in 2018, the French National Assembly deleted "race" from the first article of the constitution, which had previously stated that all citizens are equal before the law "regardless of origin, race or religion" (*Le Monde* 2018). Their reasoning was that "the word 'race' has no scientific validity and it has been the basis for racist ideologies" (*France24* 2018).

Critics argue that this form of colour-blind, secular identity is far from neutral or universal. In her ethnography of *laïcité*, Fernando (2014:7) explores the tension "between abstract universalism and embodied particularism" at the heart of Republican citizenship. She describes

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[67] "Risk taking and security management policy for MSF OCP staff." 2015. MSF internal archives, Paris.

the experience of the "Muslim French": people who are committed to both the public display of their faith and their French citizenship. Their identity becomes a paradox: they cannot be both Muslim and French. Their position, she argues, unmasks republican universal citizenship as "already the site of a privileged particular" (Fernando 2014:86). The universal is based on the racial, religious and ethnic norms of whiteness and Christianity (Fernando 2014:89). Rather than neutral, she argues that secularism is based on specific understandings of the relationship between belief and practice which has Christian origins (Fernando 2014:166). Similarly, Beaman (2019) argues that whiteness operates as a powerful default (Fanon 1952), by exploring the experience of North African second-generation French citizens. She describes colour-blind society as an ongoing "racial project" (Omi and Winant 1995), through which the links between whiteness and national belonging are continually reproduced (Beaman 2019:547). Ultimately, people have to abstract away particular racial, ethnic, religious identities in order to adopt a universal identity, but not everyone is able do so: some people can never embody this universalism, they are always marked as particular (Fernando 2014:62).

Critical race theory provides further insight into the particularity of universality. Race is understood as a "socially constructed and historically fluid" category (Omi and Winant 2015:x). The critical treatment of whiteness began with the work of W.E.B DuBois (1970), who described how the relative invisibility of whiteness maintains white supremacy. Since, scholars have explored how whiteness operates as a default which helps reinforce a system of privilege. For example, Toni Morrison, the African-American literary theorist, described how whiteness remains a normative identity that frames all other races as Other, marked with difference. In *Playing in the Dark,* she describes how arguing that race is not important only illustrates its centrality: "the act of enforcing racelessness" is "itself a racial act" (Morrison 1992:46). In *The Racial Contract,* Charles Mills (1997:76) summarises:

> The only people who can find it…possible to deny the centrality of race are those who are racially privileged, for whom race is invisible precisely because the world is structured around them, whiteness as the ground against which the figures of other races – those who, unlike us, are raced – appear.

Whiteness becomes the referent of prestige and power: the epitome of normalcy (Mbembe 2017:28; Fanon 1952), in contrast to blackness, which becomes a sign of Otherness (Mudimbe 1988:44). The mere suggestion that being white has any meaning often triggers defensive

responses (DiAngelo 2018). Yet, in order to combat racism, one must first notice race (Omi and Winant 2015). As this thesis illustrates, race impacts on who can wield power and perform neutrality in different contexts, and this is sometimes used strategically in humanitarian practice.

This theoretical work helps us think critically about who can embody or represent neutrality and universalism, and who has access to power. It is not a perfect fit: most of this work looks at one context, predominantly Western nation states, exploring how a dominant identity operates as a default, presenting itself as universal. I want to draw out a slightly different point from this work: who can perform neutrality is *context dependent*, because everyone embodies forms of particularism which affects their experience of life and the way that they are perceived by others. MSF has a liberal vision in which shared universal humanity is what brings people together – treating people as samples of humanity is the way to treat them equally. MSF is imbued with French republicanism – for instance, the term "race" is considered problematic, illustrated by the fact that "morphology" was used rather than "race" when discussing changing team composition for security reasons.[68] However, not everyone can abstract parts of their personal identities and histories away: not everyone can fit the universal human mould with the same ease, because it is always specific and particular, depending on the time and place. The imaginary of what is neutral or universal is *always specific*: it is socially, historically and politically informed.

In particular, critical race theory helps explore how whiteness operates in humanitarianism. There remains a striking silence on the topic of race in studies of development and humanitarianism (Pailey 2019; Benton 2016). Several academics have tried to address this silence by applying critical race theory to describe how whiteness operates as a default in the aid sector. Sarah White (2002: 418), for example, challenged the dominant colour-blind stance of development arguing that it operates as a "racial project" in and of itself which helps reproduce racial hierarchies: "being unable to see one's own colour" in fact naturalises "the privilege to which it gives rise". Similarly, Uma Kothari (2006:20) described how authority, expertise and knowledge have become "racially symbolised", concluding that the silence around race mean that people have not analysed the power, privilege and inequalities that come from whiteness. More recently, Pailey (2019:5) focused her attention on the "white gaze" of development, through which whiteness is understood as the "primary referent of power,

[68] "Risk taking and security management policy for MSF OCP staff." 2015. MSF internal archives, Paris, p.2.

prestige and progress across the world" (Pailey 2019:16). Adia Benton (2016:270) has also called for more research on how racial structures of inequality continue to "shape the everyday practices of humanitarianism." She explores the experience of African expatriates navigating an aid infrastructure where "assessments of their expertise, mobility and professional 'success' are racialised" (Benton 2016:266). I explore the role of whiteness during everyday negotiations for access, but make a slightly different point. Indeed, whiteness operates as a default in humanitarianism, symbolising power and privilege. However, whiteness also means different things in different places (Twine and Gallagher 2008): it acquires a web of other meanings that are historically and situationally contingent. These meanings also impact on who can perform the role of a detached, neutral humanitarian.

In the four key empirical chapters, I describe how MSF humanitarians negotiate access in a brokerage club, with different people playing different roles. During these processes of collective brokerage, the teams perform principles – it is a group performance. As I illustrate, however, some employees are more dramatically competent than others in certain areas because of who they are. I explore the experiences of fieldworkers in a conflict zone and how historically contingent, socially ascribed meanings which are associated with certain ethnic labels, gender identities, whiteness and differences in nationality intersect and overlap with personal histories and networks to impact humanitarian negotiations for access with armed groups. Ultimately, whilst negotiating access, different collective and personal identities are *put to work* strategically as a resource or instrument for humanitarian teams because these identities affect who can perform the role of a neutral humanitarian, who can wield power and influence, and who is at particular risk of violence.

CONCLUSION

This chapter outlined the key theoretical bases of the thesis: the setting of negotiated governance in which interactions between humanitarians and armed actors take place; the processes of brokerage and translation conducted by humanitarian teams working in symbiosis; and crucially, the conceptualisation of everyday humanitarianism in conflict settings as performative, in which the strategic use of ambiguous, collective and personal identities becomes central to maintaining humanitarian access. This is the background against which the next four chapters are set. In what follows, I delve into the empirical detail: the everyday practices of different humanitarians working together in North Kivu. In each chapter, I add another layer of complexity, illustrating how different personal and collective identities

influence who can perform the role of a humanitarian, who can wield power and influence, and who is at particular risk of violence in different contexts. The strategic deployment of these identities becomes another approach to maintaining humanitarian access.

5. "WHO CAN SING THE SONG OF NEUTRALITY?": HUMANITARIAN FIXERS AND PERFORMANCES OF HUMANITARIANISM

INTRODUCTION

After several months in North Kivu, I was invited to a meeting of the *Cercle de la Sécurité* in Goma. It was a bumpy motorbike taxi ride to an NGO office. This part of the city was coded "green" by humanitarian organisations' security protocols and was thus home to a large number of foreign aid workers and NGO offices. The earth was scorched black, an uneven surface sculpted by molten lava that had engulfed the city in 2002 after an eruption of the nearby volcano, Mount Nyiragongo. On a clear day, its dramatic outline was visible, looming on the horizon.

I found the members of the *Cercle* assembled in a conference room. The table was decorated with an array of different smartphones. Several members of the group were inspecting a new UN map of Masisi territory. One Congolese aid worker in the group explained that they were looking for his home village – this had become their unofficial benchmark for whether maps were any good. "On the last map, lots of villages weren't even on it," he told me. The meeting began. First, the members did a "tour" of each territory in North Kivu. Every week, they discussed recent incidents, such as robberies, kidnappings, clashes between armed groups, or the emergence of a new faction. On that morning, they pieced together witness reports, scrolling through their *WhatsApp* messages. Subsequently, they turned to "points of analysis", trying to make sense of all the information and its significance for the humanitarian operations in the region.

The *Cercle* is a group of Congolese humanitarians who work in security management for different international NGOs in North Kivu. Although they hold a variety of different job titles, the members perform a common function within their respective organisations: they analyse security conditions by collecting and collating information about new developments in the protracted violence of the region and about recent acts of criminality. They form and maintain a network amongst different local authorities and armed actors so that NGOs can negotiate access to operate in North Kivu. The members of the *Cercle* represent the backbone of the humanitarian presence in the region. As one of the founders of the *Cercle* put it, "We are like fixers as well as humanitarians, and this is our Congolese space of aid." This was a forum, it was explained to me, where members could "speak freely" without the presence of their "*muzungu*

bosses." The *Cercle* was a form of backstage, where Congolese humanitarians could step out of character (Goffman 1956). Although it does not feature in most official narratives, the ability of international humanitarian organisations to work in eastern DRC depends on this Congolese space of aid, which operates in symbiosis with the world of mobile, foreign staff.

Foreign interveners often rely on intermediaries who are fluent in local languages, gather information, broker relationships and help guide them through unfamiliar terrain. Nineteenth-century European explorers in Africa relied on interpreters and brokers (Kennedy 2013; White 1991), whilst Christian missionaries depended on local employees to negotiate a mission's presence in contexts of conflict, as well as translating the central tenets of Christianity (Levine 2006). Meanwhile, African employees of colonial regimes became the "hidden linchpins of colonial rule" (Lawrance et al., 2006:4), mediating encounters between colonial authorities and local actors, and conducting complex processes of meaning-making that led to the "highly localised permutations" of colonialism in practice (Osborne 2003:32). Today's foreign interveners likewise rely on such individuals, and despite growing interest in the (too often overlooked) role of local actors in the production of journalistic or scientific knowledge (Palmer 2019; Nyenzi et al., 2020; Piot 2019), there has been less examination of the sorts of fixing and brokerage work conducted by locally hired humanitarian employees, which shapes how intervention unfolds in practice.

In North Kivu, brokering security – the ability to analyse the political landscape, network with different actors, and translate between different languages and interests – has become an important skill (Vogel and Musamba 2018; Stys et al., 2019). One afternoon, I had lunch with a fixer based in Goma, who emphasised the complexities of working for humanitarian agencies. After being employed by several agencies, this fixer had decided to "go private" and work instead for journalists. He had less to do with the "humanitarian fixers" now, he told me, because "they're exclusive, they won't share their information with us. Their work is *even* more complicated, because of the humanitarian principles." In other words, humanitarian fixing was further complicated by the need for humanitarians to represent their organisation – employees had carefully to balance their personal and humanitarian identities.

This chapter delves into some of that complexity. I explore the brokerage and translation work conducted by "local" Congolese MSF humanitarians working in a "field" that is not a distant, liminal space, but their country (and province) of origin. I focus particularly on the way that

these humanitarians have diverse identities, histories and networks – important forms of identity capital (Dorronsoro and Grojean 2018; Hoffman et al., 2020) - which are put to use in negotiating humanitarian access. This chapter, specifically, brings out a central tension in their position: that their "proximity" – personal identities, histories, networks which situate them in North Kivu – become a double-edged sword. On the one hand, these identities are a resource for humanitarian access: local staff are essential to networking with armed actors and political authorities, as well as translating the meanings of policies and principles in practice. On the other hand, they find themselves either *at* risk, or perceived as *a* risk, or both, as they mediate ambiguous, overlapping identity positions and competing demands. They are exposed to external pressures and acts of violence because of their personal identities, whilst possibilities for promotion are limited precisely because of their embeddedness. In short, they face a tension between being rooted in the locality, and needing to represent MSF in practice. As such, they embody the contradictions of MSF's approach in North Kivu: a simultaneous need for operational "proximity," as well as for a performative distance from everyday conflict dynamics.

Strengthening "local" actors' leadership and capacity to respond to emergencies has been at the heart of reform efforts in the aid sector since the 1990s.[69] However, in North Kivu, local humanitarians' position in MSF was circumscribed on security grounds, as well as to prevent their engaging in any behaviour that might jeopardise MSF's work. MSF's security praxis is built on a model of "complementarity": the presence of transient, supposedly "detached" foreigners is seen as a counterweight to the embeddedness of locals, whilst the proximity of locals is seen to counteract the transience of mobile foreigners (Redfield 2012). Although this "brokerage club" (Bierschenk et al., 2002:28) model is designed to keep everyone safe, it nonetheless reproduces hierarchies between "foreign" and "local" colleagues.

The chapter is structured in four parts. First, I describe how "the field" is imagined in MSF as a place separate from home, one where employees must perform humanitarian principles as a matter of security. Yet, for the majority of MSF employees, the field is not a faraway place, but close to home. So, how could they represent MSF at all times? Second, this chapter outlines how the position of these local staff is further complicated by the fact that their very embeddedness is a crucial resource during everyday practices of negotiating access. Congolese

[69] For instance, localisation was at the heart of the Code of Conduct of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief (1994), Principles of Good Humanitarian Donorship (2003) and Principles of Partnership (2007).

staff broker and translate, drawing from diverse identities, histories, interpersonal networks. Third, I describe the risks of embeddedness, and the difficulties of brokering and performing a humanitarian role simultaneously. Fourth, I describe how MSF teams work together in North Kivu, with the supposed "detachment" of mobile, foreign staff understood as protecting local staff and MSF's image in a manner that determines that local staff, although crucial members of the brokerage "club", are rarely its leaders.

PERFORMING PRINCIPLES IN "THE FIELD"

Behaviour in "the field"

Behaviour in the field is seen as central to the security of MSF teams, and I experienced this first-hand when I went to live for a period with a project team in rural North Kivu. At 6am, I arrived at an MSF base in Goma to prepare for our convoy. I was given an MSF gilet and I was told to keep several things to hand on the journey: a phone, a "security envelope" of cash in case of a robbery, and a copy of a letter indicating my purpose in the country. We drove for hours and along the way we passed several roadblocks. At the sight of the MSF vehicles, the men who were manning the blocks hastily removed the metal barriers, and a salute from the project coordinator or a few words of greeting from the driver was enough to get us through – this was a routine encounter. On arrival at the project, I received an "expat security briefing" and I toured two safe rooms – areas protected by sandbags in which to seek refuge in case of shooting nearby. I was informed of the curfew, told where I could go (and not go) in town, and shown how regularly to communicate my location using a handheld radio. This security briefing also included rules about my general behaviour. By riding in the MSF car, living with the team, and wearing the emblem I had become indistinguishable from MSF employees – part of the assemblage of people and objects that enacted MSF to onlookers. Because I was now visibly identifiable as MSF, my behaviour was seen as a reflection of the organisation. It was imperative that I, too, follow the MSF code of conduct.

Later, I read the security guidelines for MSF in the region, which explained how "every individual MSF staff member…must be aware of the security implications of their personal behaviour on MSF staff security and on the ability for MSF to provide humanitarian assistance."[70] Every employee must also "put into practice the employees' charter" which

[70] "MSF OCB Security Policy." 2018. MSF Belgium, in author's possession, p.5.

"defines basic behaviour for anyone working within the organisation, and the principles…such as neutrality, impartiality and independence."[71] MSF staff must embody these principles in practice, because "all actions and statements made by staff are seen by outsiders as representing MSF."[72] "Lifestyle and behaviour"[73] are crucial for security because employees are "MSF 24/7 – not only during work hours."[74]

The guidelines I read are rooted in a particular imaginary of "the field" as somewhere distant and different from home. As Peter Redfield (2012) argues, MSF is based on the model of a transient expatriate: its "assumption at the outset", he writes, is "that its volunteers would be eagerly and effortlessly mobile. Unencumbered by social obligations at home, the medical humanitarian should likewise acquire few in the field, living lightly on the landscape, and always ready to leave once urgency passed" (Redfield 2012:362). In other words, "the field" is imagined as a liminal space, isolated from humanitarians' own political interests, which fieldworkers enter, then exit. They are to remain detached from local concerns, building relationships to help humanitarian relief delivery, but not getting entangled in messy social relationships. This is the "stage" upon which they must perform a humanitarian role (Goffman 1956).

The "field" is constructed as a site of action "out there" (Malkki 2015) - a place of hardship and danger. In MSF fundraising materials, jungles and dirt roads are depicted, not the grey offices in Europe (Stellmach 2020). Anthropology and humanitarianism share this "field imaginary", the emphasis on somewhere exotic and strange, which is rooted in a shared colonial history (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Just as in anthropology, there is a "hierarchy of purity" of field sites in MSF: "If the field is a place that is not like home, then some places will be…more field-like" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:14). In North Kivu, "*explos*" (explorations) of rural areas are the purest of fields. Projects in rural areas are still the "real field," but working in urban areas with the luxuries of restaurants and bars is not. With "the field" imagined as separated from home, then, both the humanitarian and anthropologist are constructed as itinerant, professional outsiders (Stellmach 2020). The separation of home and field tries to cultivate some sort of "detachment as a marker of professionalism" (Okely 1992:8), but as a result reproduces binaries such as us/them, strange/familiar – a "field" with a native "Other" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

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[71] *Ibid.*
[72] "Expat guidelines DRC 2006." MSF Holland, in author's possession.
[73] "Risk taking and security management policy for MSF OCP staff." 2015. MSF internal archives, Paris, p.2.
[74] "Security Incident Report: threats to national staff." 2014. MSF Holland, in author's possession.

"Where is 'the field' for me?"

The week I arrived to stay in this MSF project, the adoption of a new employee charter for "behaviour in the field" was causing some debate amongst Congolese employees who, just like their foreign colleagues, were required to sign. The charter set out the appropriate forms of behaviour that should be adopted at all times by MSF employees. A training material for "national staff" explained that the humanitarian principles "are lived and put into practice every day through the choices made by both MSF as a whole and every one of its members."[75] The security protocol explained that Congolese staff are "part of the community," but must also represent MSF and "act as ambassadors towards the community."[76] Whereas some staff argued that they were always viewed as MSF and must behave accordingly, other members of the team asked how they could represent MSF, adopting its principles of neutrality and impartiality, even after work. One employee pointed out that the charter defined what was termed "behaviour in the field." He asked: "And where exactly is "the field" for me? This is my home."

The debate surrounding the new charter illustrated the difficulties some Congolese staff experienced in representing MSF at all times, in performing principles at home. Despite MSF's initial assumption about the transient nature of its workforce, the organisation now relies on locally recruited personnel, who now account for 90% of its employees (Redfield 2012). These employees have complex (and varying) social and political histories, personal networks and contacts in the same "field" in which they are required to perform a humanitarian identity. They cannot segregate audiences, but instead must perform overlapping roles in the same setting (Goffman 1956). As one Congolese employee from North Kivu told me, "we keep our personal identity, but at the same time, we are humanitarians. It can be difficult to balance the two."

One afternoon in the project base, a poster entitled "behaviour in the field" caught my eye. Underneath a photograph of a man in surgical scrubs, a new born baby in one arm and the other raised in a thumbs-up to the camera, the poster summarised this tension in a single sentence:

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[75] "The MSF Pocket Sanou." 2012. MSF Belgium, in author's possession, p.4.
[76] "MSF OCB Security Policy." 2018. MSF Belgium, in author's possession, p.2.

> MSF employees generally respect the views, knowledge, lifestyle, religion and beliefs of the local population, as long as they are not contrary to the humanitarian values and principles upheld by the (*MSF*) association.

The juxtaposition between the "values, knowledge, lifestyle" of the "local population" and the "values" of MSF became particularly pertinent for employees of MSF who were themselves members of the "local population." Just how "universal" were the values that MSF required its employees to adopt, both out of work and during work hours? One Congolese employee told me: "I respect the charter, but after work, I manage myself." Another told me that the values of MSF are suitable for work, but not for "*chez moi ou la boîte*" (at home or in the bar). Whilst on a long drive one afternoon, one Congolese MSF employee told me that MSF came from France and has retained its "European culture." This employee explained that he moderates his behaviour whilst at work, but the rest of his life was separate. We drove past a range of political flags tied to trees and lamp posts, and he told me that he was running for parliament in the forthcoming elections. When I asked whether he would quit MSF in order to do so, he said he would not, and explained that he was going to campaign whilst on annual leave. This employee's political campaign was a secret from his colleagues. He argued that the MSF charter should not dominate your life when you are not at work: "I have my own code," he concluded.

THE HUMANITARIAN FIXERS

The position of these Congolese humanitarians was further complicated by the fact that their personal identities, social and political histories, networks and trajectories at a local level are crucial to MSF's everyday security management and negotiations for access. As one MSF security plan for Congo summarised, "networking and context analysis is the basis of our capacity to negotiate acceptance" and "national staff have a key role in this."[77] But what does this actually look like in practice? In what follows, I describe the work of several employees in North Kivu to illustrate the complex everyday practices of humanitarian fixing – brokerage and translation.

The Assistants

After 2013, senior coordinator positions were partnered with a Congolese assistant in MSF in North Kivu. Given the high turnover of foreign coordinators, their assistants' job description

[77] "MSF OCB Security Policy." 2018. MSF Belgium, in author's possession, p.2.

was to maintain a network, translate, and help introduce foreign colleagues to local actors. Assistants described themselves as cultural brokers, ("cultural referents"), constructing an opposition between "local culture" and "Western culture" that required their mediation. One head of mission assistant told me that the biggest mistake any "expat" colleague can make is assuming that MSF's message will work in Congo as it has in other places. MSF "comes from Europe" he told me, "and needs to adapt. We are here to help." On arrival in North Kivu, one security guideline confirms, "each new expatriate has to receive cultural briefings to ensure that they are aware of cultural differences…and can behave accordingly in order to have a good acceptance and image of MSF."[78] During these briefings, one assistant told me, he would outline a broad history of North Kivu, but also touch on a range of other topics: "Don't wear flip-flops to formal meetings with government officials, they are for the toilet" and "Don't be too direct or ask armed groups too many questions, that will make them suspicious." The assistant described his role as "setting the scene" for interactions between political figures and foreign staff, because "expatriates have the strategy", but they need to understand how to carry it out "in this context." "I am the institutional memory, or the branch, where birds *[expatriates]* come and land for support, before they fly off somewhere else," he concluded. A former head of mission described local staff as "cultural bridges," to "help us avoid dangerous *faux pas*."

Maxime was a former project coordinator assistant in North Kivu. Before this, Maxime had worked as a community mobiliser. His role was to "act as the interface between the community and MSF" in order to "increase acceptance." He worked with volunteer community health workers within the Ministry of Health (*relais communitaires*) who lived locally and were paid by MSF to help "explain MSF's message." Maxime built up a network and was nicknamed MSF's *Radio France International* – a source of information and analysis. MSF "realised I was a resource," Maxime explained, and he was promoted to project coordinator assistant.

As an assistant, Maxime maintained contact with a network of local actors and negotiated MSF's position in relation to these actors' differing interests. This involved "countering accusations or suspicions" about MSF's intentions and rearticulating MSF's principles. Maxime analysed the shifting political settlements at the project site in order to help MSF "win acceptance." His role, as he summarised it, was to "make sure MSF passes on its message, to ensure that we are accepted by all, but at the same time not viewed as too close to one side." Maxime also helped

[78] "Local security plan Mweso North Kivu." 2016. MSF Holland, in author's possession, p.2.

broker new connections. "To be connected was my job", he told me, because foreigners "lacked informants, they lived in an expatriate ghetto." Maxime would "find out who the project coordinator needs to know, find a way to contact them and introduce them." Maxime also helped translate: "We analyse, interpret and help them *[expatriates]* understand. We see things they don't." He described local staff as "maps" for foreigners who had quickly to learn a plethora of acronyms in a fluctuating political landscape. One former project coordinator described Maxime as an essential guide: "He helped me to pick it all up - after all, he lived it."

One afternoon, Maxime drew me a visual aid – he "actor-mapped" from memory the project site where he had worked. The town was divided into three different neighbourhoods, each with different *Chefs de groupement* and *Chefs de quartiers,* as well as different *Jeunesse* civil society movements. There were personal rivalries and power struggles within the customary structure. Two of the neighbourhoods were occupied by the Nyanga community, whilst the third was predominantly dominated by the Hunde community. There were several churches, each with their own links, depending on the priest and the location of the church. Maxime maintained contacts within three armed groups as well as with the national army. The town changed hands several times, so the way that these groups fitted into the fragmented political landscape shifted. Maxime needed to maintain contact with all these actors and decipher the shifting relationships between them in order to understand how MSF fitted in. Different MSF employees from the project site became brokers: their links to armed and political networks became a resource. Motorbike taxis were important sources of information about nearby areas, whilst different youth groups were connected to armed groups, and customary authorities had potential influence over different armed actors.

Maxime negotiated MSF's position within this jigsaw of different authorities and armed networks. First, it was politically sensitive *where* MSF chose to work. Both MSF's hospital and base were located in the same neighbourhood. Therefore, MSF needed to concentrate its work in the areas controlled by competing governance structures, with links to different, warring armed groups and principally inhabited by different (historically divided) communities. The team set up three mobile clinics, supporting health centres in all three neighbourhoods to ensure it was "balanced." Second, recruitment was incredibly sensitive. In Maxime's words, it was crucial to liaise with the different *Jeunesse* youth groups from each neighbourhood, as well as the *chef de quartier*. If people saw MSF's hiring as partial or working against their interests, "things

would degenerate quickly," Maxime explained. MSF hired connected individuals as community health workers in each neighbourhood, who then became important health promoters.

Maxime stressed the importance of hiring mixed teams as a way of rendering MSF's neutrality visible. Security guidelines for North Kivu similarly stressed the need to avoid "bias through hiring practices that accidentally benefit one group over another."[79] Perceptions of bias could make MSF "vulnerable."[80] Personal identities also needed to be taken into account when deciding who could travel in different convoys, and who could "communicate MSF's message." In some areas, the perceived ethnic identity of different staff impacted on their safety and how they were perceived in relation to histories of violence (Pottier 2006). Therefore, MSF teams "balanced" their convoys, especially when crossing frontlines, roadblocks or areas controlled by different armed actors. First, the teams placed a well-connected employee in the convoy from the local area as a "representative" to help "keep the rest of the team safe." These employees often had a form of "ethnic capital" which marked their status and inclusion in a political space (Hoffman et al., 2020:127). This was balanced with the inclusion of another employee – for instance, someone with the perceived ethnic identity of an opposing armed actor. As drivers told me, the humanitarian status of local staff was often questioned at roadblocks: but, "when they see one of their brothers with us" – someone who is known locally – "they think ok, it's one of ours." The perceived ethnic identities and personal connections of local staff became instruments for access, and assistants helped with the strategic composition of MSF teams.

Congolese staff, and in particular assistants, sometimes accompanied coordinators to meetings with armed actors in order to translate for foreigners who might not speak Swahili or local dialects, and for interlocutors who might not speak French. This process was more complex than linguistic translation. There was often a second, simultaneous conversation, which foreigners could not understand, that acted as a form of aside. Another Congolese assistant, Richard, described his role as "reassuring" people: he guided his foreign colleagues whilst trying to "build trust" with armed groups by responding to side questions in Swahili, such as "What does this *muzungu* really want?" These interactions relied on a balance between performed "localness" of Congolese staff through language (Peters 2016) and the perceived remoteness of

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[79] "Pinga security plan 2011." MSF Holland, in author's possession, p.2.; "*1202 Sitrep Nord Kivu Fevrier."* 2012. MSF internal archives, Paris.
[80] "Security Incident Report: threats to national staff." 2014. MSF Holland, in author's possession.

unknown foreigners, performed through their lack of linguistic ability (Garrido 2017). In one meeting, for instance, a member of the APCLS told Richard that he had confidence Richard was telling the truth about MSF's intentions, as Richard was unable to escape the repercussions of lying. Yet, this combatant then asked Richard to leave the room – he would only share sensitive information with the "expat" who did not have links locally.

Translation was sometimes strategic: Congolese employees described adjusting meaning in these asides. It was impossible to "translate the tone and exact meaning" of what their colleagues said, and, at times, it was not necessarily desirable: "I didn't want to translate exactly how they *[expats]* said it: it would cause tensions, or didn't make much sense," one employee explained. At other times, it was not desirable to translate exactly what armed actors had said. Another Congolese employee described travelling with a mobile clinic, when an MSF convoy was stopped by members of an armed group. Speaking in Swahili, they explained that there had been some shooting that morning on the road. "However, they assured me it was safe for us. They asked me not to tell the *muzungu* because that might mean we would not come and deliver healthcare," this employee explained. Linguistic translation, as well as preserving language barriers, constructed multiple and overlapping spaces of exchange in a single meeting.

Mon réseau: Emmanuel

It is not just assistants who broker and translate: security is not a separate department, but "must remain the job of everyone."[81] Emmanuel worked for MSF in North Kivu, where he grew up, and during his first briefing with MSF, he learnt that "security also meant information." The project site was nestled between several warring armed groups, and changed hands several times, but Emmanuel had an advantage over his colleagues: he had a pre-existing network of family, friends and acquaintances in armed groups. He used these personal contacts to access reliable information about areas where it was not safe for MSF to travel and to help broker relationships for the organisation. Not only this, but Emmanuel had his own military experience. During the first Congo war, he had worked for the AFDL rebel group and after returning home, he had found a job with MSF, and gone on to work at several project sites over the years.

[81] "*Rapport de visite Nord-Kivu. Mars 2007*." MSF internal archives, Paris.

Emmanuel described how he turned his "military background into a strength." He was able to access information and warn his colleagues when not to move in a particular area, so "they *[expatriates]* realised I was useful for security." At one project, Emmanuel acted as an intermediary between MSF and several armed groups. The area was controlled by the CNDP – Emmanuel had links with several commanders from their time together in the AFDL and growing up in North Kivu – and Emmanuel also knew several important local elites who were acquaintances of his family. Emmanuel became an informal intermediary with another armed group when a wounded combatant needed to be reassured that he would not be harmed at an MSF hospital in a CNDP zone. The combatant wanted to speak in his mother tongue to someone from the same "ethnic community." Emmanuel fitted the profile, translated, and eventually persuaded the commander that MSF would guarantee his safety.

Emmanuel described a sort of military *savoir faire,* which meant that he was able to broker between military figures and humanitarians:

> I understood the military attitude. But at the same time, I came to understand the humanitarian attitude. My role became facilitating understanding between the two. I could do that because I had been on both sides.

When Emmanuel became a humanitarian, he described a personal transformation: he changed his "mentality." This process of identity formation will be examined in more detail in Chapter Eight. As Emmanuel saw it, "Beginning in an armed group can help you be a humanitarian, because you know what it is to be military. You know how to behave and interact, you are not scared." Emmanuel thought it was "easier for me to negotiate with armed actors, to get them to respect humanitarians. I can help with acceptance."

Employees like Emmanuel used their own personal contacts to access information for MSF: having a network was central to their humanitarian practice. Some had friends and family in political networks, others had their own historical experience in the political wings of armed groups, in provincial or territorial government, or civil society organisations. Others told me about their military pasts. Thousands of Congolese youth have been going in and out of armed groups for several decades, a process described as "circular return" (Vlassenroot et al*.,* 2018). NGOs and armed groups are both significant employers in the region. Some humanitarians have histories in rebel groups, and some rebels have histories as humanitarians. In a region

where networking with diverse armed actors is a resource, former rebels have the necessary *savoir faire* to help NGOs "manage security." Indeed, some of the brokers best placed to mediate between "state" and "non-state" networks are former combatants themselves (Stys et al., 2019). Meanwhile, urban university graduates with rural networks are ideal candidates both for the political wings of armed groups, and also for international NGOs (Buscher 2016). Rather than distinct, the worlds of "Aidland" and "armed groups" are overlapping and interlinked by individuals who do not just broker relationships between the two, but also move between them.

Other employees grew up locally, with family living nearby. During my visit to one project, for instance, a team of nurses was preparing to conduct outreach medical activities in a nearby health centre. In order to "check" the security of the roads, the project coordinator asked one of the members of the team for help. "It's his home," I was told, "he's going to phone around." Other employees brought extensive contacts from their past experience working in the Kivus. For instance, some had brokered mobility whilst working in the mining sector (Vogel and Musamba 2018), or as nurses in the government health structure, or as traders. The personal identities and histories of these employees are central to understanding MSF's everyday security management, and they became a resource for MSF teams when negotiating access. All staff were encouraged to share any information that might be pertinent to MSF's operations and were expected to network as part of their role. In short, they "did security" on the side.

Reading the road: Timothée

Timothée was a driver for MSF and I was told he was one of the most important "security contacts" for the project coordinator. Timothée grew up in North Kivu. After his father died, he left school to find work. He began as an errand boy for truckers, but eventually became a long-distance truck driver himself. For years, Timothée transported commercial goods across east Africa and gained an intimate experience of how to travel the roads near the MSF project site. As a truck-driver, Timothée also built an important network among armed commanders and local elites and he would ring these contacts in case of emergencies or in order to find out more about the security conditions on the road. In addition, Timothée built a network among the other long-distance drivers travelling the same roads: "We shared the same roads, so we also shared information," he explained.



Figure 12: MSF trucks stuck in the mud in North Kivu. Source: Personal Photograph 2018.

Timothée turned his knowledge of the road into a resource in the humanitarian sector. Whilst driving trucks he got to know an NGO driver, who suggested that Timothée join the NGO sector. Timothée got a job at MSF, and he brought with him an extensive, pre-existing network - he was able to collect information about the security conditions in areas where MSF travelled. Timothée explained that the rule was: "If you hear something that could help *la maison* (MSF), then you go and tell the project coordinator." Timothée described negotiating access as his "trade" – he knew how negotiate at roadblocks and interact with bandits. "It is routine, it is just one of the tasks of being on the road," he told me.

Like other drivers, Timothée had an important form of *metis* – practical knowledge about how to navigate a shifting social structure, acquired through practice and experience in a particular locality (Scott 1998:316). Timothée described how drivers read the road, explaining how security, like violence, is not a "thing" (Richards 1996), but an everyday experience with detectable locally determined signifiers. As another MSF driver explained to me, "My job is to know the roads and interpret them" in real-time, analysing the surroundings for the team. "I can pick up warnings," he explained, "things I see and sense, but also from people we pass, who might say *macho mbele* (eyes ahead) – a problem is coming up on the road." During mobile clinic trips in rural areas, whilst "nurses are doing their work," another driver described his role as talking to people and "taking the temperature." On several occasions, the information or "sense" that this driver acquired prompted the team to leave early. He concluded that drivers "have to react like a footballer, not a doctor", when it came to security. This referred to thinking and acting at the same time: "It is difficult to teach, it is instinct", he concluded.

Within MSF, it is widely known that drivers play a crucial role in negotiating access. In 2003, MSF France's former President, for example, described how "the driver is effectively an

ambassador, someone who mediates with local powerholders and with the population."[82] In North Kivu, drivers were described as MSF's *porte-parole* on the road. As one European MSF employee told me ("although it wouldn't be in the archives") his driver became the "preliminary link" to armed groups whilst conducting "exploratory missions" in North Kivu. As well as being well-connected, drivers are skilled in navigating "roadblock politics" (Schouten 2019), reflected by the fact that drivers are the "first line of contact" in cases of an aggression on the road, with foreign staff instructed to "act according to the advice of the driver."[83] One former project coordinator told me, "No matter how high up I get in the organisation, I always keep drivers close. Drivers are gold. I have hundreds of stories of how they have saved us in the field."

The Mwami Humanitarian

Patrique had been working for MSF for over a decade when we met. He came from an important family – a close relative was the *chef coutumier* (customary chief) of the *chefferie* in the territory where Patrique worked. Patrique joined MSF because it became clear that "MSF was working for the interests of my community." He described himself as wearing "*deux chapeaux"* (two hats), performing two roles simultaneously: customary authority and humanitarian. Patrique told me that his overlapping position helped with MSF's "acceptance": people trusted him and confided in him. As he explained, the *chefferie* was respected by some local armed groups which drew on a discourse of *autochthony,* or rights to the soil administered by the customary authority. In addition, national army commanders stationed nearby maintained close contact with the *chef coutumier,* which meant Patrique had access to information. Patrique worked closely with his foreign colleague: "people from the village come to talk to me, they say - *Mwami* be careful, and they share information with me for our *muzungu* friend." In fact, it was striking how many MSF employees had links to customary authorities. This was commented upon by one Congolese employee who contrasted his own modest origins: "No royal blood here!"

Patrique described the ceremonies he conducted for new project coordinators to welcome them to his "traditional soil", to illustrate his support and to help protect them: "I give them strength." After the ceremony, "people may fear the project coordinator" because they knew he had been blessed by the *Mwami,* Patrique told me. Employees like Patrique are not just technicians. Nor are they just well-connected brokers. Instead, they are humanitarian

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[82] "MSF France President's Report to the General Assembly." 2003. MSF internal archives, Paris.
[83] "Local Security Plan: Mweso." 2014. MSF Holland, in author's possession; "*Comportements secu recommandations."* 2010. MSF internal archives, Paris.

professionals who are also embedded in public authority structures. They conduct important technical work, but also help MSF teams collect information. These employees have important forms of identity capital (Dorronsoro and Grojean 2018) which become a resource for MSF, and their inclusion in the team has important symbolic value. Patrique possessed a symbolic form of identity-based resource, or "customary capital," which enabled him to exercise authority through the notion of "custom" (Hoffman et al., 2020:128). The political salience of chieftaincy is reproduced through rituals and ceremonies (Hoffman et al., 2020:125). In this project location, MSF has been integrated into ceremonies which have symbolic power in marking the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion in a territory. Patrique's customary capital became an asset for the MSF team.

Translating principles and protocols: *Promo santé*

At one project, I spent some time with a health promotion team. Posters in the office listed MSF's "principles" as well as "strategies" for how to "communicate them" - these included theatre and role-play. The health promotion team travelled to nearby rural areas to raise awareness about the medical services offered by MSF, but also to help "communicate" principles. Therese, a Congolese health promoter in North Kivu, told me that the team had a medical focus, but also an "acceptance strategy" - health promoters were "ambassadors for helping MSF be accepted." Therese described "translating" principles so that they were understood at a local level. The team were like "intermediaries" between MSF and the "population" who "help pass MSF's message," "exchange on priorities" and prevent "misperceptions" about MSF's work. In Therese's words, she learnt to speak the "language of humanitarianism" and to translate it into "local meanings."



Figure 13: MSF health promotors conduct "sensibilisastion" theatre sessions in Mweso, North Kivu. Source: Sara Creta/MSF

What did this translation look like in practice? One health promoter from North Kivu described it as "looking after MSF's image." He talked through the example of triage in health centres, highlighting a recurring dilemma: "Even if actions are dictated by what they (*MSF*) see as principles, there are always different interpretations of MSF's actions locally." He gave me an example from a few years earlier, when MSF prioritised the most vulnerable (children and women), or the most gravely ill, at a mobile clinic. However, this particular area had just experienced an intense period of violence. Patients in the health centre began to identify "patterns" amongst those being selected in the *triage* process and accused MSF of selecting people based on "ethnic belonging." At another health centre, this health promoter was asked why MSF prioritised under-five year olds, but had excluded a pregnant woman – surely, the unborn child was under five? He described a complicated conversation about when life begins, and admitted he was himself confused. More generally, some MSF employees told me that they were referred to as *mganga* (doctor) as a sign of respect. Their affiliation with MSF shaped how these employees were seen in their local community. *Mganga* also referred to the way that MSF staff (even those without medical training) could translate the organisation's medical protocols to events in everyday life. To take a simple example, MSF employees could navigate the

organisation's referral system for ambulances – they knew that a haemorrhage was critical enough for an MSF ambulance, and could summon one.

Congolese humanitarians, therefore, helped to negotiate the meanings that MSF's policies and principles acquired. They reproduced a binary of "local" and "non-local," with their own position as mediating between the two, making "local culture" legible to "internationals," and MSF's interventions legible locally in order to facilitate "acceptance." During their everyday work, these humanitarians navigated layers of translation and interpretation, as well as the strategic misunderstandings that form when global norms come into contact with specific settings (Appadurai 1990). During a security training for MSF employees in Europe, one of our trainers asked: "What do our principles really mean?" and someone in the group responded that MSF relies on local employees who "understand the context and help translate the principles." Indeed, the performance of principles in line with the specificity of a particular political locality has been framed in MSF as essential to security: the way to "reaffirm the cosmopolitan ethics" of MSF is to "reckon with its own cultural situated-ness" (Givoni 2016:259). According to this model, local employees help to "localise" these concepts in practice (Merry 2006), and their personal identities, histories, networks and experience become a resource through which to do so.

"AT RISK OR A RISK"

One European MSF employee in North Kivu described how "local staff's proximity means they are at risk themselves, or are a potential risk to MSF." The very embeddedness that was described as a resource when negotiating access and translating principles could also become a source of risk. Indeed, there are two main reasons Congolese staff do not occupy senior decision-making roles within MSF in their own country: in order to protect them, and in order to prevent any behaviour which might jeopardise MSF's image.

At risk

A senior MSF employee put it succinctly when he told me: "Because networking is such an important aspect of national staffs' jobs, there is a danger of forgetting how much they are exposing themselves." Congolese employees in North Kivu from diverse regions and with very different personal histories were unanimous in articulating how they felt more exposed than their foreign colleagues - subjected to pressure and coercion from armed actors. One assistant head of mission argued that armed groups do not "buy into" the humanitarian principles when

they are coming from "a local," making demands on them that they would not make of foreigners: for phone credit, for contributions at checkpoints, to hire certain personnel or purchase from certain suppliers, to pay taxes on salaries, or to give equipment and set-up systems of embezzlement. The MSF archives detailed multiple instances of forced recruitment of Congolese personnel by different armed groups,[84] as well as rackets concerning their salaries.[85] As one Congolese employee told me, locals were not always in a position where they could say no and, unlike their foreign colleagues, they were rooted, with families living nearby, which made them more vulnerable. Given these additional risks, such staff described attempting to keep a certain distance. For instance, one Congolese employee had been in contact with the leader of the APCLS, Janvier, for fifteen years in his capacity as an MSF employee, but he had never met Janvier in person. This employee did not want to stay in his role with MSF forever: If "people know you have influence, you end up exposed to pressures."

Rather than feeling protected in a sanitised "humanitarian space", employees from North Kivu described additional risks, which they faced *precisely because* they worked for MSF. Local humanitarians do not have access to the same security infrastructure as their foreign colleagues – for example, they are not evacuated during times of extreme violence. One nurse told me about working in North Kivu in 2008, when the team became trapped in heavy fighting between the CNDP and national army. Foreign employees were evacuated. Meanwhile, this nurse felt too exposed even to flee on motorbike taxi – she was known as someone who works for MSF (with the corresponding salary) and feared being a target of banditry.

For employees interacting with people they knew on a personal basis, things became more complex still. "I sometimes tell our staff: you are not interacting as brothers or friends now, you are wearing the MSF T-shirt," one European employee told me. Extensive interpersonal networks increased pressures. For instance, Bahati worked close to where he grew up and struggled to present himself as "only a representative of MSF." Friends made demands, asked for his help getting a job in MSF, or asked for payment for information that they gave him. Bahati also struggled to maintain a distance during his interactions with the leader of the militia in control of the area, who began to ring Bahati regularly on his personal phone. "I felt exposed," Bahati explained. He concluded that his links, as well as a resource, could also be a

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[84] "*Fiche Pays RDC 2010.*" 2010. MSF internal archives, Paris.; *"Sitrep Rutshuru Novembre 2010."* MSF internal archives, Paris.
[85] "OCA North Kivu mission sitrep November 2012." MSF Holland, in author's possession.

liability: "Armed groups find out about you, your origin, your family. There are normally links somewhere – they find and exploit any personal links between you and them, they make it harder to say no." Employees like Bahati found themselves in an impossible situation: how could they handle the tension between MSF's demands and values, and the demands of their local networks, when keeping both satisfied was central to their role and safety?

Ultimately, not everyone could perform humanitarian principles with the same ease. One experienced Congolese employee, Luc, described the need to choose the best person to play the humanitarian role. In his words, MSF already has the "lyrics" – MSF's principles and discourse. But teams on the ground have to decide: "who is going to sing the song?" It was necessary to choose the person who could most easily "get MSF's message across," taking into account how that person may be perceived, and the potential impact on MSF's operations. For many, their personal identity, situation in society, their perceived ethnic identity, or their military, political and personal histories made it difficult for them to be viewed as "MSF." Rather than being neutralised by the MSF logo, such identities and histories could place staff in danger: their humanitarian role was distrusted by armed actors. For example, humanitarians with military and political histories described the difficulty of presenting themselves as impartial to conflict. Employees with experience or links to Rwandan-backed rebellions of the past endeavoured to keep their background a secret from "self-defence" Mai-Mai who had mobilised against such rebellions. They feared being directly associated with the historical violence attributed to their former armed group. As one employee told me: "I did not tell anyone about my background. It can help with associated groups and specific individuals, but it's a problem for working with their rivals." Former combatants also avoided discussing their backgrounds with their colleagues, who themselves had complex histories and experiences of violence. "There were tensions within the team. To have military experience in the region where you work can be difficult," one summarised.

In addition, perceived "ethnic identity" affected the safety of different employees (Pottier 2006), mapping onto highly politicised discourses of *autochthony,* as well as histories of past violence. As the historian Gillian Mathys (2017:467) summarises, ethnic discourses have histories: "Multiple layers of history, memory and recurring waves of violence became condensed into (ethnicised) mental maps guiding interpretations of the past and the social present." Congolese humanitarians from North Kivu told me that they were often associated with the armed group "dominated by my community." During times of tension, this could place them at risk. One

former Congolese project coordinator assistant summarised how "MSF itself is accepted, but it's more difficult to get them *[armed actors]* to accept MSF staff from other communities." The problem, he explained, was that these staff were viewed as "implicated" in historical violence. The number one rule in MSF was "never to expose staff": teams took into account the impact of perceived ethnic identities on employees' security in the province.

A particularly extreme example emerged at MSF's project in Pinga, when power shifted between Nyanga and Hunde dominated groups, the NDC and APCLS. By the end of 2013, violence had escalated. NDC had taken control of Pinga during a period of fighting, which culminated in the leader of the group, Cheka, parading the decapitated head of an APCLS soldier in town. Hunde MSF staff fled in fear.[86] The behaviour of the NDC then changed over time. After several APCLS attacks, Cheka became convinced that the MSF team was complicit. "Cheka thought our Hunde staff were working for the other side. Some of our staff were arrested," a former employee remembered. Additionally, it became difficult to travel from NDC-controlled Pinga to a nearby APCLS-controlled area to conduct mobile clinics, as Nyanga MSF staff were accused of being NDC spies. One former project coordinator remembered how the APCLS refused to let MSF's convoy pass with a Nyanga employee in the car. "We were stuck for three hours," he remembered. The well-connected drivers eventually negotiated for the convoy to pass. At the checkpoint, however, the project coordinator remembered how "APCLS soldiers talked directly to our Nyanga employee, and said, 'Don't return, or we'll chop *your* head off.'" The "expatriate" team from the time concluded, "the humanitarian identity of the workers…is questioned" and, "some national staff are in tricky positions…staff are only to move in MSF convoys if they feel comfortable."[87]

Congolese employees described the sensitivity of being labelled "a Tutsi" as a humanitarian working in North Kivu, given the politicisation of an *autochthony* discourse among Mai-Mai militia and their opposition to supposed "foreigners" from Rwanda. After the invasion of Rwandan-backed armed groups, being perceived to be "a Rwandan Tutsi" became further politicised in the Kivu provinces (Mathys 2017). One employee from North Kivu told me: "armed groups don't look at the T-shirt you are wearing. We have a problem with *ethnicisme* here, something the Belgians brought us." Some humanitarians described being asked by Mai-

[86] "Sitrep Pinga project January." 2013. MSF Holland, in author's possession.
[87] "Security Incident Report Pinga January 2013." MSF Holland, in author's possession.

Mai militia, "what are you doing here? You're a Rwandan." Indeed, MSF recognised this sensitivity, and does not hire Rwandan nationals in the Kivu provinces.

Constituting a risk

As well as facing additional risks, locally embedded staff were seen within MSF to constitute a potential risk to the organisation itself: there was a concern that their behaviour might jeopardise the organisational image, and thus, security. There was some doubt as to whether certain staff could be neutral and impartial - or be perceived as such by armed actors. In response to the call for "localisation", one MSF think-tank argued that expecting local actors to adhere to humanitarian principles in conflict zones "might be nothing short of utopian" (Schenkenberg 2016:23). The reasons may be "intentional (e.g. from a conscious decision to privilege a particular group), unconscious (such as a repetition of culturally normalized patterns of exclusion), or driven by a (perceived) fear of immediate or future retaliation by local power actors" (Schenkenberg 2016:23). In this way, local proximity was seen as useful, but also limiting in MSF.

There remained some doubt about locals' commitment to "MSF spirit" which transcended "particular" attachments (Shevchenko and Fox 2008:116). As one former project coordinator put it, "Being MSF doesn't trump who they are. If a civil war erupted in my home, I'm not going to be neutral." Although the local team were essential for security, the project coordinator "didn't pretend any of them were neutral." There remained doubt surrounding some staff's commitment to *"comportement MSF"* (MSF behaviour) in a context of violent conflict. After tensions within the team and the discovery of a system of fraud in one project, for instance, it was concluded that local employees "know the MSF principles very well, but prioritise their own benefit (power, position, money) and their ethnicity over MSF."[88] In some instances, project coordinators described "ethnic" divisions within the team which had a negative "influence on MSF team spirit." In extreme cases, hospital staff from different communities were reluctant to treat patients from the "other side."[89] There were chronic tensions surrounding recruitment. At one project, MSF employees staged a protest at the perceived favouritism of Nande in recruitment: MSF's work became embroiled in ongoing contests about access to resources and *autochthony* at a territorial level (Jackson 2006). These instances of

[88] "Security Incident Report: threats to national staff." 2014. MSF Holland, in author's possession.
[89] "DRC *Sitrep* August-September 2014." MSF Holland, in author's possession.

division were taken as evidence that personal allegiances might be prioritised over "MSF behaviour." Although MSF relied on local employees and their identities, histories and networks for security management, the organisation did not fully trust local employees with the MSF flag *precisely because* of these local identities, histories and networks.

The interpersonal networks of local staff, for instance, were useful, but also viewed with some distrust. In response to rumours of Congolese employees being sympathetic to or allied with certain armed groups, foreign staff in North Kivu 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." Several foreign MSF staff described their unease at never knowing the extent of the links between their colleagues and armed actors. One former head of mission remembered how during one meeting, "the first thing the leader of this armed group did was to ask our colleague about his father – there were family connections, I had no idea." The number of local employees with histories in armed movements seemed to increase this perception of risk. Some Congolese staff admitted that they had not disclosed their background: although many Europeans and North American MSF employees had military histories, Congolese staff argued that their own military experience was viewed with suspicion because it situated them in local political contests. When I asked Emmanuel whether he had ever disclosed his past to "the expatriates", he exclaimed, "Of course not! Why would I do that?"

This distrust was aggravated by instances when MSF teams felt that the organisation's security had been "compromised" by the behaviour of local staff. For instance, there were cases of employees socialising with armed actors after work, or using MSF equipment for the administrative tasks of armed groups – "some willingly, but most out of survival," one project coordinator remembered. In a few extreme cases, local staff were discovered to have concurrent military affiliations: joining active combat in new waves of violence, or spotted in military uniform on their days off.[90] Humanitarians had military pasts, and some returned to their politico-military careers. At one project, the new Administrator of the Territory appointed by the newly installed rebel administration had been a former MSF employee: "I knew him well, we had to re-set boundaries," the former project coordinator remembered.

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[90] *"Dossier Secu Rutshuru."* 2012. MSF internal archives, Paris, p.1.; "Security Incident report: participation of MSF staff in armed fighting. April." 2013. MSF Holland, in author's possession.

MSF's "behaviour in the field" charter aimed to minimise behaviour in employees' personal lives that might disrupt a performance of principles – such as getting into disagreements whilst wearing an MSF T-shirt, or sleeping with prostitutes when they were supposed to be ambassadors of MSF at all times. Yet employees from nearby had their own histories and disagreements. What happened after working hours could impact on MSF's work. At one project site, for example, after the relationship between an employee and someone from a well-connected family soured, the MSF team received threats and was forced to withdraw. Elsewhere in the province, MSF vehicles were blocked repeatedly on the road. It transpired that these vehicles were not being stopped for any reason associated with MSF, but because the personnel in the convoy had unpaid debts.

In order to prevent local staff's behaviour compromising security, MSF teams held "repeated principle sessions."[91] Security plans for North Kivu instructed expatriates to "ensure that all staff know what MSF stands for," and to reinforce to local staff that "their behaviour can also be detrimental to the image/security of MSF…Being seen as too close/in favour/connected to specific groups can be a potential risk."[92] In one MSF section, a new training was developed to improve national staff's "understanding of MSF and its principles" given that national staff played such an "important role in communicating MSF's principles and activities," which was central to maintaining access.[93] The training aimed to "strengthen staff's ability to act as Ambassadors of MSF," but also to improve the relationships "between national and international staff" and generate "inter-cultural understanding." This was highlighted as important for the "security of MSF."[94]

In this way, local staff were also approached as a potential *source* of insecurity: a group with different interests and alliances which needed to be analysed in order to avoid "security incidents." "National staff are *part of the context,*" I was told. In effect, local staff were performers of principles, but also an audience for MSF's organisational performance: their perceptions of the organisation more broadly, too, were considered important for security (Abu-Sada 2012). As one senior MSF employee put it, "Many security problems came from within: issues of staff management and accusations of partiality in recruitment." Security guidelines stressed the

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[91] "Head of Mission Handover 2014." MSF Holland, in author's possession.
[92] "North Kivu April 2011 security plan." MSF Holland, in author's possession.
[93] "Review of Sanou for OCB Operations. October 2012." MSF Belgium, in author's possession, p.2.
[94] *Ibid,* p.3; "MSF OCB Security Policy." 2018. MSF Belgium, in author's possession, p.2.

importance of transparent and "balanced" recruitment processes to avoid "internal instability" within the MSF team and potential threats to the organisation - societal "tensions" were also reflected within "national staff."[95] One Congolese MSF nurse put it this way: employees of MSF "may betray *la maison* (MSF)" by sharing information with bandits if they perceived MSF to be partial, or if they felt personally wronged by a decision made by the MSF team. In the face of robberies targeting MSF's vehicles, there was suspicion of internal collaboration, "an internal leak" about the convoy's exact itinerary. Indeed, disgruntled staff have been identified as one of the main sources of insecurity for humanitarian organisations more generally (Fast 2014).

In sum, foreign staff also had to perform neutrality to their colleagues. As Rebecca Sutton (2018) describes, aid workers perform their "distinction" from military actors in order to appease the "phantom local" – a composite observer that combines beneficiaries, authorities and armed actors who could potentially harm humanitarians. The imaginary of this local audience depicts civilians as an "object of mistrust, fear and potential danger" (Sutton 2018:641). In North Kivu, MSF humanitarians did not just perform "distinction" from military actors; but performed the humanitarian principles to a local audience, which included their own Congolese colleagues.

COLLECTIVE BROKERAGE: THE FUNCTIONS OF DETACHMENT

The concerns that emerged in relation to local staff were balanced by the role played by foreign staff: MSF considers "complementarity" between "international" and "national" employees as central to maintaining its presence and security management (Hofman and Heller Pérache 2014). In North Kivu, Congolese employees also emphasised the importance of "complementarity." One Congolese employee argued that "expatriates" and Congolese work to "keep one another mutually safe. We do things together, like a couple who complement each other's weaknesses." Whilst some members of the team in North Kivu had useful interpersonal networks and identities, others were a fleeting presence on the political landscape, and were understood to be able to perform principles with more ease. Just as a "local-ness" was seen to hold operational functions, so was mobility and "foreign-ness" – a means of constructing "detachment" from ongoing, political contests (Redfield 2012).

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[95] *Ibid.*

Protective shields and Guardians of principles

Congolese staff remained assistants, but not heads of mission or project coordinators in their own country. As one former head of mission told me, this was in order to "protect them – my job is to shelter local staff from the risks that come with being that embedded. Being out of the context is a resource, we are less exposed." Foreign staff in North Kivu described their role as taking difficult decisions, withstanding pressure from armed interlocutors and political authorities, as well as "diffusing tensions" during these tense interactions, because as foreigners, they did not face the same pressures or risks as their local colleagues.

A former MSF head of mission in DRC wrote an opinion piece entitled "Expats: The Useful Idiots of Impartiality," arguing that "expatriate presence remains crucial for the delivery of humanitarian aid" in conflict. This, he explained, is because a foreign employee "has the one quality the national aid worker will never acquire: the ability to go home when things go wrong" (Hofman 2013). Local humanitarians who experience pressure to "divert aid" can use their "expatriate decision-maker" as a "handy scapegoat." Indeed, the security guidelines for newly arrived "expatriates" in North Kivu highlight the need to "protect national staff" who "need to be shielded" from making decisions.[96] Although drivers were essential negotiators on the road, MSF also placed a foreign employee in the convoy to alleviate the pressures put on Congolese employees during interactions with armed actors.[97] People in the convoy played different, complementary roles – nationality played a role, but so did race, which will be discussed in depth in the next chapter.

Congolese staff also saw their foreign colleagues as a form of protection. In the words of one driver, foreigners "bolster our humanitarian identity. Locals are mixed up in their own personal things." One senior Congolese employee, Luc, described what he and his colleagues termed the "*parapluie* (umbrella) strategy", whereby Congolese employees used their foreign colleagues to "cover" themselves from the demands of armed interlocutors. If an armed interlocutor demanded something he knew he could not give, Luc would explain that he needed to refer to his "expatriate boss," who would then explain MSF's principles with success. "What really helps is having an expatriate, who doesn't know anyone," he told me. "Armed groups don't demand the same things from expatriates, they don't have the same leverage." Bahati described his

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[96] "Security Incident Report: threats to national staff." 2014. MSF Holland, in author's possession.
[97] "Security Plan Mweso March 2009." MSF Holland, in author's possession.; "*Coordinateur Projet Fin de mission rapport Dec 08. Rutshuru.*" 2008. MSF internal archives, Paris.

foreign colleagues as his "*bouée de sauvetage"* (lifebuoy). When local commanders rang Bahati repeatedly making demands, Bahati's standard response was that he would have to ask his *muzungu* boss. In his words, "armed groups know they are blocked with expatriates."

Congolese employees described working in symbiosis with their colleagues: their role was "background work," often leaving more formalised negotiations to their foreign colleagues. Their role was "access but not content." There reached a certain point where Congolese employees felt exposed, and as I was told, "it is better if MSF's message comes from an expatriate." Bahati, for example, told me that his job was "to facilitate acceptance. I am in the middle of MSF and armed groups." But, this means there were things he could not do: "My job is information, guidance, but it is limited to that." A former MSF head of mission told me that teams "have a network of local staff, but everything is consolidated with an expatriate in the field. One cannot function without the other." In his words, security management is "a chain – local staff give us information, they open doors for negotiations." However, MSF "does not put them in the frontline." There is a moment where they "cannot go any further, then that is the role for the expatriate," he summarised.

Foreign employees of MSF in North Kivu described constructing themselves as impartial to the conflict, which helped to diffuse tensions and let them play the part of the protective shield: the combination of mobility and foreignness helped construct "detachment" from political dynamics. A former European employee in North Kivu put it this way:

> There is nothing better than sending a doctor who doesn't know their arse from their elbow when it comes to the conflict to talk to a warring party. They just explain: "This is what I do, I want to provide medicine here."

Whilst local staff helped to build trust initially, many of MSF's interlocutors only shared sensitive information with foreign staff, one Congolese employee explained, as "it can be easier to trust an outsider with sensitive information. After all, they won't be around long."

Because of the doubts surrounding the ability of some local staff to be "principled", foreign staff were also portrayed as guardians of humanitarian principles in practice (Schenkenberg 2016:16). Given that Congolese staff were subject to increased pressures, there were concerns that they might be forced to make unacceptable compromises. "Expat supervision" was put in

place to avoid systems of fraud - fuel or mechanical parts being sold on the side, or irregularities in pharmacy stocks. Locally employed Congolese staff were crucial to security management, but their interpretations were seen as partial. "Expatriate-only" meetings discussed sensitive information, and only "expats" were supposed to lead negotiations with armed groups in an official capacity in some projects.[98] MSF teams endeavoured to prevent local employees becoming powerful interfaces: "National staff guide you, but in a certain direction, so you need to do your own analysis", one former head of mission summarised. Instead, local staff's role was to "help collect information, but not take the decision", another project coordinator explained, because they cannot "give an analysis that isn't influenced by who they are." One former head of mission concluded that local staff could more reliably occupy coordination positions abroad in countries other than their own: "There, they can be neutral," he explained.

Imperial Duress

In Goma, Congolese staff working for other NGOs perceived MSF as the slowest to "localise." As one employee of another agency lamented: "Have you been to an MSF compound? It's like a mini-Europe in there!" Localising humanitarianism has been at the heart of recent reform efforts. The first argument behind localisation is pragmatic: given that people in the areas affected by crisis are the first to respond, empowering local actors is seen as a means of providing a more efficient, context-sensitive emergency response. Local actors, it is argued, have a comparative advantage in terms of access: they are physically close, but also possess networks and a better understanding of the historical and cultural specifics of the context (IFRC 2018:2), which means they have greater legitimacy and are more trusted by "the population" (Stoddard and Harmer 2006:31). When international actors "struggle to gain access," they could rely on "local" organisations to "reach conflict-affected communities" (Stephen et al., 2017:4).

The second argument is a moral one: localisation is a means of rectifying (post)colonial power imbalances between the Global North and South. Localisation aims to prevent insensitive interventions that marginalise local actors, bypass their priorities and needs, reproduce forms of domination and exclusion and fail to build existing local capacity that is central to future disaster preparedness (Roepstorff 2020; Zyck and Krebs 2015; de Torrenté 2013). In order to make humanitarianism more effective and equitable then, the entire humanitarian system needs

[98] "Local security plan Mweso 2016." MSF Holland, in author's possession.

to be "turned on its head" (Gingerich and Cohen 2015). After the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, several donors and agencies committed to giving 25% of funds to local actors by 2020.[99]

How does MSF fit into this broader debate? MSF's internal reflection about the role of "national staff" aimed to promote equality. After *La Mancha* accords in 2006*,* teams in North Kivu answered a questionnaire about whether there should be "limits on the role/responsibility of national employees in your given context." One head of mission from the time responded that Congolese staff "are more of a target for authorities to influence MSF policies, and this can also have security implications for them." The head of mission concluded that the localisation debate needed to focus on how "MSF reaches its external goals (charter), and not some misplaced political corrected-ness", because MSF "has a job to do and we want the best man/woman for the job…some jobs need an expat and some need a national."[100] Ultimately, MSF's collective brokerage model is designed to keep everyone safe, but it nonetheless reproduces hierarchies within the organisation's employees.

On the one hand, the risks faced by locally embedded humanitarians illustrate a potential paradox of localisation: by putting local actors in top positions, humanitarian agencies may in fact make their jobs more difficult, endangering certain lives all in the name of empowerment and of valuing all lives equally. The argument that humanitarians should take the chance to "indigenise", so solving the "perennial challenge" of lack of local ownership, as well as the supposed increased security threats for Western humanitarian workers (Stoddard and Harmer, 2006:39), overlooks the fact that the majority of attacks are on "national staff." Localisation may in fact transfer risk onto those who are already the most exposed. In MSF, rather than calling for changes to the existing structure of foreigners in top positions, Congolese staff instead called for more opportunities for nationals to get expatriated abroad – to become foreigners in senior positions elsewhere. One head of mission assistant concluded that even if MSF asked him to become Head of Mission in North Kivu, he would refuse: "Head of mission abroad, as an expatriate? Of course! But here? No thank you, that would be impossible."

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[99] "The Grand Bargain – A Shared Commitment to Better Serve People in Need". 2016. https://www.agendaforhumanity.org/sites/default/files/resources/2018/Jan/Grand_Bargain_final_22_May_FINAL-2.pdf [Accessed April 2020].

[100] "Questionnaire: Role of national staff in your mission DRC." 2007. MSF Holland, in author's possession.

That said, MSF's model nonetheless reactivates power imbalances from the colonial era between foreign decision-makers and their "native assistants" (Lawrance et al., 2006). In *Duress,* Ann Stoler (2016:21) encourages scholars to delve into the "messy, troubled spaces of ambiguous colonial lineages", the ways that a durable, colonial "presence" has "tangible and intangible effects" on contemporary political landscapes. The impacts of colonial histories on the present day, she argues, are neither marked by simple continuity, nor rupture. Instead, we must explore how imperial effects are "partial, distorted" - exerting a subtle, yet lasting influence on social life, as if "everywhere and nowhere at all" (Stoler 2016:5). Imperial duress lingers in the security discourses of NGOs, the perceived dangers that "proximity" presents to "neutrality," and the binary between "universal" and "local." Only certain employees are understood to be "neutral." The description of locally hired staff as open to corruption, or tied up in "ethnic" particularistic loyalties, reactivates colonial discourses of Otherness, (Kothari 2006; Grovogui 2001:445; Depelchin 2005:85), with the universal "encompassed by the Westerner" (Mudimbe 1988:46). Whilst the personal identities of local employees are potential tools for access, they are also limiting for these humanitarians. "There are some tasks you just can't trust to a national," one European MSF employee summarised.

Meanwhile, the detachment of foreigners needs to be protected because it is seen an important resource. Structural elements of humanitarianism which are usually identified as weaknesses, such as thematic rather than contextual knowledge amongst "expats" (Autesserre 2014), or mobility (Redfield 2012), in fact seem to hold functions within MSF: helping to preserve a degree of (perceived or real) detachment of staff from the complexities of conflict in the site of intervention. As one MSF employee explained, there are time-limits on missions in North Kivu to prevent "expatriates becoming too implicated" at a local level, which could impact how that individual, and thus MSF, was perceived. Much like the colonial regimes of the nineteenth century (Cooper and Stoler 1997), humanitarian organisations have set constraints on the intimate details of employees' private lives (Beerli 2018). Personal relationships are understood through a security logic in North Kivu: foreign staff must not become too socially entangled. In project sites, sexual relationships between foreign employees and Congolese citizens, including MSF's locally hired staff, are forbidden. This is made explicit in the "expatriate codes of conduct,"[101] as well as security at briefings for newly arrived staff. These rules aim to prevent

[101] "Local security plan Mweso 2016." MSF Holland, in author's possession. "Security plan profile North Kivu final April 2011." MSF Holland, in author's possession.

abuses of power, to avoid tensions within the team, as well as "perception problems" locally. If staff are representatives of MSF at all times, then sexual relationships could potentially endanger the organisation's reputation and "jeopardise" MSF's "principles, mission…and image."[102]

In this way, MSF staff have to balance proximity and distance to the local environment, managing a tension between engagement and containment (Cooper and Stoler 1997; Enria 2018). The aims and actors have changed, but they still involved the maintenance of distance between foreign interveners and local populations – a politics of exclusion (Stoler 1995). In MSF, although Congolese staff were crucial to everyday operations, they remain part of the "local context." Security protocols defined and formalised "acceptable" behaviours which would not disrupt the performance of principles, but in doing so, they reproduced internal borders (expatriate/national, neutral/implicated) within humanitarian agencies themselves (Beerli 2018). The fact that local staff were themselves seen a source of potential security threats, part of the "phantom local" (Sutton 2018) to whom MSF must perform, further reproduced these hierarchies of expatriate/national, us/them. Foreign staff were forbidden from "going native" (Cooper and Stoler 1997:5).

CONCLUSION

The everyday practices of brokerage and translation conducted by local employees are crucial to how humanitarian organisations work in fragmented and militarised political landscapes. Brokers of humanitarianism operate in the fragmented politics of contemporary armed conflict where different authority structures intersect (James 2011:318) and governance is a sea of shifting political settlements (Vlassenroot et al*.,* 2008). In eastern DRC, the ability to broker this uncertainty (Vogel and Musamba 2018), to network and translate, to move and to transport, has become a crucial form of *savoir faire* for the politics of everyday life and for the local job market.

Congolese staff are essential to understanding MSF's security management in North Kivu. They are brokers and translators, as well as technicians. However, they mediate a complex position whilst conducting a humanitarian role – balancing their personal and humanitarian identities. On the one hand, the "relational and interpretive labour" of local humanitarians are central to negotiating access for the delivery of humanitarian relief (Peters 2020). Local employees

[102] "OCA 2012 standard framework responsible behaviour." MSF Holland, in author's possession.

maintain a network of actors, analyse and translate between their interests and help "localise" principles. During the process, they "transform, translate, distort and modify" the meanings of the concepts (Latour 2005:39). Local employees' identities become a resource during this process, enabling them to collect information from personal networks or to gain access to certain areas. They hold symbolic forms of "identity capital" that MSF teams can draw from during humanitarian practice (Dorronsoro and Grojean 2018; Hoffman et al., 2020). Drawing on past experience, local employees also possess situated knowledge about how to navigate a shifting political landscape. These identities, histories and networks are a crucial counterweight to the transience of their foreign colleagues.

On the other hand, local humanitarians encounter great risks, balancing competing and contradictory demands. Their position is further complicated by the importance placed on performing principles in MSF: they face distrust precisely because of the personal identities, histories and networks that are central to their role. They are required to represent MSF in a "field" where they are already known quantities. Humanitarianism is built on the idea of universal humanity, overlooking the fact that not everyone can perform neutrality with the same ease. Therefore, although the embeddedness of local staff is central to MSF's work, it is counterbalanced by the supposed distance of foreign staff, who help protect their colleagues and safeguard MSF's (perceived) neutrality and impartiality. This collective brokerage model is built on complementarity, but is not an egalitarian practice. Proximity both defines and limits certain employees' role – they will never be leader of the club, because they cannot perform principles with the same ease, to armed actors, or to their own humanitarian colleagues.

In our final meeting, for example, Emmanuel concluded that his links were an asset in MSF, but meant that he "couldn't evolve" in the organisation. Emmanuel's experience encapsulates what could be termed a "security curse" – his role was fixed to a certain locality, he was useful where he was. Emmanuel's personal and military contacts and identity became a resource, he possessed a form of situated knowledge about how to navigate a particular context, gained through personal experience. But it was thematic specialisation that enabled locally hired staff to move up the hierarchy or get expatriated abroad - *techne* knowledge which could be implanted elsewhere (Scott 1998:320). Emmanuel, however, was not promoted and did not develop his technical skills – he was under the impression that "they *[expatriates]* knew I was useful here, but saw me as too implicated in local politics."

6. THE DONKEY RULE: WHITENESS, SECURITY AND DETACHMENT

INTRODUCTION

I first heard about the donkey rule at a Sunday afternoon barbecue by Lake Kivu in Goma. Outside the compound walls, white Land Cruisers displaying the emblems of an array of different international humanitarian organisations spilled onto the pavement. Inside, humanitarian workers were dotted around a spacious lawn overlooking the lake. That afternoon, I was introduced to a former MSF employee, Carl. After listening to my research pitch, he responded: "I suppose you'll be interested in the donkey rule." I wondered at first whether we were speaking at cross-purposes. It was the first I had heard of donkeys.

Yet, donkeys were to become a recurrent theme in my explorations of MSF's everyday security practices in North Kivu. As Carl explained to me that afternoon, the donkey rule refers to the presence of a "white expatriate" in the front of an MSF convoy, placed there to protect the rest of the team. As a security measure, foreign staff were often placed in convoys. When conditions were especially dangerous, donkeys were white. The donkey rule was not always applied, nor was it uniform across North Kivu. Rather, donkeys were used when MSF perceived a heightened security risk for their teams. Donkeys were used in convoys crossing frontlines between different warring parties, or when transporting an injured combatant through a zone controlled by their adversary. After one robbery of an MSF convoy, for example, the team specified that "all road movements…should have at least one white expatriate in the movement."[103] Such "white expatriates" were called "donkeys" because their role is simply to get the team "from A to B."

So, how do donkeys help protect MSF teams? The logic, I discovered, is as follows. First, the white face acts as a signifier of neutrality: someone "visibly detached" from the local conflict, with no local ties. Whereas the neutrality of Congolese staff may be questioned, and a black expatriate may be confused with a Congolese citizen, white faces in an MSF convoy bolstered the image of the organisation as neutral, impartial and independent to the different warring parties in North Kivu. The second reason was a consequentialist argument: whiteness was seen as a resource because it seemed to signify a life worth more than others. There was a perception

[103] "Road evaluation report Pinga-Mweso 16 August 2010." MSF Holland, in author's possession. "Pinga Security Plan 2011." MSF Holland, in author's possession.

that armed groups were less likely to attack a convoy with a white expatriate out of fear of international repercussions or a concern with international reputation. Third, whiteness was understood as protective because it supposedly conjured up narratives of racial superiority from the colonial era – a "complex" towards white skin - which encouraged restraint or deference on the part of armed actors. Whiteness became another instrument of humanitarian access for MSF teams.

This chapter explores how whiteness functions in everyday humanitarian practice in North Kivu. I argue that the way that different humanitarian staff are perceived and the forms of situated power they hold are not *only* defined by nationality or degrees of mobility as the last chapter described, but also by race (or as MSF sometimes euphemistically calls it, "morphology."[104]) Race sometimes overlaps with nationality, but at other times it stands alone as a key marker of detachment and power. Whiteness remains a powerful symbol in North Kivu with historically specific and locally contingent meanings. Whereas discussions of race remain muted within the humanitarian sector and euphemised by foreign staff, whiteness was mentioned by every single one of my Congolese interviewees. Discussions about whiteness – its connotations and uses in different contexts – became central to understanding processes of security management and negotiations with armed groups. Race, security and detachment were understood as deeply interlinked.

As the last chapter explained, Congolese staff described their foreign colleagues as a form of protection, a "*parapluie"* that Congolese staff use to "shelter" themselves from the demands of armed actors. "What really helps", Luc told me, "is having an expatriate who is seen as neutral and doesn't know anyone." But Luc also qualified his position: "Expatriate *parapluies* help, but less so when they are black. The problem is they aren't automatically identified as "expatriate," as neutral, so they don't have the same protecting impact. Being white here is important." The importance placed on race was echoed by drivers, logisticians, outreach nurses, and a range of assistants working for MSF. In short, my interviewees were clear that it was whiteness, specifically, that offers a form of protection. By focusing on their perspectives, in this chapter I delve into the under examined, localised understandings of whiteness – its meanings, its significance, how it is co-constituted, as well as the *social functions* it holds for those who are not labelled "white." In short, I examine how race functions in performances of humanitarianism.

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[104] "Risk taking and security management policy for MSF OCP staff." 2015. MSF internal archives, Paris.

The donkey rule is an example of how whiteness becomes a strategic tool in everyday humanitarian practice.

The chapter is structured as follows. To begin, I give a brief overview of the existing studies on race and whiteness in aid intervention and delve into its ambiguous meanings in the DRC. In the subsequent sections, I tease out three areas in which whiteness was seen as an advantage: first, by looking at the way it signified organisational neutrality; second, by considering how it seemed to encourage restraint by drawing on armed actors' concerns for international repercussions; and third, by exploring how it conjured up a colonial era "complex" towards white skin. Along the way, I complicate the picture of how race operates in these interactions, stressing how nationality intersects with race, how race plays a different role with different armed actors, and how the meanings of *muzungu* and whiteness diverge. To conclude, I describe how race remains an uncomfortable topic within the humanitarian sector and in MSF particularly – a sector and an organisation committed to colour-blindness. Yet, by sometimes instrumentalising whiteness as a resource, MSF's everyday humanitarian practice is shaped by, and reproduces, the very racial hierarchies that its egalitarian values seek to transcend.

RACE AND HUMANITARIANISM

Race and Aid

Race is a "socially constructed and historically fluid" category (Omi and Winant 2015:x). But, as the philosopher Charles Mills (1997:xiv) wrote, "Room has to be made for race as both real and unreal: race can be ontological without being biological, metaphysical without being physical, existential without being essential, shaping one's being without being in one's shape." So, what is whiteness? The study of whiteness emerged in the United States when W.E.B Du Bois (1970) described how white identity operated as a (too often invisible) form of power that perpetuated discrimination. Whiteness is not a static or uniform category: the boundaries of whiteness shift and change in different localities, but also over time (Roediger 2005). Whiteness means different things to different people in different places: as "whiteness travels the globe, it reinvents itself locally upon arrival" (Twine and Gallagher 2008:10).

There remains a striking silence on the topic of race in studies of aid. As Adia Benton (2016:268) points out, whilst anthropological critiques focus on power, they have not explored how humanitarianism is organised "along racial lines, alongside those of national citizenship and

class." For example, Peter Redfield (2012) and Didier Fassin (2007) describe the hierarchies of humanitarianism between "foreign" and "local" employees, but they only mention race in passing. Redfield (2012) describes the "double binds" encountered by MSF as it tries to operationalise its vision of being *sans frontières,* illustrating the tensions that result from the "unequal states of motion" between its "international volunteers circulating between missions" and the "national staff hired…at specific project sites." As I illustrated in the last chapter, "attachment" and "transience" amongst staff hold operational functions (Redfield 2012:370): mobile foreigners with few ties try to construct themselves as distant from local conflicts in order to insulate themselves (and their colleagues) from risk. Redfield goes on to mention how "the shadow of race loomed large," particularly in "an African context" where "physical appearance sharply distinguished the majority of expats from the surrounding population" (Redfield 2012:374). Yet, Redfield does not explore how this visible difference might also influence the ability of humanitarians to construct themselves as distant and detached, nor its influence on who faces risks where. The aim of this chapter is to illustrate how this visible difference has *operational functions* for humanitarian teams.

Fassin's (2007) notion of humanitarianism as a "politics of life" describes a hierarchy of life in MSF between "higher value" expatriates and "national staff" with "only limited protection." Fassin mentions that protagonists to a conflict are aware of this hierarchy: internationals become kidnapping risks because they have a higher "market value." However, he only mentions race once: "distinctions are set up between foreign staff, almost always western and white, and local employees" (Fassin 2007:516). He does not explore how race is a signifier of protected life which can stand apart from nationality, nor the impact race has on the security of humanitarians in different contexts. In the Sahel, for instance, Fassin's (2007) characterisation seems to hold, yet this politics of life is also racialised: MSF responded to the kidnap risks posed to Western staff by jihadist groups by imposing restrictions not just on nationality, but also race – whiteness was a marker of the West, and seen as a risk (Hofman and Heller Pérache 2014; Chkam and Hofman 2013; Issoufou 2018). In contrast, in North Kivu, whiteness was described as a facilitative mechanism for MSF field operations. It is therefore important to give ample consideration to the way race shapes how life is given specific meaning and value *in different contexts*.

Several academics have pointed out how authority, expertise and knowledge are racialised in aid work (Crewe and Fernando 2006; Roth 2015). Sarah White, for example, argues that the

dominant colour-blind stance of development reproduces racial hierarchies, and describes how her "whiteness opened me doors, jumped me queues, filled me plates" (White 2002:408). Uma Kothari (2006:17), in contrast, describes being "devalued" in contrast to her white colleagues:

> Decisions about which of us should undertake field visits appeared to be based on who would be taken more seriously and wield more authority rather than on who had more appropriate experience and knowledge.

Robtel Pailey (2019:16) similarly describes how Western whiteness remains "a signifier of expertise" in development and the "referent of power, prestige and progress across the world," whilst Adia Benton describes how African expatriates work in an aid infrastructure where "assessments of their expertise, mobility and professional success are racialised," calling for research on how racial structures of inequality "shape the everyday practices of humanitarianism" (Benton 2016:270).

In this chapter, I make a slightly different point. Whiteness indeed operates as a default in humanitarianism, symbolising power and supposed expertise. However, as the different dynamics in the Sahel suggest, whiteness also means different things in different places. It acquires a web of other, multiple and unstable local meanings that are historically and situationally contingent. These meanings also impact on who can perform the role of a humanitarian in different contexts: race intersects in complex ways with nationality and mobility to influence who holds power, who faces risks, and how humanitarians are perceived. In the DRC, whiteness became another instrument of humanitarian access used by MSF teams - the power of whiteness is used strategically as a form of protection in the brokerage club. I examine, therefore, how people not considered "white" in the DRC perceive and co-constitute whiteness: how it is made, what it means, and crucially, the social functions it holds.

Whiteness in the DRC

Before I describe how whiteness functions in MSF teams, I want to highlight that analyses of the politics of race in Africa are strikingly rare (Zyl-Hermann and Boersema 2017).[105] Exploring whiteness in contemporary Africa reveals a form of privilege which is not invisible, but hyper-

[105] With the exception of studies that examine the experience of white minorities in post-apartheid South Africa and post-settler countries (Steyn 2001; Fisher 2010).

visible, reflecting complex colonial histories and conjuring up collective memories of domination (Hendriks 2017). Social and economic relationships on the continent are still shaped by hierarchies based on racial power, and the local meanings of whiteness have an "intimate relationship with global practices of race" (Pierre 2012:98). The power of whiteness appears to be a lasting effect of mental colonisation - imperialism shaped how Africans understand themselves in relation to others (Fanon 1952; Thiong'o 1986:153). In eastern DRC, whites are often associated with money and modernity, and proximity to whiteness acts as a sign of status (Ndaliko 2016:25). Blacks must prove their status, whereas for whites it is assumed (Pierre 2012:77).

In the DRC, I argue that whiteness has a multivalent, unstable meaning, but is nonetheless a form of power. By examining how white expats construct their identities and how they are perceived by their Congolese employees on a logging concession, Hendriks (2017:697) aptly describes this ambiguity of whiteness, which is fragile and contested, but is at the same time reinforced as a structure of power. Benjamin Rubbers' (2006) work also helps make sense of this ambiguity: he describes how people in Haut-Katanga region interpret the tragedy of Congolese postcolonial history through four narratives: the abandonment of Congo by Belgium, the biblical curse on Africans, the conspiracy of Western capitalism, and the alienation of life forces by white people. These contradictory stories are employed in unison, with whites portrayed as "sometimes beneficent, sometimes maleficent. However opposite, the two images grant him absolute power" (Rubbers 2006:283). Skin colour becomes a "social framework of collective memory" (Rubbers 2006:283).

In North Kivu, whiteness is simultaneously used as a protective resource in humanitarian operations, while remaining fragile and even flexible in practice. Congolese MSF staff spoke in terms of a binary: black or white, despite the long histories of Arab and South Asian traders in eastern Congo (Renault 1988). Foreign humanitarians found themselves slotted into this binary – for instance, one Tunisian MSF employee pointed out that they were considered white in Congo, but African-Arab in France. European, *muzungu* and *blanc* were often used interchangeably by my Congolese interviewees, described in contrast to Black Africans - "*les noirs*." It became clear that *muzungu* was used unambiguously to refer to white foreigners. However, as I illustrate, although whiteness and *muzungu* overlap, *muzungu* is a concept distinct from whiteness. In Kiswahili, it translates literally as someone who wanders around. In the Great Lakes region, it came to refer in the 18th century to European explorers who seemed to

wander aimlessly. Whilst wandering foreigners now may be equated with whiteness in the local imaginary, the essential features of *muzungu* were originally foreignness and mobility.

A SIGNIFIER OF NEUTRALITY

Wandering foreigners: visible foreignness

So, why is whiteness viewed as a security management tool for MSF in North Kivu? The first explanation given by Congolese staff was that whiteness creates a *visible* indication of foreignness, communicating organisational neutrality and detachment from local interests. In effect, whiteness is a prop in the performance of neutrality to armed interlocutors: it embodies the organisation and its principles, along with the MSF emblem, the white T-shirt, white flag and white Land Cruiser (Latour 2005). Race, in short, becomes an instrument in performances of humanitarianism – a tool in the identity kit for performing neutrality.

To illustrate these dynamics, consider the case of referrals - the transportation of patients by MSF vehicles to nearby health facilities. In one rural project I visited, MSF had been supporting a hospital and nearby health centres for over a decade, and referrals were a well-established part of their informal collaborative agreement with local armed groups. The process of collection was at times particularly sensitive, especially when transferring armed actors through areas controlled by opposing groups, and MSF needed actively to demonstrate its impartiality and neutrality. At the MSF base, I heard remarkably similar arguments from different Congolese staff that *"les blancs"* (white staff) were important to have on board during referrals. For instance, Hector, one experienced outreach nurse, emphasised the importance of white expatriates in persuading an armed group to allow a convoy to pass through their zone of control, whilst transferring an injured combatant from "the other side." He argued that expatriates "protect us": "When they see an expatriate - white, not black - they let us pass, they stop firing." He summarised: "In North Kivu, when you see someone white, you see neutrality – it's a *muzungu*, he has come here just to give us medicine." By contrast, "Congolese humanitarians are brothers, they could be spying, giving information to their community', and black expatriates could be mistaken for "a brother from around here."

This view was reiterated back in Goma. A Congolese former project coordinator assistant told me that armed groups "cannot tell the difference between us blacks: there is a risk of confusion." *Muzungus*, however, are "easy to recognise as foreign: it's visible." He described

white skin as linked with perceptions of neutrality: the individuals seemed detached, not embedded in local political networks. Trust in him, in contrast, would be limited: "Perhaps I have a friend or family in politics, perhaps I'll accidentally tell my wife something and she will have contacts with the other side." In short, "being white, or being black" was crucial to perceptions of political proximity or distance from the local context.

I spent time chatting with MSF drivers on the road in North Kivu. At one project site, I spent the afternoon with Moise, the head of motorcycle drivers, who described the process of planning a convoy through a nearby rural zone in order to support health clinics or organise mobile clinics. First, amongst the team, Moise selects a "representative" of the local community as a "way of comforting" the population, a "security cover which keeps the rest of the team safe." Second, the rest of the convoy must be "balanced" with staff from communities other than those in control of that area. Finally, there must be someone "neutral" in the convoy. In sensitive zones, Moise explained that "if they *[armed groups]* are interacting with me, they know it is just a brother, a Congolese. They may not trust my word or believe the humanitarian principles from me." *Muzungus*, however, "provide acceptance"– they are believable as neutral.



Figure 14: MSF team in Nyanzale, 2017, Source: @MSFCongo Twitter.

Moise's colleagues agreed, but argued that the presence of *muzungus* was only necessary at the start of MSF presence, during "hot" periods, or at the start of a new relationship with an armed group. *Muzungus* "bolster the humanitarian identity" of their Congolese colleagues, one driver told me. But over time, their relevance wanes. "Armed groups learn", I was told, "they understand that we are neutral, [that] it is MSF, even without the *muzungus*." Once back in Goma, I asked drivers with experience in the *Petit Nord* about whiteness in convoys. One driver suggested that this was an obvious question: "Yes, of course, having whites in the field is important, we need them. Goma, it's different, it's a cosmopolitan city, but in Masisi, whites still play a crucial role."

In effect, whiteness is understood as central to the construction of medical neutrality in practice. Medical neutrality is not a universal norm or abstraction, but "works as a tool or stance that is thoroughly political, social and cultural" (Benton and Atshan 2016:153). As Redfield (2013:118) writes, neutrality is "as much a strategic weapon of the weak as a hegemonic assumption of the powerful": in North Kivu, it was described as a form of protection by Congolese humanitarians working in conflict environments. Yet, in order to work as such, neutrality must be translated in line with the specific social and political conditions of the area – and then performed (Goffman 1956). In North Kivu, foreignness became a means for MSF medical operations to perform distance from local political contests – constructing an image of mobile outsiders without connections or alliances. Whiteness, then, became a signifier of this detachment: an important identity marker in the performance of principles. Peter Redfield (2012) entitled his essay on the mobility of MSF expats "The Unbearable Lightness of Expats", playing on Kundera's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. This playful title could be taken one step further (Benton 2016) – the mobility of expats is signified by their literal, physical "lightness."

"The black is the *muzungu*"

But, where does this leave the mobile, international employees of colour, who are not immediately identifiable as *muzungus* because of their "lightness"? In one case, a senior black "expatriate" MSF employee visited a project in North Kivu. He was frustrated that the Congolese project staff did not put him in the front of the convoy, but instead asked for a white woman who was on her "first MSF mission." Former (white) heads of mission remembered how the donkey rule was a touchy subject: "We avoided a one-size-fits-all, it was not always put in place, and sometimes the logic was not clear at all to us," one remembered. One white project

coordinator had argued that the donkey rule was discriminatory against black employees, despite the fact that her Congolese colleagues advised her to put it in place. Ultimately, I was told that the "expatriate team" often took the advice of Congolese staff - especially experienced drivers who were from the particular locality.

Whilst travelling with the MSF team, I was invited to sit in the front seat of a truck with Claude, an experienced driver who gestured to different parts of the road, relaying stories of robberies and difficult frontline negotiations. Claude also recounted an anecdote. Whilst travelling in Masisi territory, an MSF convoy was stopped by bandits. There were two "expatriates" in the car, Claude remembered, one "visibly expatriate" and the other a "black African expatriate." The bandits became violent towards the African as they thought he was Congolese and pretending not to understand their Swahili. Claude concluded from this story that "both black and white expatriates are respected" as foreigners but "it takes longer" for armed actors to recognise that "blacks are foreign."

Another afternoon, Claude recounted a story about how, when he was driving with a former, black African project coordinator, armed group members on the road repeatedly expressed confusion as to who was the expatriate boss:

> They'd ask me: *"Muzungu ni wapi?"* (Where is the muzungu?) I'd reply that "*apana, c'est lui, iko le chef*" (no, it's him, he is the boss), whilst gesturing at our African project coordinator. In the end, they'd conclude, "*le noir ni le muzungu*" (the black is the *muzungu*.)

Black African expatriates therefore could not so easily mobilise visible detachment. Nor did the colour of their skin communicate power or status with the same immediacy. Local imaginaries of detachment and neutrality, as well as authority, remain racialised (Benton 2016). In other words, black African expatriates found it harder to perform a humanitarian role – a role which was racialised in North Kivu.

Claude's account also gives an indication of the more nuanced ways that *muzungu* and whiteness diverged: *muzungu* was used metaphorically to refer to the black project coordinator because of his political power and socioeconomic status, and his foreignness. Indeed, *muzungu* is sometimes used to refer to wealthy Congolese because they share whites' *kizungu* (modern lifestyle)

(Rubbers 2009; Fabian 1995): progress, status and "modernity" remain racialised, embedded in colonial racial logics (Thiong'o 1986:153). The social function of whiteness in humanitarianism was that it indicated foreign-ness, detachment and therefore, a perception of neutrality. *Muzungus* – foreign, mobile bosses who were not easily identifiable as such – therefore had to be actively made or constructed as *muzungus* through face-to-face interactions, with the help of their local colleagues. The boundaries of whiteness seemed flexible and constructed: difference had to be "done" or made through interaction (West and Fenstermaker 1995).



Figure 15: MSF convoy in Masisi territory. Source: Personal Photograph 2018.

Different white tribes

Whilst whiteness was understood as a signifier of neutrality useful for protection on the road, the way it functioned in face-to-face interactions with different armed groups was more nuanced. Race and nationality intersected in the construction of supposed detachment, depending on the history of the armed group and their relationship with different European countries. One former project coordinator assistant described his role as setting up a performance. As the institutional memory, he observed how different armed interlocutors

responded to different MSF project coordinators from different countries. It was a matter of "finding mechanisms to gain acceptance", whilst ensuring that the "mechanism" does not fudge MSF values.

Other Congolese employees confirmed that nationality was indeed important to take into account when deciding who could perform a humanitarian role effectively: "There are different white tribes," I was told. In face-to-face meetings, armed interlocutors also wanted to know which country foreign MSF staff were from. Congolese humanitarians described being asked in Swahili "What does your boss want to talk about?" and then, "Your boss, what nationality is he?" "I'm asked that with all *muzungu* colleagues," one Congolese humanitarian explained. The national identity of different humanitarians was associated with the histories of different European countries in the Great Lakes region. I was told that it was sometimes difficult to ensure foreign staff were seen as "just MSF, representatives of MSF", no matter which country they came from.

For example, Richard, a Congolese MSF humanitarian, told me about the difference between "Anglophone" and "Francophone" whites and the connotations of their national background with different armed groups in North Kivu. In Richard's experience, the FDLR (the armed group that was formed by remnants of the former Rwandan government responsible for the genocide who fled in 1994) "accept *muzungus* easily" because they "think *muzungus* could help them" with their politics of legitimacy in the global arena. Richard explained that French and Belgians were particularly "easily accepted," given the close historical ties and past cooperation between their governments and the former Rwandan regime (Staunton 2016; Des Forges 1999). Some members of the FDLR had been part of this former elite in Rwanda during a period when the Rwandan military had maintained close ties with, and received training from, the French (Beswick 2014:218; Rusagara 2009:161).

However, in the case of the Tutsi-dominated CNDP rebellion, being French or Belgian could be sensitive, given this historical link with the *génocidaire* regime and because of the controversies surrounding the French-led *Operation Turquoise* during the Rwandan civil war (McNulty 1997). Instead, Congolese staff described "Anglophone *muzungus"* as "the most neutral." "Tutsis see themselves as friends of Anglophones," the Congolese employee Yannick told me, reflected in the fact that the Kagame government "changed Rwanda's official language from French to English." Yannick told me that one French project coordinator even used to highlight her

attachment to England, where she lived, rather than France during interactions with the CNDP and M23. When interacting with these groups, Yannick described being foreign and Anglophone as the crucial combination. For example, he recounted working with a Liberian project coordinator who was "more easily accepted" than white French or Belgians – being "Anglophone really helped with accessibility." Sometimes, then, this constructed "Anglophone" identity was detached from whiteness as the primarily marker of neutrality.

In face-to-face interactions, nationality and race intersected in constructions of detachment. The meetings became microcosms of complex international relations – foreign employees became seen as representatives of their country. In the case of Belgium and France's sensitive history of support for the former Rwandan regime, the power of whiteness as a signifier of neutrality was diminished during interactions with some armed actors – being black but Anglophone could instead be a powerful signal of detachment. Despite this nuance, Congolese MSF staff remained consistent that whiteness was still a form of protection and a facilitator of access on the road and in initial meetings – a white face signalled someone outside of it all, certainly until further questions were asked about the background of that individual.

A SIGNIFIER OF PRECIOUS LIFE

The politics of life

Congolese humanitarians told me that the perception of white lives as precious, worth more than others, helped minimise potential risks to MSF convoys in the field. Whiteness was a visible and powerful signifier of a hierarchy of life, signifying someone important, someone with influence. One of the drivers I spoke to put this particularly succinctly, telling me: "When we *[Congolese people]* see a *muzungu,* we know their life is precious." If a *muzungu* was in the convoy, he went on, armed groups would hesitate before attacking it – there was a fear of consequences and reprisals. The security implications of an association between whiteness and "the West" were more complex than white Westerners being a "kidnapping risk" like in Mali (Fassin 2007; Hofman and Heller Pérache 2014), or being considered indistinguishable from Western military/political actors and increasingly targeted in deliberate attacks (Stoddard and Harmer 2006). Instead, whiteness was associated with power on a global stage, which meant that the stakes involved in attacking that life were higher.

Congolese MSF staff, for instance, highlighted that whiteness symbolises the "Western world" - *muzungus* are seen as "representatives of the international community." As one driver explained:

> There is a general view among armed groups, and people here in general really, that you don't want to touch white people or the people who work for their organisations. Humanitarian work is a thing of whites, and if you mess with them, it will come back and hurt you.

Another senior Congolese MSF employee argued that if something happens to national staff, it will be a "national discussion," but if they are international, especially white, there is a perception that "things will become complicated – next thing they know it'll be on BBC or RFI. It will leave Congo." Other Congolese project staff told me that the consequences of "security incidents" against MSF international staff had an effect on armed actors. After repeated security incidents involving foreign employees at one project site in Masisi, MSF had withdrawn from the zone. There had arisen in consequence a widespread local belief that, if *muzungus* were attacked, MSF would leave. Armed groups in Masisi did not want to be held responsible for the withdrawal of free medical services and face consequent blame from the local population. Several Congolese project staff argued, therefore, that the presence of a white encouraged restraint.

The legacy of the International Criminal Court also looms large in these calculations. As Phil Clark (2018) has pointed out, the high-profile cases of two former Congolese rebel leaders (Bemba and Ntaganda) who were sent to The Hague gave the impression that the court worked with Kabila's government and predominantly targeted non-state armed groups. MSF employees highlighted an association between white faces, the international community and a fear of "distant justice" (Clark 2018). For instance, one foreign fieldworker described his interactions with the leader of the NDC, Cheka: "Being under an ICC mandate seemed to be playing on his mind, it seemed that he didn't want anything to happen to MSF and certainly not to any of the international staff." He concluded: "I felt secure as an expat, and I think being white helped with that."

Yannick, a Congolese employee, agreed that the importance of whiteness was not only as a symbol of detachment:

> If you have a white face in the car, you won't be stopped at checkpoints. Armed groups think of the ICC straight away when they see that white face. They are automatically more afraid of the consequences, they think it is a representative of the international community here.

Yannick described a "white face" as "symbolic" – something that "invokes fear." With a black expatriate, the process will simply "take longer: the convoy will be stopped at the checkpoint, and they will check if it is an expatriate." Therefore, when it comes to transporting injured combatants, "it is just easier to send white expats", Yannick concluded. Ultimately, mobility is a form of power, and some bodies have more power to move than others (Lombard 2016). At these moments of time pressure and political tension, MSF prioritises speed and security – the organisation strategically uses the identity of white employees as "kinetic elites" (Adey 2006:343), whose presence communicates to armed groups that MSF is not to be obstructed.

Indeed, foreign fieldworkers also described whiteness as a form of power. One employee made the following reflections on how, during the CNDP conflict, MSF always had a donkey in the vehicle:

> We always had white people in the car because we know that they *[Congolese citizens]* could kill each other, because they care less about the life of an African than a white person. Being white gave you this sort of protection. We would have, for instance, a nurse doing the nursing, and then I *[as a white person]* was shaking hands with armed groups.

Another former MSF employee echoed this point, telling me that his team "always put an expatriate in the car because we thought that a potential robbery would cause less harm to the driver if the white person was there." He described an instance when he had negotiated the release of a local employee who was being threatened by a member of the CNDP rebel group, explaining: "Once again, I knew why we were there: we could offer the kind of protection that no one else could offer to our staff."

The problem of bandits

In this way, the strategic use of whiteness by MSF teams was another approach or instrument of identity that the team could adopt in processes of collective brokerage. In particular,

Congolese humanitarians described how a racialised politics of life (Fassin 2007) was at work which they endeavoured to utilise in order to protect their own lives. However, Congolese humanitarians working for MSF and other agencies in North Kivu also described a growing sense of uncertainty after an increase in incidences of kidnappings in North Kivu by unknown criminal elements or "bandits," rather than known armed groups with whom humanitarians negotiate. The role of whiteness as a security management tool was actively debated – the logic of the donkey came under strain.

Since the end of the M23 war in North Kivu, "security incidents" against humanitarian workers have increasingly been attributed to unknown armed men. MSF has found it increasingly difficult to distinguish criminal activity from politically motivated violence.[106] The logics and modalities of violence are increasingly defined by anonymous "criminality" and personal vendettas rather than "war" between opposed armed factions in the region (Verweijen 2019). The rise of kidnappings and robberies committed by "unknown bandits" poses challenges to MSF's security strategy based on negotiation, analysis and interaction with warring parties in a conflict context. As a result, some have asked: Has the logic changed? Are white foreign staff becoming a kidnapping risk, with a higher price on their heads?

At one project, the project coordinator convened a meeting after repeated robberies of MSF convoys and the Congolese outreach nurse, Hector, described the debate that followed. A local employee had argued that the presence of a *muzungu* in the convoy had attracted the robberies - a sign of wealth that had attracted criminal bandits. Hector disagreed with this analysis, as did the majority of the Congolese attendees present, concluding that *muzungus* "do attract attention; the children come running", but that the benefits outweighed the risks. He insisted that white skin remained a "powerful symbol" that helped strengthen MSF's acceptance and thus security. As many other Congolese MSF employees pointed out, kidnapping does not principally target foreign aid workers, or foreigners at all. Instead, it has become a growing problem for Congolese citizens in the region. Whiteness was still described as a form of protection, even in kidnapping contexts. Congolese staff remain the most vulnerable to attack in DRC (EISF 2018), and whilst MSF has always been able to negotiate the release of foreign white staff (usually within a matter

[106] Mclean. "Impact of Violence on Medical and Humanitarian Services in North Kivu, DRC." 2017. Analysis Department MSF Brussels. p.16.

of days), three local MSF staff who were abducted in North Kivu in 2013 remain missing to this day: their names are Philippe Musongelwa, Richard Matabishi and Romy Ntibanyendera.[107]

Representing "the West"

Whiteness, then, signified life that was valued on an international stage. Whilst the presence of this powerful symbol of "the West" provoked fear of reprisals, the impact on face-to-face negotiations was again more complex, and depended on the armed group and their own political goals vis-à-vis the "international community" which the white face came to symbolise. Whiteness could provoke a political performance, or distrust and wariness on the part of armed interlocutors. As many of the Congolese MSF staff put it, whiteness was an important element in the complementary relationship between them and the foreign staff in the task of "managing security." Congolese employees were just as important as the other half of this partnership: "my boss and I are like a couple who need one another," I was told by one assistant.

Maxime, the former Congolese project assistant, argued that "armed actors feel more threatened by seeing the presence of a *muzungu*, they will think that they will be reporting to the ICC. They see the white skin and think of the consequences – they become concerned about their image or personal survival." For some, formalised meetings with white, Western aid workers became performative: a means for armed groups to build their "international legitimacy" (Coggins 2015; Huang 2016; Bob 2006; Schlitchte and Schneckener 2015). MSF employees told me that the CNDP rebellion used interactions with foreign humanitarians as a "public relations" exercise. Nkunda (the CNDP leader) "preferred *muzungus,* he was concerned with his image with the world, he saw it as part of his public relations strategy," one Congolese employee told me. Another told me that during the CNDP conflict, "having a white face helped, because they *[whites]* represented the international community, and Nkunda wanted to show *un bon visage au monde* [a good face to the world]."

Indeed, one white former employee described going to Nkunda's farm, where Nkunda "lectured for an hour about what he was doing for children and maternal health, he wanted to explain his policies and politics, to legitimise himself." As the MSF archives from the time describe, the CNDP presented itself as a political movement challenging the legitimacy of the

[107] I have used their real names as a form of witnessing. MSF Press Release. 2017. "Release our colleagues abducted four years ago." 11 July. https://www.msf.org/drc-release-our-colleagues-abducted-four-years-ago [Access April 2020].

government - their discourse centred on "protecting the population," and they even sent diplomatic delegations to other African countries[108] MSF staff recognised how humanitarian aid access was part of the CNDP's "political propaganda" strategies.[109] Whiteness became associated with important, Western countries – the CNDP had an audience for its political performances.

Lillian, the head of mission, described interactions with armed groups as "theatrical." This was a performance for both sides, with different MSF staff provoking different performances from different armed commanders. Lillian described meetings with Bosco Ntaganda when he was a local commander of the CNDP (i.e. before he became leader of the group and a senior figure in the national army and the M23 rebellion). Ntaganda usually arrived with a group of his officers, and, in Lillian's view, it seemed as if he was performing for them rather than for her. He would say things like, "it is thanks to me that MSF is here" as a means of illustrating his importance to his fellow officers present. Lillian's Congolese colleagues from the time also remember it as "*un jeu"* – a game on their part, in which interacting with a foreign, white aid worker illustrated their personal status and importance.

Congolese humanitarians explained that over the last decade working in North Kivu, some armed groups have changed their attitude towards *muzungus* because of their shifting "relationship with the international community." For instance, after accusations of mass rapes Cheka of the NDC began to interact differently with *muzungus* in MSF. According to Congolese employees at the time, he wanted to repair his image with the international community and saw humanitarian access as a means of doing it. In contrast, other Congolese staff noticed the increasing mistrust among some armed groups towards *muzungus* in the context of the *glissement* (delaying of elections) by the Kabila government between 2016-2019. Armed insurgency became more explicitly entangled in national politics, as armed groups mobilised popular resentment towards the central government and increased their anti-government rhetoric (Vogel and Stearns 2018:705). For example, some *Mai-Mai* in the *Petit Nord* accused *muzungus* of helping Kabila cling onto power: Congolese staff were told that their *muzungu* colleagues "eat with Kabila." There was a perception that the "West" and its UN peacekeeping mission, aid

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108 "*Rencontre 31 mars 2007 avec le general Laurent Nkunda."* MSF internal archives, Paris. "*Nord Kivu sitrep Dec 08 semaine 51*." MSF internal archives, Paris.

109 "*Rapport fin de mission Rutshuru 16 oct-13 Dec 08*." MSF internal archives, Paris. "*Quelques questions/reponses sur les OP en RDC Oct 08-Dec 08*." MSF internal archives, Paris.

infrastructure and the ICC was behind the Kabila government and preventing the will of the Congolese people being carried out, experienced project staff explained.[110] During face-to-face meetings between MSF "expatriates" and armed commanders, Congolese staff described parallel conversations in Swahili, to which the expatriate was not party. Here, the most common questions were: "Are you sure this one is not going to report us to the ICC?" It was up to Congolese staff to reassure these commanders of MSF's intentions.

Whiteness, to summarise, was a marker of power and international status – it signalled a life that mattered, a member of "the international community." This symbol of power could provoke fear, distrust and hostility, political performance, or restraint. Depending on the shifting political context and different armed groups' historical experience or future political goals vis-à-vis the "international stage", whiteness functioned in different ways during face-to-face negotiations in North Kivu. Despite this, Congolese humanitarians argued that whilst the fear of international repercussions and the ICC might provoke distrust or wariness in face-to-face meetings, it could be mobilised as protection for humanitarian teams on the road and "in the field." Even if distrustful or wary, armed groups would still think twice before attacking these powerful white faces. The risks were too high. Whiteness remained a tool of humanitarian access.

WHITENESS & IMPERIAL DURESS

Old-school humanitarian space?

In the words of one European MSF employee, in contrast to northern Mali or Somalia, eastern DRC is the "archetypal, old-school humanitarian space, where you can still talk to everyone, negotiate with armed groups." Another senior "expatriate" employee told me that "you can push your luck a bit here." The final reason Congolese MSF humanitarians argued that whiteness was a useful tool was that, in the words of one driver, there is still a "respect for whites" among some people in remote areas, because of the lasting impact of narratives of racial superiority from the colonial era. As Moise, the Congolese head of motorcycle drivers summarised, *muzungus* remain the "*première image de respect"* (first image of respect). This, it was argued, could be used to MSF's advantage.

[110] Indeed, von Billerbeck and Tansey (2019), Marriage (2011) and Clark (2018) make a similar argument that the UN peacekeeping mission, ICC, and Northern donors have helped enable authoritarianism in the DRC.

Of course, "respect" for whites was far from universal - it depended on individuals' class, personal experience and education level. Congolese humanitarians told me that they had seen a sense of fascination with white skin in some remote locations, where people may not have seen or spent much time with "a white" before. Indeed, for many Congolese MSF employees who had also never been to such remote locations, the reaction to their white colleagues was quite a surprise. Hector, an outreach nurse, told me that "if you are doing a mobile clinic and you are with a White, people come and see what you are doing, even if they are not ill." Not only this, but Hector described his shock when "patients told me they want whites to treat them, because they believe that if a white treats them, then they will get better." Whatever he thought of these beliefs, Hector told me that they were useful - white employees remain "powerful symbols" for MSF's "acceptance" in these areas.

A complex

How is any of this relevant to negotiating access with armed actors? A driver with experience in Masisi argued that the role of whites was particularly relevant when negotiating with armed groups in the zone, because "when you come with a white expatriate, they know you are serious, they listen." A project coordinator assistant agreed that bringing a white was useful with local armed groups because it makes them feel important because someone who matters is coming to speak to them. Whiteness remains a signifier of authority, with notions of respect and hierarchy lingering as a form of "duress" (Stoler 2016:1). There seemed to be some "colonisation of consciousness" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:4) in North Kivu, in which some people have internalised the view colonialists had of whiteness as superior (Fanon 1952). This is a reflection of what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986:153) and Frantz Fanon (1952:4; 1961:250) describe as a form of mental colonisation, in which for some formerly colonised people, whiteness and the West remains associated with modernity, progress and intelligence. Imperialism was "total" – it impacted the "mental universe" of the colonised, impacting how they perceived themselves in relationship to others (Thiong'o 1986:153), with an internalisation of feelings of inferiority linked to blackness (Fanon 1952).

Jacques, an experienced driver, argued that he had seen how whiteness could give armed actors a "complex because there is this idea that whites are superior somehow – more intelligent, more important." The word *complexé* was repeated by several different Congolese staff to describe the effect of bringing "a white" to a meeting. If just a Congolese citizen met with a local commander

or head of an armed group, the humanitarian would be in a weak position, I was told. However, in the company of a white colleague, the balance of power tilted. Jacques saw this as a direct colonial hangover: "The idea that the white man is better is something that the Belgians put in place, and still lasts." Another Congolese MSF employee, Clément, highlighted the fact that local commanders are "part of society, they come from here too, some are from rural areas and have stayed there." In North Kivu, he told me "Contact with *muzungus* and Europe is still a sign of status. All of the top leaders have been to Europe, many studied there. If you go to Europe and come back, people will think you're important." All of this only reinforced the idea that "whites are superior, it is entrenched," Clément concluded. Other Congolese employees told me similar stories, but clarified that it also depended on the individual commander's education or experience. For example, in one armed group in the *Petit Nord,* the leader was not very "at ease" with *muzungus*. In contrast, another commander in the movement had lived in Europe: "Of course, it was different with him, he was used to *muzungus*," I was told. When setting up a meeting with specific armed commanders, the specific characteristics of that person had to be taken into account.

Congolese employees who told me about this "complex" towards white skin also expressed their own frustration. The driver Jacques, for instance, told me that it was "depressing" that in some rural areas there was still "respect" for *muzungus*. However, he concluded that "it can be useful for our security in the field", combined with the idea of detachment and the fear of the consequences of hurting white lives. Clément, the former MSF aid worker, told me that this idea of white superiority still lingers because of a "lack of education" and Congo's difficult postcolonial history. He told me about the infuriating conversations he had with his own mother, who had been surprised to learn that European countries also have problems with corruption. "She grew up only knowing the Catholic priest, she thought *muzungus* were perfect for so long," he explained.

These Congolese MSF employees stressed that of course they themselves did not think that their white colleagues were more intelligent or even more qualified. Yet, because local imaginaries of whiteness were still wrapped up in notions of superiority and authority, race became a useful means of leveraging protection and power whilst conducting humanitarian operations in dangerous environments. It could help Congolese humanitarians to be taken more seriously, to be considered more neutral, and to be more protected, preventing them from being attacked with impunity. As one white aid worker told Uma Kothari (2006:16) in the context of

Bangladesh, "people don't really believe that I am more intelligent and more knowledgeable because I am white, what they do believe is that I will have greater access to power." For my Congolese interviewees, this was a fact of life - if a depressing one – which meant that their white colleagues played a central role in performances of humanitarianism. They remained the face of the organisation, the leaders of the brokerage club.

Localisation

The symbolism of whiteness, and the power it can provide in North Kivu, is an example of how colonial legacies of social hierarchy continue to linger to this day, "reactivated" in contemporary imaginaries of neutrality and authority. As Ann Stoler (2016) argues, the effects of colonial histories on the present are "partial, distorted" with "uneven sediments" which exert a subtle, yet lasting influence on social life (Stoler 2016:5). Colonial "logics and sensibilities" continue to "pervade our imperial present", leaving "durable marks" that reinforce key "fault lines of the world today" (Stoler 2016:6). In this case, colonial discourses shape the social and political landscape where humanitarian organisations work in North Kivu. Colonial duress is akin to a "pressure exerted" on the interactions of everyday life: complex colonial histories become "absorbed" into social interactions (Stoler 2016:20). MSF employees from around the world were left to navigate the sediments of imperial debris that have a durable impact on efforts to put their discourse of egalitarian cosmopolitanism into practice.

The donkey rule illustrates further the complexities of "localising" or "decolonising" aid. In this context of a racialised politics of life (Fassin 2007), how should MSF "localise" medical operations? As I explained in the last chapter, the call for "localisation" was a response to the growing sense that the "Western humanitarian system" was facing a "crisis of legitimacy:" it was time to decolonise and remedy North/South power imbalances (Bennett et al., 2016:46). In addition, localisation was seen as a means of correcting the perceived failures of the "humanitarian system" in intervening in complex crises. Some aid agencies argued that international actors "struggle to gain access" and should rely on local actors (with better networks and understanding of the area) to reach "conflict-affected communities" (Stephen et al., 2017:4; IFRC 2018:2). For others, localisation was also a way of staying present in contexts where Western aid workers were attacked because of their association with foreign interventions (Stoddard and Harmer 2006).

The donkey rule complicates this narrative. In the context of North Kivu whiteness - a signal of foreignness, of the West, of power - is actually seen as a resource rather than a hindrance during negotiations for access. It plays an important role in the performance of humanitarian principles, and is understood as a potential form of protection for Congolese staff who already faced greater risks precisely because of their embeddedness in local histories and networks. Just like remote control management, localisation has the capacity to transfer risk onto those who are already the most exposed (Collinson and Elhawary 2012). By putting local actors in top positions in DRC, humanitarian agencies might in fact be putting them in further danger. Whilst MSF has remained sceptical of a blanket endorsement of localisation precisely because of the challenges faced by local actors and the protective functions of foreignness (Schenkenberg 2016), other NGOs have embraced localisation in eastern DRC. The Congolese employee of another NGO told me that MSF's approach seemed "colonial" to him. However, he also described the difficulties of working in a "localised team." A few years ago, he and several Congolese colleagues were taken hostage in North Kivu. "We wondered what would have happened if we had been with a *muzungu,* whether they *[the armed men]* would have changed their behaviour. I believe that having a white in the car might have made them think about the consequences," he told me. Before I left DRC, one MSF Congolese employee explained he was going to cover an "expatriate position" for a short period until MSF filled the position. He expressed some apprehension: "I won't have a *parapluie",* he told me.

CONCLUSION

Whiteness became a security management tool for humanitarians in certain contexts in North Kivu: an instrument of identity in the brokerage club. In practice, the meanings of whiteness are slippery and unstable, drawing from a historical familiarity with European travellers in the region, colonial legacies of racial hierarchy, as well as more recent perceptions of the "international community" and its power and reach. Race, mobility, nationality, and language also overlap and intersect in complex ways in performances of humanitarianism. Nonetheless, Congolese MSF staff described their colleagues' whiteness as a powerful symbol that helps in MSF's everyday work, sheltering local employees during interactions with armed actors and facilitating mobility and access in militarised areas. I argue that the importance that whiteness plays in North Kivu presents a "double bind" for MSF (Redfield 2012), and for humanitarianism more generally: given its complex interrelationship with security, how should perceived racial difference be treated to ensure humanitarian organisations both provide security for *all* their staff, whilst valuing all lives equally?

MSF's approach prioritises the ability to maintain access to those who need medical aid in a context of protracted violence. MSF picks the employee who can best perform the humanitarian role in that particular context. Whereas in Mali whiteness is seen to be a security risk (Issoufou 2018), in North Kivu whiteness is incorporated into everyday humanitarian practice as a potential tool in the negotiation of access, and to protect the majority of (black African) staff. Peter Redfield (2012) argues that the implementation of MSF's principles in practice leads to paradoxical outcomes. Like Fassin's (2007) notion of a "politics of life", this draws attention to the reproduction of inequality based on nationality, despite the organisation's vision of being *sans frontières*. Yet, as this chapter has illustrated, nationality is not the only divisive form of identity among MSF staff: race matters too. The use of whiteness as a resource by MSF presents another "double bind" for the organisation: MSF's everyday practice is shaped by, and reproduces, the very racial categories (and in some cases hierarchies) that its egalitarian values seek to undermine.

On the one hand, MSF is committed to the universal equality of all human life: "*Médecins Sans Frontières* provides assistance to population in distress…They do so irrespective of race, religion, creed or political convictions."[111] In MSF, employees are meant to become embodiments of the organisation: their humanity, and being MSF, are the only identities that are supposed to matter as they perform a humanitarian role. By focusing on humanity, MSF denies the importance of other forms of difference. Not only this, but MSF is also influenced by a French Republican approach to difference – the idea that the way to build a fair and just society is to focus on what we have in common. This approach encourages colour-blindness. In fact, the French National Assembly deleted "race" from the first article of the constitution, which previously stated that all citizens are equal before the law "regardless of origin, race or religion," because the "word 'race' has no scientific validity and has been the basis for racist ideologies" (*France 24* 2018).

On the other hand, notions of racial difference remained entrenched in North Kivu. In order to navigate this environment with a racialised politics of life, MSF has to adapt. This means that paradoxically, despite the fact that MSF is committed to the universal equality of all human life, top managerial positions are mostly held by foreign staff, and white staff possess particular advantages and conduct operational functions that their colleagues cannot. In order to treat

[111] MSF charter: https://www.msf.org/msf-charter [Accessed April 2020].

everyone equally and provide security for all, then, a hierarchy between "local" and "non-local", white and black, is at times reinforced. Whiteness remains a potent symbolic identity in North Kivu which MSF uses pragmatically to reach rural populations and deliver health care, as well as to protect its own staff. But, when racialised identities and their associated assumptions are used for strategic reasons, colonial era racial hierarchies are reified.

Given this double bind, there remains a disconnect between the importance placed on whiteness as a protection mechanism by Congolese staff, and the way in which race remains an uncomfortable subject within the MSF movement more broadly. Despite the practice of the donkey rule and the discussion about whiteness by employees in eastern DRC, race is often muted in official MSF documentation. One security protocol states that "MSF recognises that security threats on its members may vary according to their gender, nationality or morphology and that, under exceptional circumstances, MSF may profile its team composition according to such criteria."[112] With the euphemism of "morphology" here, race is denied importance, considered an archaic and problematic concept of analysis. Nonetheless, in practice, it sometimes shapes profiling or hiring practices, as well as everyday humanitarian practices (Issoufou 2018). The strategic use of whiteness seems to operate as a "public secret" (Taussig 1999) in North Kivu about how humanitarians manage the security of their teams on the ground.

But what is the alternative to MSF's approach? The importance and symbolisms of whiteness in contexts like North Kivu could be dismissed as problematic, with responsibility instead being given to the (majority) of Congolese staff and African expatriates, with race dismissed as a consideration in everyday processes of security management. This would certainly be an important step towards decolonising international aid structures. Yet, it could also present a contradiction: such empowerment might, in fact, make these staff's jobs more difficult and dangerous – endangering (certain black) lives, all in the name of valuing all lives equally. As Congolese MSF employees told me, foreign *parapluies* are useful for protection, and sometimes, it is more effective when *parapluies* are white. Therefore, localised forms of racial politics are not only recognised, but actively used as a resource by a range of different actors in everyday humanitarian practice, including local humanitarians.

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[112] "Risk taking and security management policy for MSF OCP staff." 2015. MSF internal archives, Paris.

Almost a year after the barbecue with Carl by Lake Kivu, I travelled back to Goma from my last trip to a project site in North Kivu. Before departure, outside the MSF office, two Land Cruisers were waiting. The driver, Claude, opened the passenger seat of the first jeep, inviting me to take a seat in the front of the convoy; the other staff were already sitting in the back. I was the only foreigner travelling that day. Despite the fact that I was not even an employee of the organisation, I was to be head of the convoy – in the front car, in the front seat, the point of contact, the one with the radio. I had become a donkey.

Once back in Goma, I met with the experienced Congolese humanitarian Luc for the last time. He expressed regret that I was leaving – just another *muzungu* in transit. He ended our meeting with some life advice: he suggested that I come back to North Kivu to get a "real job" once I had "finished my studies." In jest, he suggested that I could return as a project coordinator with MSF. There was a vacancy that they were struggling to fill. I said this sounded tempting, but that I am utterly unqualified. As Luc accompanied me to the compound gates, his parting comment was that we would make a great team, but that ultimately "the perfect candidate would be someone with your skin, and my brain."

7. DOING GENDER AND THE THIRD SEX: GENDERED HUMANITARIANISM AND NEGOTIATIONS FOR ACCESS

INTRODUCTION

I met Mama[113] Agnes in her office in the MSF *village d'accueil*, a centre tucked away behind an MSF-supported general hospital in North Kivu. The *village* housed women whose health was at risk if left to give birth at home, but who lived too far from the hospital to travel at the appropriate time. Up to seventy women could stay at the facility at any one point, with access to healthcare just a short walk away. In 2016, almost 5,000 babies were delivered at the general hospital, more than 900 of them to women staying at the *village*. Women from all over the zone came to stay in the *village*, Agnes explained to me, "no matter who they are, whatever ethnicity, community, or politics." Agnes gave all new *village* inhabitants a cup, a toothbrush, and some yarn so that they could begin knitting a hat for their baby. One "expatriate" employee told me that on particularly discouraging days, he went to the village to remind himself what MSF did in the area: the impact was visible, tangible. In his words, it was a "zone of peace."



Figure 16: *Village D'Acceuil* entrance. Source: Sandra Smiley/MSF

Agnes was the "mother of the mothers." She had been running the centre for years, ensuring that that women received the necessary medical support, whilst also building a family atmosphere as they waited or recovered. Agnes explained that, as well as providing crucial medical treatment, the *village* has a secondary impact on MSF's "acceptance." People have mothers, sisters and daughters who have been treated in the *village* and in consequence MSF has become embedded in the local social fabric. The *village* also played its own more direct role in security management: women came to Agnes with information about recent clashes near their homes which might impact on MSF's ability to work. "If they didn't love MSF, they wouldn't

[113] Referring to someone as a mother is a sign of respect (Ndaliko 2016:242).

do it," Agnes concluded. When the women returned home, they became informal "ambassadors" for MSF. On one of my visits, women staying at the *village* performed a song with playful lyrics. Agnes wrote them down for me:

> *Ninafurahi na MSF* (I am very happy with MSF)
> *MSF nani wa kukuchokoza?* (MSF who is bothering you?)
> *Tutamukata kichwa na magoti yake* (We will cut off their head and knees)
> *Acha tuishi na MSF* (Leave us to live in peace with MSF).

I was told that Agnes was important for security management at the project given her extensive network with women from the *village* and the respect for her locally. She also had an advantage, according to her colleagues, "because she is a woman." On my arrival at the project, a senior MSF employee was surprised to hear that gender had not featured more centrally in my analysis: "Women are important for security and gender plays a role," he told me. But what was this role exactly?

This chapter describes how women working in North Kivu performed their role as humanitarians in gendered ways during interactions with armed groups. Women are marked by, and articulate, specific kinds of difference. Gendered and racial identities hold a set of unstable historically contingent and socially situated symbolisms, which fieldworkers endeavour to use to their own advantage. To begin, I outline the theoretical underpinnings of the chapter, examining how race, nationality and gender interrelate. Second, I describe the experience of several Congolese women working in health care delivery in MSF, looking at how they possess a different form of *metis* knowledge and are embedded in different networks. I argue that, when interacting with armed groups, Congolese female humanitarians use gender stereotypes as an advantage, portraying themselves as apolitical, maternal caregivers in order to carry out a radical politics of care. At the same time, however, these Congolese women described being subject to gendered vulnerabilities in the field. In the third section of this chapter, I explore the concept of the "third sex" – a term used to describe white women, whose authority, status and behaviour mean that they were not perceived as possessing the same social status as women, nor men. In this section, I show how race, gender and nationality are understood to intersect, producing systems of privilege and power as well as "erotic capital" (Hakim 2010), historically and socially situated in the specific "field" of North Kivu (Green 2013). In sum, this chapter explores the

functions gendered identity holds amongst humanitarians navigating the political and social context of cyclical violence in North Kivu.

DOING AND UNDOING GENDER

Doing gender

The concept of "doing gender" refers to the idea that gender is created through interaction (West and Zimmerman 1987:130). In other words, "a person's gender is not simply an aspect of what one is, but, more fundamentally, it is something that one *does*…in interactions with others" (West and Zimmerman 1987:140). West and Zimmerman build on Goffman's (1976:96) concept of "gender display", but they argue that gender is not just a performance of society's idealised feminine or masculine natures to an audience. Instead, gender is a *social product*, "an ongoing activity embedded in everyday interaction" (West and Zimmerman 1987:130). As we interact with others, we are expected to display behaviour that is consistent with gender norms in that particular situation. How to "do gender" therefore depends on the context: behaviour must be "modified or transformed" to the situation so that it is "gender appropriate" (West and Zimmerman 1987:135). We are constantly "doing" gender, exhibiting traits that are expected of a given gender category. This may make it seem as if gender is "natural", but in fact it is "being produced as a socially organised achievement" (West and Zimmerman 1987:129). This process of doing gender sustains and reproduces the idea of "natural differences" and the often hierarchical arrangements based on sex category (West and Zimmerman 1987:146).

The concept of "doing gender" helps us consider how people situate themselves during interactions with others, often in strategic ways. The concept has since been extended to encompass situations when people *undo* gender (Butler 2004; Deutsch 2007; Risman 2009); in other words, when people do not follow the traditional scripts and "appropriate" behaviour for a specific gender category. If doing gender perpetuates the idea of gender differences, then undoing gender challenges differences between men and women and masculinity and femininity. Gender is renegotiated. When thinking about power, gender does not stand alone: it is essential to examine the "interlocking nature of gender, race and class" which operate simultaneously (hooks 2000:xii). In recognition of this, West and Fenstermaker (1995:19) extended the concept to "doing difference", examining how difference is also "an ongoing interactional accomplishment" in which gender, race and class categories work simultaneously.

Race and class differences, like gender categories, are not essential or natural, but are created through specific interactions (West and Fenstermaker 1995:30).

Gender, race and humanitarianism in conflict

In what follows, I adopt the concepts of doing and undoing gender to explore how MSF employees conduct gendered performances of their role as humanitarians during interactions with armed groups. Being a woman was described as a form of difference by humanitarians when negotiating access with armed combatants in North Kivu. Although there have been women in the Congolese army since the 1960s, their numbers remain relatively low and they are rarely in senior positions (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2011); the estimates of female participation in armed groups in the Kivu regions vary widely, but women in armed groups can serve multiple roles simultaneously: not only as "wives", but also in active combat roles (Coulter, Person and Utas 2008:19; Verhey 2004:10). Nonetheless, women working for MSF in North Kivu described interacting with exclusively men in armed groups' rank-and-file and leadership authorities. Working as humanitarians, they were women in a predominantly masculine, militarised context.

There are still relatively few academic explorations of women's gendered experience of aid work in conflict, despite the fact that gender has long been a concept of analysis in development studies and in analyses of the impacts of development programmes on recipient populations (Momsen 2012; Mukhopadhyay 2016; Ticktin 2011b). Recent ethnographic studies of women's experience of humanitarianism and peacebuilding illustrate how experiences and practices of intervention are gendered (Martin de Almagro 2018; McLeod 2015; Roth 2015). For instance, Roisin Read (2018) draws from aid worker memoirs to examine "difference" as a gendered relation of power in aid, explaining how women feel distanced from the imaginary of an aid worker, and therefore try to perform their aid worker identity to "pass as what they are assumed not to be" (Ahmed 2017:155 in Read 2018:301). "Aid worker" identity, she stresses, is not a homogenous category that overwrites "all other kinds of difference" (Read 2018:305). Instead, gender intersects with race, nationality and class to produce forms of situated privilege and power, or of disadvantage in particular contexts (Martin de Almagro 2018; Higate and Henry 2009). In consequence, it is essential to explore the "racialised and gendered experiences of aid in conflict", which can reveal more about the "complex power structures and relationships of humanitarianism" (Read 2018:313).

In a similar vein, Silke Roth (2015:358) examines how "Aidland" becomes a site of "gender renegotiation" and allows "women and men working in aid to ignore and play with conventional gender expectations." Gender differences are both reinforced and challenged during everyday aid work, and intersect with other forms of inequality. A career in aid offers "opportunities to negotiate gender relations" – gender can be undone, but also *redone* depending on the demands of the given context (Roth 2015:380). For instance, by simultaneously emphasising women's role or experience as mothers whilst integrating women into leadership positions including in contexts with dominant gender hierarchies, everyday aid practice becomes a form of *redoing* gender (Roth 2015:358).

In North Kivu, doing and undoing gender became another part of performing a humanitarian role and negotiating humanitarian access. Gender became "one more thing to take into account": it was another possible "approach" for MSF teams. Of course, there was no one-size-fits-all approach; the role gender could play depended on the situation. Nonetheless, gendered identities were seen by MSF teams as a potential identity-based resource for access, which might help the organisation to gain trust with armed actors and access information locally. Ethnographic studies, rather than reproducing a narrative of women as victims, have illustrated how women in conflict become "tactical agents engaged in the difficult task of social navigation" (Utas 2005:426), capitalising on stereotypes about women (for instance, as "passive") to carry out their own agendas and "steer through difficult times" (Kihato 2007:416). In North Kivu, performing their role as humanitarians in gendered ways was one "tactic" for humanitarians during negotiations for access (Utas 2005). In short, doing gender became a means of performing humanitarianism.

Gender in eastern DRC

The way women working in health delivery in MSF positioned themselves in North Kivu is particularly illuminating because the DRC has been labelled the worst place to live as a woman (Kristof 2008) and placed "on the international radar as a place of horrific sexual violence and vile barbarity" (Mertens 2019:2-5). While the severity of sexual violence in the DRC should not be dismissed, the narrative of eastern DRC as "rape capital of the world" has framed Congolese armed actors as barbaric perpetrators, reproducing colonial tropes of a sexualised and racialised Other, whilst also entrenching dichotomies such as saviour/victim and victim/perpetrator (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2008; Mertens and Pardy 2016).

Humanitarian interventions on gender-based violence have predominantly focused on the rapes of women by Congolese men (Mertens and Myrttinen 2019), thereby reproducing the idea of Congolese women as disempowered victims, and ignoring the structural and historical context in which sexual violence takes place (Freedman 2015; Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2009; 2013). Gender relations in DRC are as a result often portrayed as timelessly unequal, with men as violent oppressors and women as subservient victims (Laudati and Mertens 2019). This portrayal of Congolese women as powerless is an example of the tendency of Western scholarship to assume that all "third world women" are the same: subjugated, bound by tradition, victims of male violence and universally oppressed, and therefore implicitly in need of saving by Western women who are educated, modern, and liberated (Mohanty 1988). Congolese women are seen as victims of their own innately violent culture, just as the Belgian colonial regime represented women as victims of "traditional African customs" (Mertens and Myrttinen 2019:7; Mianda 2009). Congo remains described as the Heart of Darkness with "savagery that is almost incomprehensible" (Kristof 2010) – a place in need of saving (Achebe 1988; Allimadi 2002).

There is nothing innate about the position of women in the DRC. Gender identities and relations in eastern DRC (like anywhere else) are "fluid and constantly changing", shaped by the significant social, economic and political changes over the last one hundred and fifty years (Hollander 2014:19). As Gertrude Mianda (1996) argues, colonialism and its legacies have shaped the experience of Congolese women. Some of Congo's precolonial societies were matrilineal or matriarchal (Ndaliko 2016:241; Mongwanga 2014:227). Patriarchy was superimposed onto a broad range of existing gender norms in Congo - introduced by Christian missionaries and further institutionalised during Belgian rule (Yates 1982). Missionary schools defined gender and race as the basis for differential treatment, and the power of a conservative form of Catholicism in Belgian colonialism meant that these gendered roles were overtly reflected in colonial policy (Yates 1982:127). The education system was sexually segregated, largely excluding girls (Mianda 2002), and it pushed the model of the Christian patriarchal family which was seen as a blessing for African women as it would rescue them from polygamy (Yates 1982:130). The role of women in agricultural labour was challenged - they were trained as homemakers (Mianda 2002:147). This patriarchal structure was then adopted and reworked in the postcolonial era, as an *evolué* class internalised such gender norms in their quest for "civilisation" (Mianda 2002:158), and Mobutu's *Code de la Famille* in 1988 reproduced the

subjugation of women from colonial law (Mianda 1995; Ndaliko 2016:243). Patriarchal relations, therefore, were in part a legacy of colonisation.

But women's position in the economy and political realm, as well as notions of femininity and morality, are continually redefined (Braun 2016; Bouwer 2010). As Chérie Ndaliko (2016:243) describes, in North Kivu, women are simultaneously deeply respected and revered, and "materially restricted." In the Kivu provinces, changes to marriage as an institution and livelihood opportunities caused by colonialism, conflict and economic decline have in fact decreased some women's "dependency" on their husbands (Hollander 2014:19). Instead of reproducing other framings such as "survivors" or "thrivers" (Hunt 2008:244), it is important to examine the complexities (and nuances) of gendered experiences in the DRC (Mertens and Myrttinen 2019; Lewis 2018; Hollander 2014). There is no "single story" of women in eastern DRC (Ndaliko 2016:202), but a whole range of experiences shaped by both personal circumstances and socioeconomic class. Women in eastern DRC are not powerless in the face of sexual violence, but are involved in a whole range of local initiatives to try to increase their safety and quality of life (Bihamba 2017; Ndaliko 2016:203).

PERFORMING HUMANITARIANISM, DOING GENDER

At first, what one interviewee called the "Congolese space of aid" in North Kivu appeared to be a predominantly male sphere: in the meetings of the *Cercle de la Securité,* for instance, there were never any women present. The project coordinator assistants and head of mission assistants were men. The drivers were men. The mechanics and logisticians were men. Congolese women, on the other hand, occupied quite different posts: nurses or midwives, working in health provision or promotion. In MSF, though, security is not a separate department, but is the job of everyone. So where were the Congolese women in this story of how humanitarians negotiate access and manage security? In what ways were their humanitarian practices gendered?

One afternoon, a Congolese member of the MSF team summarised the general view that women were "important for security." He cited two reasons. First, "they gather information that we cannot": they had access different people. The second and interrelated reason was that they can "interact with people in a different way." This employee suggested that women interacted differently because of who they were: because of differences between men and women. However, in what follows, I describe the narratives of several Congolese women who

told me about their humanitarian work and the significance of "being a woman." These humanitarians positioned themselves in strategic ways during interactions with armed actors. They used gender as a tactic for humanitarian negotiation. It became another instrument of identity.

The Queen of Women's Networks

Before she joined MSF, Therese had worked as a health promoter in the local government and had been responsible for health promotion amongst women and children – part of the community-based structure that aimed to connect communities to healthcare centres. This role required building an extensive local network. During the CNDP conflict, however, Therese was displaced and settled in an internally displaced persons camp. There, she was recruited by the newly arrived MSF team who needed someone to start MSF's own health promotion activities. Therese had the experience and contacts for the role: "I continued doing health promotion, but I had to explain to people that I no longer worked for the *(Health)* Ministry," she told me. In short, Therese already had a situated and localised form of knowledge about how to work in health promotion in the zone (Scott 1998), as well as an existing contact base.

As well as raising awareness about MSF's medical services in order to "increase acceptance", Therese accompanied foreign project coordinators to negotiations at roadblocks and meetings with armed groups. During the CNDP conflict, for example, Therese helped negotiate at the frontline between the CNDP and the government-allied PARECO, so that the medical team could transfer injured patients from all sides to the MSF-supported hospital. Therese was in a good position to negotiate – "I was near my home, people knew me, so I was not just a translator, but a facilitator," she explained. Therese also drew from the network of women which she had built during her time working in the health sector: "Sometimes, the project coordinator talks to the authorities, but when I talk to women locally, it becomes clear that we did not have the whole story." Therese therefore described her contact base as distinctive: she had access to different rumours, discussions and snippets of information, which might not be readily available to her male colleagues. She could obtain more information about the shifting security context in order to inform MSF's decision-making. "Men are not always told everything," she explained, "but I could get more information because I'm known, and I'm known as someone who looks after people here." Therese joked that she was "*la reine des réseaux de femmes*" – the queen of women's networks.

"We are more easily accepted as humanitarians"

But it was not just a question of different networks: Congolese humanitarians also described performing their work as humanitarians in gendered ways - "doing gender" when negotiating humanitarian access. In particular, Congolese women working as outreach nurses, midwives and health promoters endeavoured to mobilise what they described as "stereotypes" of women as apolitical – as mothers, caregivers – to their own advantage during interactions with armed actors. They described this approach as a means of *constructing* themselves as apolitical providers of medical care – a gendered construction of neutrality that had two functions. First, it was approached as a means of personal security, bolstering their humanitarian identity as an important counterweight to the risks they felt by being embedded in local social networks and histories. Second, it enabled these women to carry out MSF's work and protect their patients: by depoliticising their medical practice, they were able to treat patients from all political backgrounds, from opposing armed factions. Rather than antithetical to political intent, this form of care was subversive – rendering unimportant the political identities of the wounded in the context of ongoing violence.

Therese told me that women had an advantage as humanitarians in North Kivu because they "are not seen as political. Armed groups here don't see us as politicians." Therese argued that it was easier for women to portray themselves as outside of politics, occupying the domestic rather than political realm. Because Therese grew up in North Kivu, she had acquaintances and links to various political and armed networks. This could make her daily work with MSF dangerous: situating herself as neutral in a context of violent conflict was difficult when she had these local associations. However, Therese found that her position as a woman and her history in the provision of healthcare for women and children meant that she was both respected and able to position herself as a humanitarian with greater ease. In contrast, one of Therese's male colleagues told me that he felt exposed: "It can be difficult for local staff to be seen just as humanitarians, and this can be dangerous especially when MSF's work *(treating all sides)* is sensitive." In his view, women had an advantage when performing a humanitarian role: women can present themselves as "caregivers" to armed groups.

Therese also described performing her humanitarian role in a gendered way as a resource to facilitate MSF's access. As a health promoter, Therese travelled through rural areas in order to raise awareness about MSF's health interventions. She argued that: "Women have room for manoeuvre, it's easier to play the role of the carer, a maternal woman looking out for the

healthcare of people." When crossing frontlines with MSF medical teams, for instance, Therese described her role as "making people see that MSF was neutral, to convince them." At checkpoints between the warring CNDP and the national army, Therese described trying to persuade soldiers to let MSF pass with wounded combatants in the car:

> MSF don't care what side you are on, you are a human, we want you to live. This is why you have to change out of your uniform and leave your gun before you get in an MSF car, because when you are with MSF, you are just a human.

As a testament to her success, Therese told me that the team had taken wounded CNDP and FARDC soldiers in the same car to the hospital: we explained to them, "You are no longer soldiers, just *malades* (wounded)." During my conversations with drivers (exclusively men), they commented on the advantage of sending a woman to talk at a roadblock when transferring patients, especially armed combatants from an opposing faction: "sometimes she can be strong at negotiating, providing care is a thing of women," one argued. Therese played on what she described as conventional gender norms for someone of her age, portraying herself as a strong, maternal woman and a caregiver. This enabled her to carry out MSF's subversive politics of care: not just caring for biological life, but treating warring combatants during active conflict. It became an approach to performing humanitarianism in interactions with warring factions.

Congolese women working in health provision described a similar gendered approach to their humanitarian role. Arlette grew up in an urban centre in the DRC and trained to be a nurse at university. When she qualified, Arlette moved to the countryside: she had over a decade of experience with MSF working in rural North Kivu. Arlette told me that she used to spend a lot of time in what she termed "the field" – doing outreach activities and mobile clinics in remote health centres on a weekly basis. This role required travelling to areas where MSF was not permanently based, building trust. Arlette's team interacted with a range of local authorities, (*chef de groupement, chef de cartier*), and with churches, police and civilians. During these encounters, Arlette concluded that "sometimes it is easier to have women accepted as humanitarians." She described how "the team relied on my relationships. We realised people saw me as non-threatening and not political, even though we were carrying out the same work". Indeed, Arlette's former colleagues from the outreach team also told me that they felt she was best placed to lead discussions. Gender had become an instrument of identity that they kept in mind.

In sum, then, Congolese women who were trained as health professionals described strategic forms of gendered self-representation which enabled them to navigate a context of violent conflict and uncertainty in North Kivu (Utas 2005). "Doing gender" became another "tactic" for negotiating humanitarian access (Utas 2005). Just as recipients of humanitarian aid may construct themselves as the idealised imaginary of a "refugee" or "suffering victim" to (paradoxically) access additional resources or rights (Ticktin 2011a; Harrell-Bond 1986), or women in conflict zones sometimes represent themselves as "victims of war" as a form of tactical agency (Utas 2005), Congolese humanitarians played on an imaginary of women as maternal carers, apolitical, endeavouring to use these stereotypes as an advantage during their interactions with armed combatants. This became a possible approach to negotiating access and portraying their medical work as impartial, thereby enabling them to carry out what was in fact a rather radical form of care (treating everyone, on all sides of the conflict) in a site of ongoing violent struggle.

By playing on ideas of femininity during their interactions with armed groups, these Congolese aid workers seemed to be simultaneously doing and undoing gender. On the one hand, they were "doing gender" - conforming to an imagined role as mothers or caregivers, presenting themselves as part of the domestic realm. Yet, rather than perpetuating existing differences between men and women, this became a means for women to navigate the militarised political landscape and negotiate with armed actors just like their male colleagues: according to many, women even had a strategic advantage. On the other hand, then, these women were "undoing gender" and challenging the supposed passivity of women as apolitical by using these stereotypes as a tactic to subvert the existing politics of life in a context of conflict. As Risman (2009:82) asks, if "women strategically adopt…feminine behaviours to fit the moment, is this really doing gender, or is it destabilizing the taken-for-granted personae that were in the past assumed essential to match sex category?" Despite this strategic positioning, it was striking how narratives about the passivity of Congolese women were nonetheless reproduced by their colleagues. One Congolese MSF employee, for instance, told me that I should try to "capture" the way gender works in humanitarian negotiations, but the problem I might face was that "Congolese women are often quiet or shy." Using stereotypes strategically nonetheless seemed to reify them in practice.

The risks of violence

The narratives of women health professionals working for MSF, then, help to complicate the simplistic portrayal of women as victims of war. As Utas (2005:403) has described, "an ethnography of social tactics…counters reductionist portrays of women in war zones as merely the passive victims of conflict." Despite this, even these middleclass women working in humanitarian health provision still felt exposed to potential violence whilst working in North Kivu. As one former project coordinator told me, for all women who worked in the region, there was a "permanent awareness" of the sorts of violence that could be committed against them. Humanitarians were working and travelling in a context of uncertainty. The advantages of a gendered performance of humanitarianism were discussed in relation to building relationships and trust with armed interlocutors. However, the way gender played out during instances of banditry or kidnapping was seen as fairly different.

Whilst Therese and Arlette emphasised the advantages of their position, Prudence, an outreach midwife in the team, told me it was "not easy" to do work "in the field" as a woman. Prudence travelled on mobile clinics to health centres supported by MSF. To some extent, she agreed with her colleagues: when it came to "talking with armed groups", her gender "was not a problem," and could even prove "useful." However, she thought that the risks involved in travelling in rural roads were different for women compared to men. These risks were discussed with Prudence's colleagues. Jokes, for example, gave an insight into "public secrets" (Taussig 1999) within MSF teams. Laughing, Prudence told me that her colleagues in the mobile clinic (male motorbike drivers) joked that she was their boss, but also their "*envelope sécu"* (security envelope) - money at-hand to give to bandits in a case of armed robbery, the idea being that the aggressors would take the money and leave the team behind. Essentially, this joke was based on the idea that as a woman, Prudence would be taken whilst the rest of the team would be left in peace. Drivers told me that they considered women potentially vulnerable: it was dangerous to send women alone to travel, and the ratio of men to women was carefully considered when planning convoys of Congolese health promoters, especially when travelling without an "expatriate" with them.

Therefore, for Prudence, a self-described "city girl", the risk of sexual violence remained a concern during her work in rural areas of North Kivu. She was a trained health professional who had worked on sexual violence in the past – she knew the statistics about instances of sexual violence in the areas where she was working. Prudence feared that if the MSF team was

robbed by unknown "bandits" on the road, she would be taken as an additional prize. Prudence argued that, as a "national", she did not possess the same international status as her foreign colleagues – she felt less protected from such acts of violence. In contrast, she told me it was foreign women, and in particular *muzungus*, who held the real advantage.

"THE THIRD SEX"

Unpacking the third sex

I first heard the term "third sex" from a Congolese former project coordinator assistant with over a decade experience working in North Kivu. Over lunch, he reflected on the many project coordinators with whom he had worked with over the years. As a project coordinator assistant, he described his role as "stage-setting": he would watch how different commanders reacted to different project coordinators. He analysed these social interactions and thought about the implications for how to "facilitate acceptance" for MSF. His conclusion was that "*muzungu* women have an advantage here, they are like a third sex - more easily seen as apolitical, exotic, but also respected. I would tell new female project coordinators to keep that in mind." Indeed, several Congolese staff integrated the potential benefits of a gendered approach into their briefings for newly arrived project coordinators, and told me about the potential power of the "third sex."

The "third sex" referred to white, foreign women who were seen as not entirely women, but not men either. Gender, race and nationality intersected to construct a situated form of privilege and difference. These women were in senior positions and sometimes behaved in ways that were considered to be "masculine" – thereby "undoing" gender. The concept of a "third sex" illustrates how power operates, but also how it "travels" (Partis-Jennings 2019:182): foreign, female humanitarians "embody difference" which holds a collection of meanings in the specific localities where they work (Read 2018:2). In North Kivu, foreign *muzungu* women were seen to possess a degree of "erotic capital" (Hakim 2010), whilst benefitting from the "whiteness of power" (Goudge 2003). The position of women as the "third sex" was understood as a potential form of leverage for MSF teams when negotiating access in North Kivu – it could be performed in strategic ways.

The term the "third gender" or "third sex" has been mentioned by aid workers in other contexts. For instance, the term was used to describe how humanitarians "from the global north

benefitted from (neo)colonial continuities" and the power of whiteness, which meant that they could occupy positions of authority over their male colleagues (Roth 2015:376). The dynamics of the "third sex" have been explored in more depth in Afghanistan, where foreign women working in peacebuilding were considered "hybrid bodies, which were marked as both female and foreign, both vulnerable and powerful" (Paris-Jennings 2019:418). They were understood to be a "strange amalgamation of women and men": given their international status and wealth, they could not be "subordinated", and some of their behaviour was understood to be "masculine" in nature (Partis-Jennings 2019:185). In effect, "race, gender and power intersect to produce particular systems of privilege, distance and difference" – this combination of foreign and female gave peacebuilders "increased power, voice and authority", a form of "social exceptionalism" which meant they were excluded from the constraints of femininity and associated with masculinity (Partis-Jennings 2019:189).

As Partis-Jennings describes (2019:190), the meaning of the third gender relies on and reproduces racialised ideas about Afghan patriarchal conditions, in which Afghan men are imagined to be traditional and oppressive, and "brown women" are powerless and subordinated (Abu-Lughod 2003). In effect, the third gender is only a form of exceptionalism when there was an "illiberal other against which to be defined" (Partis-Jennings 2019:190). In North Kivu, the notion of this third sex reproduced stereotypes about gender norms in Congo as "traditional" in contrast to the gender norms of the "West," and it also drew on ideas about racial difference and power. Yet, the third gender is not simply based on these problematic assumptions, it is also a "complex site of friction and hybridity", where aid workers' simultaneously freed themselves of gendered restraints, but also reaffirmed their subordination (Partis-Jennings 2019). Ultimately, the third sex provides a means of exploring the "shifting and situated intersectional interactions between…race, status and citizenship and gender" (Partis-Jennings 2019:186). Foreign peacebuilders in Afghanistan performed this hybridity strategically during their everyday work. But whereas in Afghanistan the term "the third sex" was used by female foreign aid workers, in North Kivu the concept was also mentioned by Congolese humanitarians who described the complex power dynamics they saw whilst working with foreign, white women "in the field."

Indeed, the "third sex" was a recurring theme during my conversations with humanitarians in North Kivu, not least because senior MSF positions in North Kivu such as project coordinators and heads of mission were often occupied by European or Northern American, white women.

One MSF section was even known amongst Congolese employees for its courageous, female *muzungu* heads of mission. "Expatriate" men in senior positions in North Kivu told me that the women can "do things a bit differently" or can "adopt a different approach" in terms of their management style and their approach to security. According to several Congolese humanitarians, *muzungu* women in senior positions challenged existing ideas about masculinity and femininity – they were "undoing" gender. These women were perceived as not really women, but not men either – they occupied senior positions, had international status and the power associated with whiteness, and exhibited some behaviour or traits that were perceived to be "masculine" rather than "feminine."

One Congolese MSF employee, for instance, told me that she had "seen strong women as project coordinators who were even stronger than men." Another reassured me that foreign women faced no problems in senior positions in North Kivu: "People here in general know that women expats, *surtout les blanches* (in particular, whites), work hard like men." A driver told me how impressed he had been with his *muzungu* female project coordinator working "in the field": "She was a *muzungu,* but she was not scared!" Another Congolese employee told me that he has seen "dynamic expat women" and worked with "courageous *muzungus* who have impressed everyone here." In fact, he preferred working with women project coordinators, because they were more "approachable", they "listen better than men", and were more "emotionally intelligent." At the same time, they were strong "and work like men," he explained.

The third sex illustrates how a politics of difference can hold operational functions in everyday humanitarian practice – gender, race and nationality intersect to construct a situated form of power. Foreign white women could "do difference" (West and Fenstermaker 1995) as a tactic during their everyday work and during interactions with armed authorities. As one former female head of mission told me, *muzungu* women were "a rare thing", or as another said, they had a degree of "novelty value." Foreign women described a "gendered approach" – they played on gender identities strategically in different interactions. There were three mechanisms through which a "third sex" was understood as a potential source of leverage for MSF teams negotiating with armed actors. First, nationality, whiteness and gender intersected so that white women could present themselves as distant from local conflict dynamics. Second, whiteness was perceived as a mark of status and power: these foreign women could garner respect and authority, and were perceived to have a degree of protection because of their association with "the international community." Finally, these women possessed a degree of "erotic capital"

which could become a resource, as long as they negotiated a complex and historically charged sexual politics.

Performing humanitarianism, doing gender?

Like their Congolese colleagues, "expatriate" women described performing their humanitarian role in gendered ways. They endeavoured to "do gender" in specific ways during interactions with armed actors: to conform to behaviours they saw as associated with women if they thought it could be a way to build trust and ease tensions. Many described playing on perceptions of women as carers – they had a "softer" approach. Race and nationality were also in play as these humanitarian employees constructed themselves as social and political outsiders: foreign nationals with minimal local connections.

Chloé was a white European project coordinator in North Kivu, who described interacting with a range of armed groups and their administrative authorities after they had taken control of the town where MSF was supporting a general hospital. In her encounters with these actors Chloé explained that "there was a certain advantage to being a woman – you are never going to fit into such a masculine space." In effect, her difference could be performed as a form of social distance from the tense political environment. There were advantages to "doing gender", Chloé explained: "In that context, there is was also the idea that providing *les soins* (care) is a feminine role." In addition, she was "clearly foreign" – her race, nationality and gender became a visible form of difference. Being perceived as an outsider, as well as a woman, meant that Chloé could "not play naïve, but use the idea of naivety – and just listen, let them speak and learn from them." Chloé argued that this approach to interacting with the armed authorities was a way of presenting herself as non-threatening and "respectful" in contrast to how she described the approach of some of her former male colleagues. After one meeting, the humanitarian liaison official of the newly installed rebel administration told Diane that "her boss doesn't know as much as he thinks." As a woman, Diane had tried to distance herself from such tensions and played the role of the humanitarian differently.

Other women described situating themselves as maternal figures, depending on their age. Brigette was a former head of mission and described "gendered aspects" of interactions with armed actors which could be "done strategically." She talked about how she situated herself as a particular sort of woman – a mother – even though she herself has no children. During her time working the Kivu provinces, Brigette always asked new military contacts about their

families and children, and spent time looking at family photographs on their mobile phones. This was a "slow process," but Brigette argued that this "human side" worked. As a woman – especially a foreign *muzungu* woman – she could present herself as someone "really outside of it all, whilst being caring." In her view, this meant that she could "get away with more" or "ask different sorts of questions," because she was not seen as threatening.

Congolese humanitarians told me that having a "visibly" foreign woman was useful when trying to persuade armed actors of MSF's neutrality or impartiality – in other words, when performing humanitarianism. It could diffuse tensions. One Congolese employee, for example, argued that "expatriate women", in particular "*muzungus",* could present themselves as "innocent" and "outsiders." In contrast, several Congolese humanitarians commented on the fact that a number of European MSF employees had military experience in Europe. This was not necessarily an advantage, I was told, and could in fact raise suspicions among some armed groups in the *Petit Nord*: "it does not help with neutrality if you show that you understand how the military works," one Congolese humanitarian concluded. In his view, women gave the opposite impression: their distance from local political dynamics was enhanced by their gender. In short, they could present themselves, in Partis-Jennings (2019:190) term, as "culturally dissonant but respectful guests."

The whiteness of power, undoing gender?

Yet, it was not simply a question of "foreign-ness." The mention of "visibility" and "*muzungus"* illustrates how race remained part of the intricate web - along with international status and gender - that made-up the "third sex." In short, the argument went that white women were seen as outside any existing gender hierarchy: whiteness was a marker of perceived status and power, which brought them authority and a degree of protection. Power dynamics shifted. For white women, their international status was worn on their skin: even though they were women, Congolese employees explained that these women were still clearly from "countries in Europe." As well as being able to construct themselves as detached foreigners, in other words, white women benefitted from the imperial debris (Stoler 2016) of racial hierarchies introduced during Belgian colonisation.

There was a perception among many Congolese humanitarians that white women were more protected from potential violence because they were "members of the international community." As one Congolese MSF employee explained, "armed actors see the white skin and

think of the gravity of the consequences, the ICC." As the discussion of the donkey rule in the previous chapter highlighted, this association between white skin and the "international community" could also lead to distrust between armed actors and MSF fieldworkers, depending on the nationality of the foreigner. Congolese employees told me that, whilst armed actors would "think more carefully" before attacking *muzungus*, some armed commanders were hesitant to "collaborate" because they thought that these foreigners might "publicise and denounce what they see." Yet, being both a *muzungu* and a woman was seen as a useful combination: these foreigners had international status, but were seen as "less threatening." Whiteness, authority, and gender therefore intersected in complex ways. Foreign white women had authority, could portray themselves as distant and different, whilst also presenting themselves as maternal carers. In this way, white women were described as "not entirely women, but not men either" (Partis-Jennings 2019:185).

One of the former project coordinators who featured heavily in the memories of Congolese staff was Lillian, a white European woman. Lillian described interacting with political authorities, armed actors and customary structures in Congo as "theatre," "a sort of ritual, they have their role, and you have yours," she told me. In addition, "everyone has their own technique" in MSF. In Lillian's experience, gender was another possible approach – gender could be "done" or "undone" strategically depending on the context. Whereas some men in MSF go for the "beers with the boys" route, Lillian told me that women could position themselves differently. Sometimes, it was beneficial to behave in an "appropriate" way as a woman. For example, some people made it clear that they disapproved of women drinking, even if they were foreign. But in general, Lillian described a sort of respect that she had not encountered in other places where she had worked: "as a woman in DRC, you actually have a good position. You can ask them *[armed groups]* questions and get answers that men cannot. We are less threatening perhaps, whatever it is, it is possible to be a competent woman here and be treated as such."

In North Kivu, stories about Lillian's bravery circulated during my interviews – it was clear that her behaviour was understood to have "undone" or perhaps even "redone" gender. In particular, several Congolese staff told me about Lillian's ability to drive a motorbike. In MSF, foreign staff did not drive cars, let alone motorbikes, on difficult mountainous roads. In addition, drivers were exclusively men. However, one day when her driver had been injured in

a rural location, Lillian had driven the motorbike back to base. Even years later, this was described as an act of strength and bravery, an almost masculine skill.

Erotic capital

Women working as humanitarians in a highly militarised environment were additionally seen to possess a form of "erotic capital" (Hakim 2010), which, I was told, could be mobilised as a resource for managing security and negotiating access in North Kivu. The term "erotic capital" has been described as a "combination of aesthetic, visual, physical, social and sexual attractiveness": an additional form of capital to the existing economic, cultural and social forms (Hakim 2010:501; Bourdieu 1997). However, this definition ignores how erotic capital is embedded in broader structures of power, such as race and class (Green 2013; Collins 2004; Brooks 2010). In Bourdieu's (1997) framework, forms of capital only gain significance in specific "fields" of power. Therefore, erotic capital should rather be understood as "a resource endogenous to a given field," and it is necessary to explore the specificities of the social context and the historical reasons why certain bodies and behaviours come to hold value or "sexual appeal" (Green 2013:153).

In the militarised political landscape of North Kivu, most female humanitarians described being sexualised "in the field" at some point, usually through comments or insinuations when interacting with certain armed groups. According to many Congolese emplooyees, members of "the third sex" were best placed to make use of their potential erotic capital, because these women were associated with the "international community" and because of the perception on the part of armed groups that there might be more severe consequences in harming these powerful foreigners. Of course, the "erotic capital" of *muzungu* women was not uniform in North Kivu; their possession of this capital depended on class, age, and experience. However, the general conception that *muzungu* women held some form of sexual capital in the social and economic climate of North Kivu was openly discussed. This seemed to be embedded in a racially and historically charged sexual politics (Stoler 1995), as well as the current context of aid intervention in North Kivu.

Sexual relationships in zones of humanitarian intervention are often simplified as either "survival sex" on the part of inhabitants, or "emergency sex" amongst aid workers in desperate conditions (Cain, Postelwait and Thomson 2006). Yet, the politics of love and intimacy in North Kivu are more complex than these characterisations suggest. The long-term humanitarian

intervention has created a social space where foreign intervenors and Congolese citizens interact, exchange and form new arrangements of power and transaction (Oldenburg 2015). In Goma, for example, young Congolese women described finding opportunities to "achieve economic independence…and their own visions of 'modernity'" through romantic relations with foreign peacekeepers[114] and aid workers (Oldenburg 2015:317). These relationships were both material and meaningful – a means of challenging existing gender hierarchies and forming an "(imagined or real) connect to the global world" (Oldenburg 2015:325; Cole and Thomas 2009). The discussion around sex was often racialised. White women had a degree of status, I was told by some young *Gomatraciens* (citizens of Goma), because they were associated with Europe. Others described a foreign girlfriend (in particular, a *muzungu*) as an opportunity to escape any family expectations of marriage and responsibility. One young MSF employee, for instance, told me about his experience having a white European girlfriend in the past: "the rules were completely different." In contrast, several middle aged, Congolese humanitarians were dismissive of the younger generation, who one thought just wanted "white girlfriends because they think it will help them get to Europe." Middle class *Gomatraciens* told me in frustration that relationships with white foreigners were always racialised: "People assume I'm in the relationship for money. What money would that be exactly?"

Complicated colonial durabilities linger in these discussions of sexual relationships between foreigners and Congolese citizens, some of whom associate whiteness with modernity, money and status. It is important to consider the historical context. As Ann Stoler (1995; 2002a) has described, the control of sexuality was a key site of imperial power, and central to the construction of racial boundaries. The sexual practices of European women in particular were policed as the boundary between the colonised and coloniser (Stoler 1989:635). The construction and maintenance of European-ness (and whiteness) was gender coded, whereby a European man could live with a local woman without necessarily losing rank, but a woman could not (Stoler 1995). Relationships between white foreigners and Congolese citizens were often still framed in North Kivu in terms of difference, materiality, modernity, and power.

What did this have to do with negotiating access with armed groups? During interactions with armed groups, being a white woman was described as a visible form of difference in a

[114] It is important to recognise that there have also been cases of sexual abuse of underage Congolese girls by peacekeepers in eastern DRC.

militarised, male-dominated landscape. Indeed, female MSF employees recognised the "gendered dynamics" and described how some interlocutors' attempts to "flirt," which were usually "tongue in cheek." Several joked about the number of marriage proposals they had received and emphasised the importance of "keeping it light" or "not shutting them down" – instead, they could play on these dynamics. One former project coordinator, for example, told me that MSF's armed interlocutors probably just thought it was "fun to try." As she pointed out, the way sexual politics operated as a humanitarian negotiating with armed groups in North Kivu was similar to the way it worked elsewhere: as a woman, you sometimes receive advances or jokes, and you need to respond in a way that will not provoke hostility and might even further your best interests. In North Kivu, this former project coordinator did not remember feeling genuinely threatened, but recognised the need not to take things too seriously. It was often just a question of "raising your eyebrows and saying are you quite done? Shall we move on?"

Brigette similarly thought that it was important to use such dynamics "to your advantage." She described a balancing act that "all women" do, but in a context like North Kivu, the stakes were higher. This balancing was between "not going too far, but also not insulting them." Brigette treated it lightly, laughing but remaining firm. Ultimately, she concluded it was "about human interaction" For some of the men she was meeting, "I was aware that I might be the first woman they have talked to for a while, especially in the remote areas." Chloé also described the importance of the "right sense of humour" in order to "play on" these dynamics. For instance, on one return trip to Goma, Chloé described passing a checkpoint manned by drunk armed men. There had been recent clashes nearby. The atmosphere was tense and the Congolese MSF team in the convoy felt uncomfortable. Whilst the convoy was stopped at the checkpoint, a drunk soldier began to tell Chloé, "*Je t'aime ma chérie, je t'aime"* (I love you, sweetie, I love you.) Chloé did not hesitate, but quickly responded: "*Moi aussi, je m'aime"* (me too, I love me). The soldier was taken aback, but found it amusing and let them pass. MSF employees described having set lines like these – humorous responses that surprised people, "undoing" gender as part of their performance of humanitarianism.

Congolese project coordinator assistants, similarly, argued that a "feminine personality can go a long way" when building contacts with members of armed groups. During his briefings for newly arrived project coordinators, for example, one assistant told me that he would explain to his new bosses that "military people might find them pretty" and that they could "play on this to make things less tense." This assistant remembered one white former project coordinator,

Simone, who everyone found "strong and charming." She was not threatened by these perceptions, but endeavoured to use such qualities to the MSF team's advantage. Simone managed to build a good working relationship with a local Colonel who had, in the past, been hostile towards the MSF project. Simone told me it was a matter of trust and personality, but she also thought that gender had played a role, she was seen as less threatening and could adopt a "charming approach." The next project coordinator, the assistant remembered, was also a foreign woman, but she did not interact in the same way as Simone – she froze. Apparently, this made things "more tense", as the Colonel felt "spurned."

When Simone finished her "mission" in North Kivu and went to work elsewhere, her Congolese colleagues remembered the disappointment amongst several of the armed groups in the *Petit Nord*. One Congolese employee remembered being asked, "*Elle est où, ma blanche? Ma fiancée?*" (where is she, my white woman? My fiancée?) for weeks afterwards. Laughing, he told me that even if MSF had asked this armed group to come and meet the team three kilometres away, they probably would risk the journey if Simone was going to be there: "She had a great sense of humour, they all respected her. She was a strong, talented humanitarian." Simone concluded that the relationships between humanitarians and armed groups over time in North Kivu were like any other. "It is personality based," she said, "not just about the organisation. The work of the organisation only gets you so far, after that it is about *who* you are as a person." MSF employees were representatives of the organisation, but they also formed relationships that were personalised, and lasted over time. This made the issue of the high turnover of senior staff challenging. "When I was back in the country years later, commanders called me up to say hello," she told me, "some were happy I was back, others were probably not because they remembered how hard I was on them." In fact, Simone remained an important resource for MSF, and when relations became strained between the MSF team and a local armed group at the project where Simone had worked, she was brought back to reengage with the Colonel with whom she had built a relationship before.

Maintaining a distance, however, could be challenging for female humanitarians. One former project coordinator described working during the height of the CNDP conflict, when she was in frequent contact with a General. This General was a crucial contact for the project team – he provided important information about ongoing clashes and helped the team navigate a turbulent security environment so that they could continue to travel for mobile clinics. However, the project coordinator also described how the General would call her late at night

just to talk, and on a few drunken occasions, had even professed his feelings. She described "muddling through", and every few months would have to have a "levelling conversation" about principles and boundaries. Erotic capital, then, was also a challenge.

In addition, many other risks remained in place. Experienced drivers, for example, told me that women should not go into the field alone, and that included foreigners. Many female MSF employees still described feeling more comfortable travelling in the company of male colleagues, and one employee described balancing the need to be "agreeable" but also "firm" in negotiations with armed group rank-and-file on the road as exhausting. Whilst a womanly approach to the humanitarian role could be useful when building trust and relationships with senior commanders and armed group leaders, this humanitarian described different dynamics with armed group members she encountered on the road: she was fearful of finding herself "in a difficult situation." The perceived threat of violence was ever-present, and experienced heads of mission and project coordinators alike stressed the benefits of travelling in the morning, when the armed men they might encounter on the road were less likely to be drunk or unpredictable. Other former project coordinators described interactions with particularly aggressive armed interlocutors. "One of the first things this Commander said to me was that he could rape me if he wanted to," one remembered, "I suggested we changed the subject." Over time, this project coordinator and the Commander nonetheless built a good working relationship – she thought that this initial comment had been part of his performance, a "test" or "show of strength."

Ultimately, "complementarity" and working as a team were still essential: Congolese drivers and well-connected Congolese employees still played a crucial role. Therese, the Congolese health promoter, described working with a popular "expatriate woman" during the CNDP conflict. Therese remembered how this expatriate was "loved," but that there were also risks involved, a need to "balance." In one instance, for example, Therese went with the project coordinator to meet with a Colonel of a *Mai Mai* group. After their conversation, the Colonel refused to let the project coordinator leave – joking that she would need to marry him first. Although this began in jest, the situation quickly escalated. In Swahili, Therese described persuading him to let them go by mobilising the fear of international consequences:

> I told him, if you marry her, the ICC will call you a criminal and a kidnapper and there will be terrible consequences. And, if you kidnap her, MSF will leave. She's

> an international. If MSF leave, the community will suffer, and will blame you – they'll make you suffer.

There was still an element of vulnerability that these women were perceived to embody whilst working in highly militarised spaces: foreign women were still described as more protected than their Congolese colleagues as they had international status, but this did not mean that the potential threats of gendered violence were not felt.

CONCLUSION

A senior MSF employee who specialised in "security management in the field" told me that "being a woman can sometimes be an advantage." As he explained, MSF selects senior managers for field positions based on their competences, but then a second step looks at "profiling": does this candidate "fit the context?" Along with nationality and race, gender sometimes became part of this analysis. Humanitarians in North Kivu highlighted a potential relationship between "gender and security," but gender was also described as opaque, slippery and ambiguous. In order to move past generalisations, and to unpack what that relationship might be, it is necessary to explore how different people are related to and perceived in different ways in particular settings.

In North Kivu, gender became another instrument of identity for MSF teams. Indeed, negotiating humanitarian access with armed groups was described as a gendered practice, in which humanitarians were both challenging, and sometimes strategically conforming to, what they perceived as the gender norms expected of them in the context of North Kivu. Women described strategic forms of self-positioning during their interactions with armed combatants in order to manage difficult situations and navigate a politically turbulent environment. Gendered identities held a set of unstable and situated symbolisms, which fieldworkers endeavoured to use to their own advantage.

On the one hand, women described playing with the image of carers or maternal figures during interactions with armed groups, "doing gender" as a means of bolstering their humanitarian role and depoliticising their work. They described the benefits of a "softer" approach – a means to build trust, ease tensions, appear non-threatening. For Congolese women working in health provision, this gendered performance was also a form of personal security to help alleviate some of the exposure of being embedded with personal ties and histories. On the other hand, by

playing with conventional gender norms, these women seemed to be simultaneously "undoing gender" – attempting to empower and protect themselves by strategically adopting certain behaviours. This gendered performance of humanitarianism was even understood as a form of situated power – an advantage women had over their male colleagues. Nonetheless, this did not alleviate all Congolese women's concerns about the potential dangers of violence. In short, female fieldworkers played on gender stereotypes for their own advantage, but in doing so, also seemed to reinforce them.

The concept of the "third sex" illustrates how white women were understood to possess a form of situational power: race, class, age, gender and nationality were in play simultaneously during interactions with armed groups (West and Fenstermaker 1995). As well as playing on the idea of women as carers, foreign white women endeavoured to construct themselves as remote from local conflict dynamics. Whiteness became a marker of their foreign-ness, but also their power and authority which was seen to complicate existing gendered hierarchies. The "third sex" could be performed in playful ways, and women were understood to hold a degree of "erotic capital" which, if played right, could become a form of leverage during everyday negotiations in a masculine, militarised environment.

8. IN-PATS AS BETWIXT AND BETWEEN: LIMINITY, AMBIGUITY AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

INTRODUCTION

I first met Moise in an MSF office in North Kivu. The walls were covered in photographs of drivers on motorcycles, with backdrops of stunning mountain views. Moise had worked for MSF for over a decade, and that morning, I told Moise that I was interested in the experience of local staff. He swiftly replied: "But I'm not a local, I'm an in-pat." As Moise explained, he did not originate from North Kivu, but from another province in the DRC. Being an "in-pat", rather than local to North Kivu or an "expatriate" from abroad, was crucial to Moise's role. Moise described his status as being "in-between" - neither "local," nor "international." In this position, Moise tried to harness the benefits both of both a proximity to, as well as a certain detachment from, the political dynamics of the project area. He helped mediate between different actors *within* MSF, as well as between MSF and armed actors. Like other "in-pats", Moise clearly distinguished himself from "local staff" members and he described a personal transformation during his time with MSF. "I have changed my attitude," he said. He had "rethought" how he understood the people around him and he now saw them "not as Hunde, Hutu, Nande; they are just people." The importance of "personal identity" had been replaced with a commitment to "universalism" that Moise had learnt "*à la maison*"– a term used to describe MSF. Personal identities were no longer as important. Yet, paradoxically, in the process, Moise had himself acquired a new identity: he had become an "in-pat."

Exactly what identity was created? Who are "in-pats"? The distinction between "national" and "international" aid workers overlooks this important category of staff within humanitarian organisations.[115] There are, in fact, three main tiers of employee in MSF: local staff, in-pats and expatriates. Whereas "local staff" originate from near the project site itself, and "expatriate staff" have been brought there to work from abroad, "in-pats" sit somewhere in the middle: they are "national" staff who have been "in-patriated", or *délocalisé*, from their province or territory of origin to work elsewhere in their own country. They are not at home, nor are they abroad. The policy on in-pats has changed over time within MSF, and differences remain between the different MSF sections operating in North Kivu. But the basic idea remains that in-pats are brought into the zone from elsewhere in the DRC to work with MSF: like expats,

[115] 'In-pat' positions exist in other organisations such as *Solidarités,* Oxfam, ACTED, as well as UN agencies.

and in contrast to local staff, they are evacuated in times of emergency. Yet, "in-pats" from elsewhere in the DRC are "internally relocated, they were not expats," one head of mission explained. They may live in the expatriate house or locally, and they have time off to visit their families every three months. But they receive national staff salaries. In-pats have an ambiguous, "in-between" status, occupying a liminal space in the organisation's hierarchy. For some, this state of liminality was transitional – after several years as in-pats, they were expatriated, in other words sent to work in foreign countries. Yet, for others, this liminality became "institutionalised" (Turner 1978), a semi-permanent state, a key feature of their job and identity.

In-pats illustrate the heterogeneity and ambiguity within the bureaucratic category of "national staff." In North Kivu, there was a diverse range of relationships to the project site amongst Congolese humanitarians: at one end, there were employees who originated from the project site itself, or nearby in the same territory, and then, there was a range of in-pats. Some originated from different territories in North Kivu province; others came from different provinces in eastern DRC; yet others came from regions situated a great distance away, spoke different languages and had minimal local connections. Many in-pats occupied senior national staff positions, but in-pats were also employed throughout the organisational hierarchy – as drivers, logisticians and nurses.

The academic literature on aid often overlooks this diversity: NGO employees are described as either "national" or "international," with few studies that explore the *diversity* of class backgrounds, personal histories and identities among "local" aid workers (Peters 2016), or how these social backgrounds might influence the ability to mediate between complex networks in conflict zones. Professional distinctions can in fact constitute "social achievements" and "instruments of strategic manipulation" by individuals and their organisations (Peters 2016:495). Aid workers strategically position themselves within the aid industry in order to gain employment (Peters 2016), and they may also use strategic forms of self-representation when interacting with a diverse range of local actors "in the field" (Heaton Shrestha 2006; Rossi 2006).

This chapter explores the role of in-pats in negotiations for humanitarian access and practices of security management. I describe the experience of in-pats as "betwixt and between" (Turner 1967), and explore how in-pats negotiate their ambiguous "in-between" status. I argue that in-pats' experience of humanitarianism led to the formation of a new identity. In the first section, I examine the development of in-pat status as one of liminality within MSF, no longer "local",

yet not "expatriate." Initially, in-pats helped MSF fill human resource gaps, but over time they became a way of helping MSF to "localise" without some of the perceived risks associated with "local staff." In the second section, I explore the everyday experience of in-pats, discussing how in-pats are understood in MSF to occupy a "middle ground" and therefore play an important role in negotiating access - supposedly harnessing the benefits of national proximity, whilst maintaining necessary distance from the political contests of the particular locality. In mediating between MSF and armed groups, as well as between employees within MSF itself, in-pats strategically position themselves through navigating a sea of complex relationships, casting and recasting themselves for different audiences whilst performing a humanitarian role. Yet, they also struggle to mediate their ambiguous status and to balance conflicting expectations and demands, encountering distrust and becoming embroiled in political contests surrounding *autochtony* and access to resources.

The third section of this chapter explores how humanitarianism has had a profound impact on the identity and sociality of those of its employees who spend years living away from "home" in their own country: they formed new social worlds, and developed a new professional identity, that of a humanitarian, and more specifically, an in-pat. This experience of mediating an ambiguous, in-between role has led to a process of identity formation. Some in-pats constructed themselves as "modern" and "progressive", differentiating themselves from other local actors. The in-pats' role was therefore also instructional: they became translators and enforcers of MSF's performance of principles *within* the organisation. To conclude, the experience of in-pats illustrates a paradox: in the process of teaching "universalism" and learning how to perform humanitarianism, in-pats themselves created a new identity, a new form of particularism.

THE LIMINAL STATE OF IN-PATS

Liminality, Identity and Aid

The concept of liminality was originally coined by van Gennep (1960) to describe the transitionary phase of rites of passage: first, individuals were separated from their fixed position in a social structure, then they occupied a "liminal phase" of ambiguity, before a phase of reincorporation into a social structure with a new social position. Victor Turner (1967) adapted the concept to explore the rituals of Ndembu in Zambia, and since then, it has since taken on a life of its own with multiple meanings and uses in a range of disciplines (Thomassen 2009). In essence, liminality refers to a state of ambiguity and in-between-ness as individuals undergo

a transition from one social status to another. This process is not necessarily linear, nor is liminality necessarily only a temporary, transitory experience. Instead, liminality can become "perpetual" - and can itself come to define individuals' status and self-conception in a social structure (Turner 1969:107). Liminal beings are "neither here nor there;" they "slip through the network of classifications that normally locates states and positions in a cultural space" (Turner 1969:64). Their condition becomes one of "ambiguity and paradox" (Turner 1967:7), as they operate at the thresholds between existing, well-established social categories – bridging these categories, whilst also blurring them and bringing their validity into doubt.

Lisa Smirl (2012) used the concept of liminality to describe the "space" of international aid work. Drawing on the memoirs of "expatiate" aid workers, she describes the formation of a "liminal subjectivity", in which "going to the field" is a codified "rite of passage." The experience of aid is defined by this space of "the field," which is liminal not in relation to the local surroundings, but in relation to the aid worker's country of origin. The act of "being in the field" creates and reproduces "Aidland": intense relationships form, which in turn shape future career trajectories. The bonds between aid workers are further entrenched by their spatial separation from the rest of the context, and their "practices of exception" – tight security rules, exception from local laws, and the lifestyles that form in compounds. In Smirl's description, this helps explain the exclusivity of the liminal space: the "noticeable absence of 'local' people within the spaces of the international." The "international community" is in a continual process of constructing and reproducing itself (Smirl 2012; Heathershaw 2016).

But it is not only foreign humanitarians who travel, create new social worlds, forming new identities in the process. Indeed, the competing states of mobility/immobility do not map neatly on to international/local (Redfield 2012), but are found among diverse "national" staff as well (Heathershaw 2016). The mobility of a great number of "national" staff means that the term "local" obscures, rather than defines, their social backgrounds and relationship with the project site (Peters 2016). The positionality of an aid worker in a particular project locality is ambiguous: contested, constructed or performed strategically. Some humanitarians are so embedded in local histories and networks that they purposefully *construct difference* in order to distinguish themselves from the "local community" and perform a degree of professionalism (Englund 2006; Heaton Shrestha 2006), whilst others purposefully construct familiarity, performing a "local" identity in order to access employment (Peters 2016). "National" staff who travel extensively in their own country, or middleclass employees from cities a great distance away from home, can be social

outsiders to the areas in which they work. Instead, it is being part of the aid community that becomes central to their identity, as their "self-conceptions" change through their experience in the sector (Heathershaw 2016:92; Swidler and Watkins 2009; Pigg 1992; Heaton Shrestha 2006).

In-pats are mobile, they travel away from their original "home" and form new social networks and professional identities. The position of in-pats is also liminal because they fall between two bureaucratic categories of the aid industry: local and international. The position of in-pats illustrates the ambiguities of these terms: what does it mean to be local or foreign to the project site? The DRC is two million square kilometres. What qualifies as in-pat? How far do you have to go from your "home" to qualify as an in-pat? Some in-pats came from a great distance away, and had never visited the sorts of rural locations found in North Kivu. One employee told me, "the first time I saw Masisi, I thought, *c'est la brousse ici!*" (This really is the bush!) Another highlighted that I, as a British person, was better acclimatised to the weather in the mountainous regions of North Kivu than he was. In-pats usually have the necessary skills or qualifications to occupy a particular post, and are therefore brought in to implement programs in that location. There were also differences in class background and in experience of violent conflict: being *Kinois* (from Kinshasa, the capital in the west of the country) or Lingala-phone (the language spoken in the west) was described as a marker of urban sophistication and education by many employees in North Kivu (Buscher et al., 2013). One employee from North Kivu, however, described how there could be difficulties when working with "*Kinois*". "Like *muzungus,*" he said, "they get scared easily. Those city boys find it hard to adjust to war!" Other in-pat staff came from closer urban centres in the east of DRC, but described themselves as social outsiders – rural project locations were foreign to them too. How long people stayed an in-pat was variable: some in-pats had lived at the project site for over a decade, and had created new lives for themselves; others were passing through on shorter-term missions, and lived in the "expatriate house." Either way, in-pats distanced themselves from the local environment, and spoke in the third person about "locals." Many defined themselves as in-pats.

Ultimately, the "in-pat" category recognises the diversity of people hired with a Congolese passport, but at the same time reifies the importance of state borders. On the one hand, in-pat status shifts the unit of analysis away from "nationality" as the key axe of difference to recognise the diverse geographical origins, socioeconomic backgrounds, linguistic skills, and the degree of "local" networks at a project among Congolese employees. On the other hand, the idea of

"in-pat" reproduces the borders of the nation state as a key defining feature. The category qualifies state centrism, but does not abandon it all together.

Origins of "in-pat" status

What was the origin of in-pat status, and what was the logic behind its creation in MSF? In-pats have become an increasingly important group of humanitarians in MSF health projects in DRC. At first, their status remained "structurally invisible" (Turner 1967), falling between the categories of "national" and "international." However, in-pat status became increasingly formalised within MSF, with different contracts and evacuation rules from those of "local staff," but also contracts distinct from those of internationals. In MSF's archives, the formalisation of in-pat status occurred over the last decade, the word "in-pat"[116] beginning to feature more frequently from 2008 onwards. For instance, in 2010, a guideline for foreign staff working in North Kivu used the terms "national" and "expatriate" staff without explanation, but a new section on "in-pats" was added, describing their role and importance:

> They are supposed to be on the same hierarchical level as expatriates in the field…they are the foundation of our programme (and the memory), helping to integrate our expatriates in the field…It isn't uncommon that in-pats have a higher position in the hierarchy than expatriates…these in-pats allow us to turn around our programmes and react quickly in case of emergency whilst minimising the delays involved in waiting for expatriates to arrive from Paris.[117]

First, then, in-pats provided practical benefits for MSF's operations in DRC: they helped fill human resource gaps in teams operating in rural areas; they occupied unfilled positions for local as well expatriate staff. Locally, it was often difficult to find candidates with the necessary experience or qualifications. Instead, it became necessary to "delocalise" skilled staff from elsewhere in the country. As a former head of mission reflected, "we tried to hire locally for acceptance, but often we had to bring in in-pats. We couldn't find the skill sets we needed otherwise." In-pats were often already technically trained. Additionally, in-pats worked as "gap fillers", occupying expatriate positions, such as project coordinators, for several months in order to cover for newly hired expatriates who had not yet arrived from abroad. In-pats also had

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[116] Or *délocalisé* in French.
[117] Translation is my own, from: "*Fiche Pays RDC. 2010."* MSF internal archives, Paris.

numerous advantages: a "better memory of the program", for example, and they fact that they were "less costly and more experienced than an expat newcomer." [118] In effect, in-pats "practiced" being local through their linguistic skills and ability to read the context, but their position also relied on the skills and education demanded in the professionalised humanitarian workplace (Peters 2016).

In-pat status did not develop uniformly across the different MSF sections. In MSF France, in-pats have performed gap-fill expat positions for some time, but even in 2012 MSF Holland considered national staff to be too exposed to take-on such roles "due to the complexity of the context and relations with authorities," one document read.[119] It was not until 2018 that MSF Holland introduced "gap-fillers". In order to make sense of these intersectional differences, many Congolese humanitarians drew on stereotypes, partly in jest: "French – few rules. Holland – lots of rules. Belgium – big and everywhere." In applying these to the differing policies on in-pats, one Congolese employee told me that the French were "the first, they are about speed," whereas the Dutch section was "more prudent, they wait to see evidence." Even the most prudent, then, had come to see the logic of "in-pat" status.

Whilst in-pat status was established for practical reasons, in-pats were also seen as an important group for negotiating access and security management. In effect, they presented MSF with a means of "localising" without the same set of risks associated with locally embedded employees from North Kivu. In-pats occupied a "middle ground" for MSF operations in a conflict environment – supposedly harnessing the benefits of national proximity, whilst maintaining necessary distance from the political contests of the particular project site. They had an element of "detachment" acquired through mobility, but also had the necessary linguistic and cultural *savoir faire* that gave them a comparative advantage over their foreign colleagues. In-pats were seen to be less "risky" – coming with less in the way of local entanglement or personal involvement. In other words, they could perform a humanitarian role without the complexities of having an existing interpersonal network in "the field" of intervention. In Moise's words, "I can more easily balance my personal and humanitarian identities." Their status as local, but not local, was seen as a resource for negotiating access in MSF.

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[118] "*Sitrep* from Head of Mission to HQ. 2010. Week 10-14." MSF Holland, in author's possession.
[119] "Head of mission handover. 2012." MSF Holland, in author's possession.

In-pats were often given more responsibility than their "local employees" in the brokerage club; they were seen as adequately inducted into the MSF way of working because they knew how to *be MSF* in practice. In one guide for expatriates in North Kivu, for example, MSF explained that in-pats were important, but "the trap is to give…inexperienced people the delocalised status (drift is possible so we need to remain vigilant.)"[120] There was distrust as to whether local staff from nearby were truly neutral, or could be perceived as such. Although links between locally hired staff and armed groups were useful for access, as one expatriate said, "there is also a risky side, we never know the extent of the links." In contrast, in-pats were more removed and already considered adequately *sensibilisé*: there was less risk that they would "drift." For this reason, in-pats were trusted to uphold the principles that the MSF emblem represents – to perform, or embody, MSF, whilst harnessing the benefits of proximity to act as guides for their foreign colleagues. In addition, they were considered to be less "at risk". As one project co-ordinator explained, his in-pat assistant was "less exposed" than local staff, because he was "not from around here." Therefore, in-pats' in-between identity was associated with an in-between level of risk: not as at-risk as "local staff", but not as protected as "expats."

"Ethnically neutral"?

In situation reports, security guidelines, and conversations with MSF employees, "ethnicity" sometimes surfaced as a framing for conflict dynamics and political allegiances, including those of MSF's employees themselves. MSF guidelines describe "ethnic violence" and "ethnic tensions"[121], or "*les tensions intercommuniataires"* and "*tensions interethniques."*[122] In particularly violent periods of fighting, there was apprehension as to whether locally hired employees would be able to prioritise MSF's interests over those of their own interests. Security protocols described national staff as "divided by ethnical lines" which meant that "reinforcement of MSF's principles through repeated principle sessions" were essential.[123] There remained doubt whether some local staff's commitment to *"comportement MSF"* (MSF behaviour) would transcend personal differences in such a violent context.

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120 *Fiche Pays RDC. 2010.* MSF France internal archives. Paris.
121 "Local security plan Mweso North Kivu." 2016. MSF Holland, in author's possession. "Pinga security plan." 2011. MSF Holland, in author's possession.
122 "*1201 Sitrep mois de Janvier.*" 2012. MSF internal archives, Paris. "*1501 NORD KIVU sitrep.*" 2015. MSF internal archives, Paris.
123 "Head of mission handover. 2014." MSF Holland, in author's possession.

In contrast, in-pats were described as "ethnically neutral" – this could become a resource for negotiating access, and they were often given more responsibility. One security plan explained that "only expats (and authorised ethnically neutral national staff) are authorised to speak to armed groups" in an official capacity: "due to ethnic tensions, national staff have been accused in the past of supporting certain armed groups."[124] In-pats were often assistants who provided "cultural briefings" for new foreign employees, to ensure that they are aware of "cultural differences, ethnicities (inside local communities and between staff) and can behave accordingly in order to have a good acceptance and image of MSF."[125] The logic went that in-pats could more easily embody the ideals of the organisation, and were less entangled in particular attachments. As a result, some in-pats described part of their advantage being able to perform a humanitarian role more convincingly *to their own colleagues*: "as an in-pat, I am seen as more neutral by expatriates, acting in the interests of the organisation, rather than of my own community," one in-pat summarised.

This description of ethnicity as somehow inescapable, rendering "locals" open to corruption or particularistic loyalties reactivates uncomfortable colonial discourses which portray "non-Western cultures" as fixed and particularistic (Grovogui 2001:445), with the "native" bound up in particular attachments, whilst ideas of universal values are associated with European culture (Kothari 2006; Mudimbe 1988:4). Ethnic conflict as an explanatory factor is embedded in colonial discourses of Otherness and "irrational" violence in the "heart of darkness" (Nzongola-Ntalaja 1999:31; Dunn 2003). The description of in-pats as guides and translators between foreign staff and locals seemed to place in-pats as "in-between" modernity and tradition, reproducing colonial discourses of progress and conversion (Mudimbe 1988:79). There seem to be uncomfortable echoes with the descriptions of the middle-class *évolués* who were seen to have "evolved" up the civilizational ladder through their education and acceptance of "Western" norms. They acted as mediators between the Belgian regime and the rest of the Congolese population, because they were able to master "European cultural categories" and translate them into "African experiences", and vice versa (Lawrance *et al.,* 2006:33; Mianda 2002:148). Indeed, the Belgian colonial administrators defined an *évolué* as "a man having broken social ties with his group, [and] having entered another system of motivations, another system of values" (Gillet and Cornet 2010:19). This was someone adequately *sensibilisé.*

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[124] "Local security Plan." 2016. MSF Holland, in author's possession.
[125] "Local security plan Mweso NK." 2016. MSF Holland, in author's possession.

Yet, experienced foreign MSF employees vehemently disagreed that in-pats were seen as "more neutral" by "expatriates" just because of their "ethnicity." Indeed, as one French Logistician pointed out, the reason MSF has been able to continue operating in the Kivu provinces is precisely because its analysis of the political environment moves beyond simplistic and deeply problematic framings of "ethnicity." In-pats had personal interests that were more difficult for an outsider to grasp than assumptions about "ethnic alliances." Instead, MSF was *pragmatic*: in-pats had the potential *to be seen* as neutral by armed actors and also by other MSF staff. In other words, they could perform humanitarianism with greater ease. As one French employee concluded, "we come with our principles, and then we adapt." MSF adapted to a context where colonial histories had remapped identity, space and political order. This "ethno-governmentality" of colonial rule had durable effects on people's "sense of self" and on "struggles over political space," and was reproduced in the postcolonial era (Hoffman 2019). Ethnicity remained a politicised marker of proximity – it associated an individual with a particular locality, historical contests over political authority, as well as with collective social memories of violence (Mathys 2017; Pottier 2006).

Humanitarian organisations in eastern DRC recognised the importance of perceived ethnicity in processes of negotiating access during the conflict in Ituri (1999-2004), when they were accused of benefitting "the other side" by warring groups linked to Hema and Lendu communities (Pottier 2006). After the murder of six ICRC staff in 2001, NGOs returned to the zone but started to travel in teams balanced with different ethnic origins. Humanitarian agencies changed their recruitment practices and became concerned with the "ethnic balance of assistance" in their choices of locations as a means of actively illustrating their impartiality (Pottier 2006:162). In effect, the Ituri case illustrated how "relief workers in conflict zones do not (and cannot) shed their ethnic identities". Instead, local aid workers "accept that a perceived ethnic identity brings strategic advantages as well as disadvantages" (Pottier 2006:151). MSF Holland was forced out of Ituri during this time - it was rumoured that the organisation was anti-Hema after a photograph circulated of an employee giving aid to a Lendu man armed with bows and spears (Pottier 2006:163). As the organisation discovered, optics mattered, and ethnic markers were powerful, impacting upon how different employees, but also the organisation more broadly, were perceived. Therefore, just as perceived ethnic identities of locally hired employees could constitute a resource for humanitarian access, so too did the supposed

detachment of in-pats – the fact that they did not belong to a community with an associated armed group, and did not have a perceived identity that situated them in specific local contests.

Stepping stone?

In-patriation became a means to prepare staff for expatriation[126] - helping provide more equal opportunities in MSF that were articulated in the *La Mancha* agreement. When I discussed inequalities between national and international staff with senior employees working at MSF France headquarters in Paris, for example, they were quick to point out that the expatriate staff body of MSF France was more diverse than before. Indeed, MSF's "expatriate pool" has become increasingly "Africanised" over time (Issoufou 2018), with a large number of Congolese citizens working as expatriates abroad. MSF has become more visibly cosmopolitan.

Congolese employees in North Kivu described the greater responsibility given to in-pats as part of a broader "experiment to promote national staff", which included short-term "detachments" to Francophone African countries. These "detachments" were designed to "fill the gaps" in these missions, but also to enable nationals to "gain experience" as a "stepping-stone" to expatriation. One foreign employee explained these initiatives were also a way to "try out" hopefuls for expatriation, so avoiding any unexpected problems further along the line. Indeed, the first criteria for the potential "expatriation of national staff" was "to adhere to the values of the MSF charter and to adopt the spirit of voluntarism."[127] Detachments, in-patriation and gap-fills were means to gain experience and illustrate such a commitment to MSF ideals and spirit. At several project sites, as well as in Goma, the Congolese team asked MSF to pay for English lessons, given that speaking English was an advantage for those who wanted to become expatriated abroad. For many Congolese employees, the aspiration was not to change the structure of the MSF hierarchy so that they could lead operations in their own country. Rather, there was an eagerness to get expatriated.

"In-patriation" was not simply a matter of human resources, then, but also a micro-version of becoming delocalised from home in order to be a humanitarian. Detachment, in this sense, was central to the cultivation of humanitarian identity, and in North Kivu, detachment from the "local conflict" was understood as central to this cultivation. In-patriation was often seen as a

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126 "*Sitrep* from Head of Mission to HQ. 2010. Week 10-14." MSF Holland, in author's possession.
127 "*Expatriation de membres du personnel national. Operational Center Brussels Département RH.*" 2017. MSF Belgium, in author's possession, p.5.

liminal, transitory phase – the aim was that it would lead to expatriation, reintegrating individuals into the social body of MSF as fully fledged humanitarian volunteers working abroad.

NEGOTIATING AMBIGUITY, PERFORMING HUMANITARIANISM

Moise told me that "in-pats do things that local staff cannot." So, what role did in-pats play in negotiating access and managing security? How did they fit into the brokerage club? And what was the significance of the "in-pat" identity?" In short, in-pats became brokers and translators between overlapping networks: between MSF and local power-holders, but also between networks employees within MSF itself. In-pats came to occupy this mediating role because of their perceived in-between-ness. Not local, but not foreign, in-pats tried to use this ambiguous identity as a way to build consensus and connections. In MSF, in-pats were entrusted with negotiating access and brokering and translating - manoeuvring through complex, dynamic situations as "boundary *bricoleurs*" (Ellis and Ybema 2010:296).

Negotiating Humanitarian Access

In-pats' role in processes of negotiating access and security management was defined by their seeming ability to harness the benefits of national proximity, without being associated with a local "ethnic group", or the risks involved in local, political entanglement. They acted as guides for their foreign colleagues: building and maintaining a network amongst local armed actors, and helping in frontline negotiations. Senior national staff positions such as project coordinator or head of mission assistants were often reserved for in-pats.

For example, one in-pat employee described how he introduced foreign colleagues to local rebel commanders, some of whom he had been in contact with for over a decade. He described the difficulty of maintaining distance given this long-term engagement. "The difficulty is to create a relationship that is not a friendship with unwanted expectations and additional pressure," he explained. Yet, this employee argued that being an in-pat – in particular, not from a local community that has an armed group active in the area – was essential to his ability to conduct this mediating role. He described "ethnicity" as a powerful mobilising force in North Kivu: "The problem with local staff is that they can be viewed as complicit with the armed group from their community." Whilst local staff were exposed and not perceived as neutral by armed groups, "I can work in ways they can't, because I have some distance," he told me. In his view, because in-pats were not "directly implicated" in local tensions, they could more effectively "get

across MSF's message." At the same time, in-pats could build a "Congolese bond" and trust with interlocutors who sometimes asked them for reassurances about the intentions of their foreign colleagues in Swahili so expatriates could not understand. How was in-pats' more "distant" position communicated during interactions with armed actors? In-pats highlighted the importance of their surnames, their inability to speak local dialects, or their accent in Swahili. One told me, "when I start speaking, it becomes clear that I'm not *du coin* (from around here)."

At a project level, in-pats helped navigate political dynamics whilst positioning themselves as outsiders to the specificities of historical violence at that particular locality. One former project coordinator assistant told me about his work during a period of intense violence, when he had to maintain contact with several warring armed groups. The project site changed hands multiple times. His role became particularly challenging as conflict had intensified between two different armed groups – the APCLS and NDC – which were linked predominantly to Hunde and Nyanga communities. These tensions were reflected internally in the MSF team. The assistant described his "distance" as essential to his ability to continue working: "I am Congolese, but I'm not from North Kivu." He argued that it would have been difficult if a local staff member had occupied his position – especially someone who was from an "ethnic community" which was associated with armed groups in the area. He concluded that "unfortunately, there is an increasing ethnic element to armed mobilisation here. The criteria for acceptance of Congolese humanitarians by armed groups seems to be either someone from the same community with connections, or someone without any links locally." If MSF always relied upon someone in the first category, they would endanger the perception of impartiality when dealing with opposition armed groups. This former assistant operated in the "in-between" - someone without local ties, but still a national who could guide.

In-pats throughout MSF conducted this mediation role alongside their other technical tasks. In-pat drivers argued that they played a central role in negotiating access which was different from that of "local drivers": "we're not ethnically aligned, so it's easier for us to be perceived as neutral, whereas local drivers are important for making contacts and going to certain areas," one told me. Moise explained that he was more easily seen as "neutral," or "not complicit," by armed actors in areas he passed through and when negotiating at roadblocks. As a result, in-pats like him were able to play a central role when travelling in North Kivu. When planning convoys, Moise described the importance of including someone "not from here": depending on the sensitivity of the area, this could be an expatriate, a donkey, or an in-pat. Because of

"ethnic tendencies", Moise argued that it was difficult for local staff *to be perceived as* "neutral." When interacting with armed actors, in-pats described helping to "enforce neutrality" because they were "not local" to the same extent. In-pats, for instance, described preventing the personalisation of MSF's interactions in the field – when an employee knew an armed commander personally, it was easier for Moise to enforce a degree of formality to the interaction: "I would say to them, you are no longer interacting as friends or family. This is *pour la maison* (MSF)." In effect, in-pat Congolese employees built up *metis* knowledge about how to navigate a particular social structure (Scott 1998), but did not have the same degree of personal links and histories. They were therefore seen as a resource - crucial to performing humanitarianism during negotiations with armed actors.

Mediating within MSF

In-pats also played a mediation role *within* MSF teams: they helped broker relationships between mobile foreigners and the large Congolese staff body. One former project coordinator assistant described his role as acting as MSF's "eyes and ears", "picking things up and helping them *[foreigners]* understand." In particular, in-pat assistants analysed how MSF employees fitted into the broader political dynamics of the area: "I looked at where local employees came from, what that might mean, how that might be perceived" in ways that "expatriates may not understand," one in-pat told me. Project coordinator assistants and head of mission assistants identified "intermediaries" amongst the staff body: "there are always links to armed groups, so we need to understand who is connected and how, and work out how that could be useful operationally," one told me. When project coordinators needed to find a way to contact specific armed commanders, in-pats directed them to the appropriate person to ask in the local MSF team. A former project coordinator described her in-pat colleague's role as acting as the "translator" of the local team. In sum, in-pats helped to broker relationships and analyse the links between a complex range of actors, including amongst MSF staff themselves.

In-pats also played a role in trying to ease tensions within MSF teams. MSF employees in North Kivu had their own complicated personal histories, disagreements, as well as difficult experiences of violence. In times of tension in-pats were sometimes called in to help. One in-pat described giving an emergency "peace" talk: after active fighting nearby, there was growing division in the MSF team, which had culminated in a reluctance among hospital staff to treat patients from "the other side." The in-pat employee needed to "strengthen the team's humanitarian identity" in order to create a sense of unity, and decided to run a workshop. MSF

was "a family", he stressed, arguing that "employees from different communities should not consider each other as enemies in the workplace…We need unity in order to serve the communities around us, despite the climate of mistrust." The in-pat explained that his message of unity "only worked coming from me, because I am not from one of these communities." The MSF archives described these "peace talks" as the best way to combat such tensions, in particular when led by an in-pat employee who has "the capacity to get and keep people together." As the documents stressed, by "being an outsider with a high position, he has more influence."[128]

Difficulties of distance

But, was being an in-pat really the best of both worlds? Their position vis-à-vis the shifting political context was ambiguous and varying. In fact, some in-pats faced considerable difficulties in occupying this "in-between" position, mediating between networks and positioning themselves as humanitarians. A former in-pat employee, Jean, told me about his work as a project coordinator gap-fill in North Kivu. Jean originated from another province in Congo, and had no personal links in the Kivus before he began working with MSF. Jean remembered the tension of not being considered local, but also not being a foreign national whilst negotiating with the national army and several rebel groups. "It was not easy", he told me, because local commanders still made demands of him (as a Congolese citizen) that they would not of foreign employees. "They know it is not easy for every Congolese to say no," he told me. As a result, Jean had to continually reinforce his independence, explaining "I'm calling you because my teams are coming, I'm not ringing as an individual, but as a representative of MSF." In other words, Jean described the difficulties of getting to be seen solely as MSF, even when an in-pat far away from home.

Jean also experienced a recurring problem for some in-pats: in North Kivu, the recruitment of "*non-originaires*" was a source of hostility and political agitation. Humanitarian organisations faced criticism for bringing in Congolese staff from provinces, rather than hiring locally (Pottier 2006:161). "Hiring for acceptance" became a matter of security – an essential consideration for maintaining access. In Masisi territory, for example, MSF received letters from the *crème intellectuelle*[129] accusing NGOs of "bringing in labour and not hiring enough local people."[130] In-

[128] "Security Incident Report." 2014. MSF Holland, in author's possession.
[129] A civil society group.
[130] Letter from *Crème Intelectuelle* June 2010. MSF Holland, in author's possession.

pats remembered the hostility: MSF employees were viewed as people with money, and "as an in-pat, local people thought I was stealing *their* jobs and *their* money." Indeed, on several occasions, the *Jeunesse* of Masisi (a youth association that helps people find employment and represent local groups within the formalised political structure) blocked NGOs from entering the territory in opposition to the "importation" of workers. Ultimately, Congolese humanitarians became caught-up in ongoing political contests about belonging and access to resources. The identities of Congolese employees became politicised using discourses of *autochtony* that defined insiders and outsiders, operating at various levels (Jackson 2006). In-pats were not neutral outsiders, but were sometimes perceived to be taking jobs from "real locals" - *autochtons*.

At MSF's project in Rutshuru, for example, recruitment processes became a tense subject. Hostility grew towards "foreigners" recruited from outside the territory. In particular, there were objections to the number of staff who had been employed from MSF's former projects in the *Grand Nord* territories of North Kivu. By 2008, there was growing hostility towards *non-originaires* from any community. The CNDP rebel group in power at the time actually warned MSF to "favour people who are from the zone (without ethnic groups specifically)" in order to avoid local backlash.[131] By 2012, MSF had received numerous anonymous letters objecting to the recruitment of *non-originaires* and threatening in-pats. MSF met with members of the inter-community *Baraza* who suggested that MSF recruit locally to "avoid insecurity."[132] Indeed, one security audit concluded: "staff composition, both in terms of tribal affiliation (locally) and from the perspective of moving staff into areas foreign to them (i.e. in-pats) needs to be carefully mapped."[133] Recruitment became a central part of security management and maintaining access.

In-pats also described problems in managing their own personal security, which arose from their ambiguous in-between position. The evacuation procedures for in-pats have developed over time, with the conclusion that because in-pats were brought in, they should be taken out. When I visited North Kivu, all in-pats were on the evacuation list. However, this was not always the case nor was it uniform. In-pats told me about their experiences in North Kivu over the last decade: during the preliminary evaluation of one rural project, for example, in-pats described how they had lived with expatriates in the MSF compound; however, because of

131 "*Rapport de visite Rutshuru. 11-12 Decembre 2008*." MSF internal archives, Paris.
132 "*Réunion avec société civile et Baraza provenaient de différents territoires*." 2012. MSF internal archives, Paris.
133 "Security Audit, North and South Kivu Missions. December 2009." MSF Holland, in author's possession.

limited resources, once the project was established, in-pats lived locally, usually with a host family. Formally, the security plan for the project included evacuation of in-pat staff, but when the project became the site of intense fighting, one in-pat described how he had not been evacuated, nor did he know the "local mechanisms" for coping with violent situations. The father of his host family had woken him in the dead of night to inform him that the family had decided to flee into the bush, and the MSF employee decided to stay rather than flee, seeking refuge in the hospital.

One former head of mission described evacuation rules for in-pats as a "touchy subject" during her time in North Kivu. Sometimes a guarantee of evacuation was given in writing,[134] but in other cases, there was still "no set policy." During the CNDP conflict, for instance, one project coordinator decided to evacuate in-pats when MSF's project became the site of heavy gunfire. However, there was not enough space in MSF vehicles. Hector, an in-pat outreach nurse in the project at the time, described how the team was trapped amongst heavy fighting between multiple armed groups. The project coordinator negotiated a safe passage for an evacuation, in which the foreign staff were in vehicles, whilst in-pats on motorcycles were sandwiched, literally "in-between" others, shielded by the convoy of Land Cruisers on either side.

Other Congolese employees described their distinctly urban identities – they felt a form of social distance, rather than necessarily geographical distance (Vlassenroot and Bücher 2013). Even if they were not *that far* away from home, they certainly felt it. Some employees had grown up in Goma or Bukavu, but others were from Lubumbashi or Kinshasa, and had little experience of the sorts of situations in which they found themselves in moments of heavy fighting in North Kivu. Whilst many had "in-pat" contracts and were on the evacuation list, other in-pats had begun their careers on the standard "national" contract. One nurse from Goma told me that she was a "city girl" and when she began working with MSF, she was not on the evacuation list. When the project she was working at was evacuated multiple times during the CNDP conflict, Congolese employees stayed, but this was particularly difficult for her. As she explained it to me, "When things got rough, I didn't know what to do." In the end, this nurse agreed to work at another MSF project, but under the condition that she had *delocalisé* status. Ultimately, in-pats felt that they did not have sufficient experience of coping with cyclical violence, but at the same time they had not always been provided with the same security apparatus as their foreign

134 "*Guide sécurité 2006*." MSF internal archives, Paris.

colleagues. The three MSF sections have since all recognised the importance of evacuating in-pats. As Moise highlighted to me, he was still on the evacuation list after more than a decade.

Shapeshifters and strategic repositioning

Given the risks and advantages of being seen as an "outsider" or a "local" at different times, in-pats tried to construct and reconstruct their identities in real time for different audiences whilst performing a humanitarian role. All aid workers are involved in complex processes of impression management. They may distance themselves from the "local community" to illustrate their professionalism, to construct themselves as "modern", or to manage difficult relationships and demands from "beneficiaries" (Heaton Shrestha 2006; Englund 2006; Rossi 2006; Pigg 1992). In other contexts, aid workers purposefully perform a local proximity by hiding parts of their histories, backgrounds and expertise in order to qualify for "local" contracts (Peters 2016). In this way, aid practice involves the strategic production of different identities (Heaton Shrestha 2006), as aid workers "adjust strategically and instrumentally to their ascribed roles" (Rossi 2006:29).

In North Kivu, in-pats conducted creative modes of self-fashioning in order to negotiate humanitarian access for MSF and manage their own safety. They practiced the creativity associated with brokerage (James 2011:335; Barber 1987; Geertz 1960), performing both local-ness and social distance for different audiences. In-pats became shape-shifters: because humanitarians encounter risks due to their perceived identity, in-pats learnt to "play on collective identities" (Bierschenk et al., 2002). For example, perceived ethnic identities could be a resource when negotiating access in some areas, and a disadvantage in others (Pottier 2006). But, these ethnic identity markers were not fixed: in-pats situated themselves strategically during encounters with armed actors using the signifiers *assigned to them by others*. Perceived ethnic identity became part of a *bricoleur* "tool kit" which in-pats used to "construct their identity" in different instances (James 2011:318). "Ethnicity" was "done" or constructed during interaction, rather than fixed or innate (West and Fenstermaker 1995).

If aid brokers are "identity entrepreneurs" (Bierschenk et al., 2002:28), then in-pats tried to be identity entrepreneurs for humanitarian access: "Like quicksilver, they have to be prepared to cast and recast themselves in in an instant for different audiences at different times, all the while attempting to maintain multiple relationships" (Ellis and Ybema 2010:295). This process was fraught with tension, and the experience was not uniform: some in-pats balanced their "in-

between-ness" with greater ease than others. Many faced distrust. In what follows, I describe the experiences of two former Congolese employees working in North Kivu. In both cases, their personal connection to the project site was more ambiguous than either the "local" or "in-pat" labels suggest. They tried to use this ambiguity strategically whilst negotiating access.

Gabriel began as a driver for MSF on an in-pat contract. He had a long career with MSF, and was subsequently expatriated abroad. Gabriel described to me his first journey to the project site in North Kivu, which became "the field." He remembered the mountain roads, the greenery, and the sense of uncertainty. The project site was quite foreign to Gabriel, yet Gabriel's "in-between-ness" differed from other in-pats. Although he had never visited the project until his first mission with MSF, his father was an *originaire* to the region and had grown up there, and was from a community with a *chefferie*. In addition, Gabriel came to realise that he had some personal contacts in the surrounding area. Before joining the humanitarian sector, Gabriel had worked in the political wing of RCD administration during the second Congolese war (1998-2003), and some of his former colleagues had subsequently joined the CNDP – the armed group now in power. Gabriel described bumping into people he knew: whilst interpreting for expatriates during meetings with armed commanders, he was sometimes recognised.

As a driver, Gabriel learnt how to navigate the roads and he had to adapt quickly. Whilst negotiating access to areas controlled by warring armed groups, Gabriel described "trying to play different roles to different people." He endeavoured to use his in-between-ness strategically to navigate different zones of control and cross roadblocks as a driver. When crossing frontlines or roadblocks manned by the PARECO armed group (which drew from the discourse of *autochthony* and was in opposition to the CNDP), Gabriel gave his surname which indicated his "local roots." In other words, he constructed himself as an "*autochtone,"* and did not disclose his history with the RCD. However, when interacting with the CNDP, Gabriel did the exact opposite: he did not disclose his surname, and used his personal contacts to his advantage. Gabriel told me that his ethnicity was not self-evident – it was a matter of perception. He did not speak the local dialect of his father's community in North Kivu, and described himself as having "Rwandan morphology," so he could "pass as a Tutsi," especially given these personal contacts. In other words, Gabriel described "doing ethnicity" differently to different armed groups whilst performing a humanitarian role. Ethnicity was constructed and fluid, reconstructed at an individual level by humanitarians during their interactions.

But, there was a limit to the extent Gabriel could strategically position himself in this manner. In his words, "the ambiguity caused me problems." As Mary Douglas (1966) argued, what cannot be clearly classified, or falls between boundaries, is often regarded as polluting and dangerous. Gabriel's loyalties were questioned. PARECO sometimes distrusted his origins, especially given the fact he could not speak the dialect. Within MSF, Gabriel blurred boundaries, and was viewed with suspicion by his colleagues. In his words, "local staff were MSF, but personal identities remained strong." Although his father was from North Kivu, Gabriel described himself as "a *délocalisé* and treated as one in MSF." His impression was that some of his colleagues saw his name, which suggested he was "one of them," but realised he was different: "I was clearly a city boy." Gabriel was university educated, spoke Lingala and English, had only lived in urban centres, and had joined the humanitarian sector as a driver as something of a last resort in the context of high unemployment and political turbulence. In MSF, Gabriel was promoted, and was even involved in recruitment decisions. He then received several anonymous threats. One accused him of having favoured "Rwandophones" in recruitment, a perception he thought was fed by his links to the CNDP. Gabriel's proximity to his foreign colleagues was met with some distrust: he was accused of excluding other colleagues by speaking English. The archives describe similar cases: those who could navigate the "staff nat/expat divide" were often "distrusted", in particular those who could speak English with expatriates.[135] There was recognition that in-pats needed protecting: as nationals but with increased responsibility, they were subject to additional pressures.[136] MSF changed its policy – recruitment decisions are solely conducted by foreign employees.[137]

In contrast to Gabriel, Yannick grew up at the project where he worked with MSF, but described himself as "ethnically neutral." He occupied an in-pat position and played an important role in negotiating access, building and maintaining a network among armed groups, and collecting "security information" about the evolving context. Yet, technically Yannick had not been "in-patriated": he grew up nearby, and had extensive personal connections. Indeed, he knew many important political elites and armed actors personally. Yannick had worked in a range of different positions in the region: politics, businesses and in civil society organisations. Yannick concluded that his job had always been brokering relationships in the nearby area, but

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135 "Security Incident Report. 2014." MSF Holland, in author's possession.
136 "Head of mission handover. 2014." MSF Holland, in author's possession.
137 "Local security Plan. North Kivu. 2016." MSF Holland, in author's possession.

with different "*casquettes"* (wearing different hats). His hat was now that of a humanitarian, and he did not intend to change careers again.

Yannick told me he could negotiate access successfully because he was known locally, but was viewed as more "neutral" because his father originated from a different province in DRC. Yannick's local situation was not seen as risky: instead his position was described by others as "unique" – he is "not *really* from here." A former project coordinator explained to me that he is "less exposed – ethnically neutral, but at the same time he has connections." Employees who came from nearby also described Yannick's position as exceptional. As one explained, "he isn't from here…well, he is not from one of the communities from here." Other project staff doubted that anyone else who grew up locally could negotiate access with all the armed groups in the nearby zone like Yannick: "For example, if you are from an ethnic community from here, you will be associated with the armed group that is linked to your community. How are you going to deal with the other side? And MSF's image will be hurt," one employee told me.

Indeed, during his interactions with armed actors, Yannick described positioning himself as local, but not local. He endeavoured to use his personal contacts as a resource to build trust, access information, and analyse the shifting political landscape, all whilst excepting himself from any historical contests linked to questions of land, identity and political authority. To do this, Yannick highlighted his foreign-ness, signalled by his surname and family history, as a means of distancing himself or "doing difference" (West and Fenstermaker 1995). When Yannick went to work for MSF in his father's province of origin elsewhere in DRC, he played the same role – local, but not local. Yannick positioned himself as *originaire,* but one who was distant from the conflict dynamics – he had grown up elsewhere, and had minimal personal connections. Whilst negotiating humanitarian access, then, in-pats strategically adapted their identity positions when interacting with different actors. In effect, they repositioned themselves for different audiences by using elements of their past background or different identity markers.

IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Becoming humanitarians

However, this was not the only process of identity construction taking place. Humanitarianism has had an impact on the identity and sociality of the people hired in the sector. The humanitarian experience powerfully shaped local subjectivities – it became a site of identity

formation. Being a humanitarian was described as a process of transformation: employees *became* humanitarians through experience, "*sensibilisation*" and trainings. Once they had learnt to be humanitarians, they could help teach others to "change their behaviour" and "mentality."[138]

The anthropology of development provides some theoretical ways of thinking through this process. The long-term presence of aid regimes has had unintended *social* consequences – a profound impact on the "identities, experiences and aspirations" of locally hired employees and "aspiring elites" (Swidler and Watkins 2009:1). 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 middleclass, "modern" and "progressive" (Swidler and Watkins 2009:9). The long-term presence of development agencies "moulds the way in which people…conceptualise national society and differences within it" (Pigg 1992:491). NGO employees form new identities, distancing themselves from "beneficiaries" who are portrayed as traditional (Heaton Shrestha 2006:212). As Escobar (1995:10) argued, development forms new forms of subjectivity, through which people come to recognise themselves as "developed or underdeveloped"; society is divided into those who are "developed" and those who are not, and people "locate themselves in this mapped society" (Pigg 1992:510). Therefore, aid work becomes a site of generative identity construction. Yet, it seems impossible to distinguish between conscious strategic positioning, (whereby people play or adopt a role), and instances where attitudes and self-conceptions are changed profoundly – the two processes are interlinked and interwoven (Rossi 2006:30; Swidler and Watkins 2009).

Encounters with aid organisations, like colonial regimes before them, lead to the development of new "systems of signification" and markers of social difference (Pigg 1992:492; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Mudimbe 1988). These categories of development are not just imposed by outsiders; instead, aid agencies reintroduce discourses of modernisation and progress which became embedded in existing conceptions of class and social difference, ultimately altering how people see themselves and their relationships with others (Pigg 1992:507). Development discourses are laced with the legacies of colonial constructions, reproducing the idea that some places and people are less "developed" than others. Development defines who can "bestow ideas about modernity and progress" and to whom it should be imparted (Kothari 2006:12). In

[138] I am not suggesting that this supposed "transformation" represents a form of "progress" or "improvement." Instead, I delve into the narratives of my interviewees and their descriptions of identity formation in the humanitarian sector.

this way, it reactivates discourses about "the West and the rest", whereby the rest is bound up in particular attachments and regressive, whilst the West is universal (Grovogui 2001:445; Hall and Gieben 1992; Pailey 2019). This "colonising epistemological order", which seeks to "universalize the West and provincialize the rest" (Zeleza 2009:131), is evident in binaries such as developing/developed, third world/first world, global south/global north (Pailey 2019). This ideology of modernisation interacts in complex ways with existing class hierarchies, and "alters the formulation of local identities" (Pigg 1992:511).

The way identity formation operates in humanitarianism is different from the development sphere. The humanitarian endeavour does not explicitly aim to "develop" or socially transform society in the long term. Instead, humanitarians provide essential relief. Nonetheless, the focus on *"sensibilisation"* of staff in line with humanitarian "values" and "principles" has uncomfortable echoes of conversion, in which people are brought from "particular" to "universal" commitments (Mudimbe 1988:46). Powerful NGOs and UN institutions in North Kivu have therefore fundamentally reshaped the urban landscape, but also the social and economic landscape: thousands of local livelihoods are dependent on these global institutions (Ndaliko 2016:5), as global aid priorities shaping lives, opportunities, and even subjectivities.

According to Congolese humanitarians I spoke to, a personal transformation took place, which centred on *becoming* a humanitarian. This was perceived as an identity that hinged on the ability to transcend political attachments, adopting instead a "universal" way of seeing people as equals and a commitment to humanity. In other words, the transformation came about through learning to perform humanitarianism and actively adopt its values. Joining the humanitarian sector was a form of social mobility, but it also formed new subjectivities. The Congolese humanitarians I talked to described why they joined the sector: For some, it was the only job available, and they found their opportunities limited in a context of high unemployment and protracted conflict; for others, a career in aid was a way of working as a doctor or engineer on a stable contract. Congolese humanitarians came from diverse social backgrounds: some were engineers, some were doctors, and many had studied agricultural development at university. Others had experience working in local government, civil society organisations, or the political wings of armed groups. Some had military experience themselves, and endeavoured to use this experience as an advantage for negotiating access. The humanitarian sphere, therefore, was a space where all these people came together and created new identities in the "regional NGO-pole" (Büscher and Vlassenroot 2010).

In MSF, by teaching its staff to "perform humanitarianism" or "be MSF" at all times, the organisation helped to create new identities amongst the people it hired. MSF was often referred to as school, university, college – many Congolese staff described the crucial importance of MSF in their career trajectories. MSF had become a site of learning and education. As one former Congolese MSF employee told me, "humanitarianism was the best school in which I was trained. It shaped me." He explained that MSF "trained me from a radio operator to where I am now, working abroad as an expatriate." For this employee, humanitarianism was not just a trade or a vocation, but was an "identity": it gives "a moral purpose."

In-pats in particular highlighted a process of identity formation during our interviews. Whilst some in-pats were expatriated abroad, others remained in a prolonged state of in-between-ness which came to define their role. During this process, in-pats created a new identity. Turner (1967; 1969) not only proposed liminality as a means of exploring experiences of in-between-ness, but also a way of exploring human reactions to these liminal experiences: the way in which identities were shaped and reshaped in the process (Beech 2011). Liminality disrupted in-pats' existing place in their social system. Working away from home, they had the possibility to "reflect" on values, identities and subsequently reorient themselves - often strategically (Turner 1967:14). Liminality came to define their experience and was central to identity reconstruction; through interactions in multiple networks, in-pats had an opportunity to redraw their own "social trajectories" and "constitute themselves as modern" – particularly in contrast to the local population, who some presented as caught up in "inscriptive identities" which in-pats themselves had managed to transcend (Heaton Shrestha 2006:212-13; Englund 2006; Swidler and Watkins 2009). In-pat identity hinged on their experience in the humanitarian sector, and on their willingness to subscribe to a form of "universalism."

Teaching Universalism

Given in-pats' commitment to MSF's values and principles, their role was not only mediation in MSF, but also instruction, as they became involved in teaching others how to be humanitarians in practice. In other words, the in-pats' role in translation ran in both directions: interpreting the politics of the networks of local staff, but also translating MSF's values to the staff body. In-pats had been adequately "sensitised" and their new identity as humanitarians was reinforced as they came to play a key role in *sensibilisation* for local employees. During this

process of teaching universalism, in-pats further distanced themselves from local staff and reiterated their distinctiveness as in-pats.

For example, one in-pat described his role as *délégat du staff,* the "intermediary between local staff and expatriates" who was responsible for "*sensibilisation."* His role was to help his colleagues understand "how a humanitarian should behave." In other words, he taught them how to perform principles. He told them to "promote a good image of MSF" at all times: "*on a toujours la casquette MSF*" – we are always viewed as representatives of MSF. This in-pat discouraged internal disputes between staff: "I explained that they should not be aggressive, they are humanitarians." In other cases, the in-pat employee described the aim as "not being a hypocrite" – for instance, he argued that a member of the *promo santé* team working to reduce sexual violence during the day must respect certain codes after work, such as not sleeping with prostitutes. At other times, this employee persuaded his colleagues to be honest about problems in their personal life that could damage the perception of MSF as a whole. He also focused on transcending "ethnicity": he helped local staff to "change their behaviour" where necessary. Rather than focusing on "ethnic divisions", he promoted MSF as a "family" where people should "collaborate." Ultimately, the in-pat nurse explained, his work "doesn't end after work, my work is always to *sensibiliser"* – to encourage understanding of, and adherence to, MSF's values.

Other in-pat staff described themselves as translators between MSF's humanitarian logics and the "local logics" of their colleagues. They positioned themselves as "in the middle." For example, one in-pat described giving a workshop to a local team which had internal conflicts. He tried to unite staff behind an ethical ontology based on a translation of MSF's principles. First, he argued that if the hospital became a reflection of the broader societal conflict, neither community would have access to healthcare: "For your community to benefit, everyone has to benefit. This is what neutrality and impartiality are. Neutrality is a *tool* that we use for our work, rather than a political position." Second, he mobilised religious arguments, quoting a popular pastor who preached the importance of helping all suffering people, no matter where they are from – drawing a comparison with MSF's ethics of impartiality. Thirdly, this in-pat employed a medical, ethical argument. He asked: "What is the first question you ask a patient? It is not: which community are you from? If we abandon medical neutrality, people will no longer be able to be treated." He recognised the importance of personal identity. "Of course, there is no such thing as a neutral person, everyone has their own community." However, this in-pat

described MSF's values as instrumental: his goal was to persuade the team of the *utility* of universalist logic at work.

In-pats at the project level who helped run *sensibilisation* sessions described the difficulty of overcoming divisions within the team in a context of intensifying conflict. One former project coordinator assistant reflected: "It was difficult to get the local staff not only to understand the humanitarian ideology but also to actively *adopt* it." His workshops focused on "the consequences of individual behaviour and the impact on the team's safety in general." Rather than being universal, MSF's humanitarian logic was described a political position in and of itself. As one in-pat put it, MSF has a "politics of equality." In-pats understood their role as negotiating or mediating between these different "logics": local perspectives, and MSF's politics of equality. "I understand both," one summarised. *Sensibiliation* became the institution through which in-pats present their local colleagues as possessing a different "mentality" which it was their task to "reform" (Rossi 2006:41).

MSF relied on in-pats to help with *sensibilisation* and "principles sessions": to help teach others how to be humanitarians, to translate MSF's "values" to local employees. And, in-pats saw this as central to their role. In effect, in-pats distanced themselves from their local colleagues, and saw themselves as cultural brokers between local staff and MSF staff. This became central to their new identity: "in-between is as much a place to be home than any other" (Cooper 1994:1539). Yet, the role of in-pats was more complex than "translating" between different groups (Lewis and Mosse 2006). In-pats also worked to *separate* worlds, to prevent "mixing" (Heaton Shrestha 2006:213), by distancing local MSF staff from the population and conflict actors so that they adopted the values of MSF rather than any political or personal alliances. Rather than simply "translating," in-pats were tasked with helping to train humanitarians.

"Transformation"

In contrast to "local staff" then, in-pats described themselves as already *sensibilisés* – already humanitarians. Along with in-between-ness, the commitment to humanitarian values was central to the construction of in-pat identity. In response to the "behaviour in the field" charter debate, in which MSF employees were required to be Ambassadors of MSF at all times, one in-pat told me how he had adopted the values of MSF in his "personal life". Being in MSF "changed my personality," he added. Through *sensibilisation* and "trainings, good quality trainings from Westerners", this employee told me he had changed his "behaviour and ideology." He

considered this "humanitarian ideology" as key to "building national unity to building an attitude not based on community or a region, but one based on the nation with everyone as equal."

It was not just a humanitarian identity that had formed, but one more specific to in-pats. Whereas some in-pats argued that the problem for local staff was that they were not *perceived* as neutral by armed groups, others argued that it wasn't a question of perception: they, as in-pats, *were* more "neutral" than local employees, who they described as often divided along "ethnic lines". One former project coordinator assistant, for example, told me that he always tried to forge connections with local armed actors himself: "I didn't want to use local staff because if they were Hunde or Hutu, they weren't neutral." During rising tensions between the national army and a local rebel group, this in-pat remembered that "certain members of the team were starting to use *nous* (we) to refer to the armed group that predominantly comprised members of their community." He never shared sensitive information with staff from the area, because he "knew it would get back to the armed groups." Instead, he "hit hard" with the MSF charter in *sensibilisation* sessions.

MSF was a site of identity creation in Yannick's case. Yannick too distinguished himself from "local people" who he grew up with. Yannick presented himself as more detached: a translator of local dynamics for foreigners, and described having "learnt to be a humanitarian." Yannick argued that it was difficult to convince armed groups that some local employees were neutral – or just members of MSF – rather than spies for opposing armed groups. Thus, the role of expatriates, and "ethnically neutral staff," was particularly important. In-pat was an identity Yannick adopted. Indeed, it was "ethnicity," rather than personal background or connections, which he defined as being "local." As a result, despite his personal upbringing in the area, Yannick constructed himself as not really local. It seemed that Yannick highlighted his social distance in order to position himself as impartial, and thus balance the tensions and expectations from local actors and differentiate himself from other staff within MSF through an in-pat status.

Gabriel described his experience with MSF as a personal "transformation." He "hardly recognises" the person he was before he joined the agency. After the end of the war in 2003, he had hoped to go into a political career, but it was a turbulent time. After a failed business venture, Gabriel found himself unemployed in Goma and he got back in touch with some old friends, one of whom, Gabriel explained, "had taken a different path": he was working for an

international NGO and suggested Gabriel should try and find a job within the sector. Gabriel became a driver, a position that he described as a step down given his university education. However, over time, Gabriel described learning the different "values" and "codes" of "humanitarian life", and over time, he learnt to "modify" behaviour. When I asked him for examples, Gabriel in jest cited being on time or even early to meetings. Later, in a more serious tone, he referred to "seeing people around me differently." Gabriel explained that even his friends thought that he had changed since becoming a humanitarian: "I have to be careful not to seem superior. They say I've become too *muzungu*." This did not refer to skin colour. Instead, *muzungu* was used metaphorically to describe Africans who had adopted a "modern life-style" (*kizungu*) (Rubbers 2009:268) – it described behaviour associated with wealth and class. Yet, being associated with *kizungu* was not just a sign of status – it was also viewed with some hostility. There was a great deal of ambivalence in Goma towards how the large aid presence was reshaping the city, social life, and even "cultural" attitudes.

Like others I talked to, Gabriel described being accused of complicity in a process of "*muzungization."* I heard this term used to refer to the changes as a result of the protracted international aid presence: a distorted job market, rising house prices and gentrification in Goma. But, it also referred to a more complex process of "cultural change." Another Congolese MSF employee, for example, described how NGOs have "brought the politics of *muzungus* here, they have changed the normal, not just through programmes, but because they bring foreigners here for a long time who change ideas indirectly." This process of "cultural change" was viewed with hostility by many. As this MSF employee described, this was because "Belgians also tried to change attitudes." *Muzunguization* was often mentioned in relation to rumours about the intentions of NGOs in DRC: for example, how they fuel conflict in order to make money out of pretending to help, or how they infect Congolese people with disease in order to make money when treating them. In Goma, one friend told me that NGOs could bring jobs and infrastructure, but should stop trying to change attitudes: "they come here, tell us what to do, but they are the ones who bring the problems", he concluded. Another friend told me that his brother worked for the UN: "he has gone to work for the *muzungus"* he said, adding that this was seen to have involved betraying Congo. One Congolese MSF employee told me that he understood this hostility, "but it is different for me, I understand, because I have learnt the humanitarian ideology." He told me that the cultural change was an "urban thing in Goma", whereas in "rural areas, things are very different, *sensibilisation* is very difficult."

CONCLUSION

In-pats, then, had their own stories to tell – stories that illustrate the complex ways that regional origin, language, class, perceived (and constructed) ethnic identities as well as personal histories and networks operated during negotiations for access in North Kivu. There was a range of ambiguous, overlapping identities within MSF teams which fell between the binary concepts of "national staff" who came from the project context and were immobile, and "international staff" who were mobile and had crossed a border to reach the project site (Redfield 2012). In-pats occupied a liminal position: neither "local", nor "international", they blurred institutional boundaries and adopted multiple, overlapping roles. In MSF, MSF, in-pats became another identity that could be used as a resource: in-pats were given additional responsibility during processes of security management and negotiating access because of their supposed ability to practice local-ness (Peters 2016) whilst maintaining a professional distance from ongoing political contests. In reality, in-pats described navigating a sea of complex relationships and networks, conducting creative modes of self-fashioning in order to negotiate humanitarian access for MSF and to manage their own safety. In order to perform humanitarianism, in-pats described casting and recasting themselves in different contexts with different audiences, constructing both local-ness and social distance.

In-pat experiences were not uniform, of course: some in-pats remained in-pats their whole careers, whilst for others being an in-pat was transitory before they were expatriated abroad. Some Congolese MSF employees remained expatriates after this move, rotating through different "missions" abroad in countries around the world - from Niger, to India, to Yemen. But other Congolese MSF humanitarians in fact *chose to return* to the DRC as in-pats, rather than continue their careers abroad – partly because being an in-pat had become central to their identity as humanitarians and their preferred status in MSF. One afternoon, while stuck in traffic in Goma, an in-pat with MSF, Albert, explained to me why he had chosen to return to the DRC after being expatriated with the organisation abroad. He had worked for MSF for nearly twenty years, but he described a sense of disorientation when working as an expatriate abroad that had led him back to the DRC. Albert had felt "isolated" abroad: "you are trapped in your security apparatus," he told me, "and you lose your freedom; your interactions locally are artificial." Albert returned to work as an in-pat, which he saw as the best position to work as a humanitarian: "there's distance which is helpful for your role, but you're still in your home country, you can live your life, talk to people, remain a part of society."

Out of an experience of liminality then, a strong identification as an in-pat humanitarian was often born. Humanitarianism became a site of identity construction, and the in-pat status was no longer solely a bureaucratic label, but it became an identity. It encapsulated their experience of "in-between-ness," their commitment to "humanitarian values." This process of identity formation illustrates something of a paradox when thinking more conceptually about how humanitarianism operates in violent conflicts because on the one hand the construction of in-pat identity hinged on a commitment to "humanitarian ideology" – the suspension of personal identity for a focus on shared humanity – but on the other hand, in-pats created their own identity, one that was distinguished themselves from other "local staff." Teaching supposed "universalism", and adopting it as a guiding principle, in other words, created a new form of particularism as in-pats distanced themselves from other employees. There was a situational irony here: MSF is underpinned by a commitment to the equality of all humans, valuing universal humanity rather than other identities or social borders, but in practice, not only does MSF use different identities as a potential approach for negotiating access, but the organisation has the unintended social consequence of creating new forms of identities. The idea "in-pat status" privileges state borders whilst creating informal, internal borders between "locals" and more distant "locals."

9. CONCLUSION

There is nothing so ethnocentric, so particularistic, as the claim of universalism.

Immanuel Wallerstein, European Universalism: The Rhetoric of Power, 2006, pp.39-40.

"EBOLA IN A WARZONE"

On 1st August 2018, the world's second largest recorded Ebola epidemic began in North Kivu. Almost two years later, more than 2,200 people had died and over 3,300 had been infected in eastern DRC.[139] During the summer of 2018, I was based between Goma and an MSF project in the *Petit Nord* territories of North Kivu. The Ebola emergency teams arrived and began to negotiate their access to work in the *Grand Nord* territories where the epidemic had begun (north of where this thesis is set). Tensions were high. The epidemic was taking place in a context of protracted conflict, in communities that were fractured after decades of social upheaval, and in an area where governance involved a shifting patchwork of public authority figures, armed groups and local government authorities.

Ultimately, the Ebola epidemic exacerbated and exposed a profound sense of distrust of the central Congolese state and Western foreign intervention. This distrust was linked to histories of political marginalisation and colonial exploitation, as well as contemporary realities of protracted foreign intervention and political upheaval. The *Grand Nord* has a long history of violent conflict and rebellion from the central state, as well as state neglect. Since 2013, there have been recurrent massacres of civilians – the killings have been attributed to the Allied Democratic Forces rebel group, and have continued despite the presence of the national army and UN peacekeeping mission. As attacks continued during the epidemic, there was growing discontent at the inability of the government forces or UN peacekeeping mission to protect civilians, as well as widespread criticism of the foreign aid system's focus on Ebola, rather than on the loss of civilian lives (Fahey 2019). The contrast between the well-funded Ebola response and the government's neglect of the region further heightened local distrust (Freudenthal 2019). Protestors attacked UN bases, and rumours circulated that peacekeepers were collaborating with rebels to exploit Congo's wealth (Radio Okapi 2019), that the Ebola response was a government scheme to suppress the region (an opposition stronghold), and that the response

[139] MSF. 2020. "Ebola outbreak in Democratic Republic of Congo: January crisis update." 15 January. https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/what-we-do/news-stories/story/ebola-outbreak-democratic-republic-congo-january-crisis-update [Accessed April 2020].

(or "Ebola business") was simply designed to enrich the Western, white humanitarians who dominated the local economy (SSHAP 2019). Tensions were exacerbated further when the presidential election in 2018 was cancelled in the Ebola-effected regions of the *Grand Nord*. In effect, the epidemic revealed the troubled relations between state and society (Chigudu 2020; Enria and Lees 2018), and during the response, Congolese citizens rearticulated their anger with the central state and the "international community" which many saw as complicit in state processes of exclusion and oppression.

In this context, maintaining humanitarian access became difficult. In 2019, there were more than 300 attacks on Ebola health workers, with six people killed and 70 wounded.[140] Much of this violence was committed by the very populations that humanitarians were trying to help. MSF struggled to maintain access, and periodically withdrew after attacks on the organisation's facilities (*AlJazeera* 2019). MSF has been present in eastern DRC for decades, but the organisation had largely reduced its presence in the *Grand Nord* territories after the end of the second Congolese war and with the start of the CNDP conflict in the *Petit Nord*.[141] In 2018, as the epidemic heated up and the humanitarian community's focus shifted north, it was time for me to head home - my "fieldwork" was over.

In the wake of the epidemic, the "no-go-zone" of eastern DRC was catapulted into the mainstream media, with a different focus for the headlines: "Ebola in a Warzone" (Maxmen et al., 2019; Beaubien 2018). How to maintain humanitarian access in this environment became a hot topic, and I started to receive phone calls from journalists who asked what my research could tell them about why health workers had been attacked.[142] Some were searching for rational frameworks to explain both access and violence. But, this thesis argues that such interest-based frameworks are not enough to understand the complex everyday processes of maintaining humanitarian access. The individual identities, histories, relationships, and networks of the humanitarians responding on the ground matter too, because people responding to a crisis are perceived and related to in ways that convey complicated political, social and personal histories and relations. Often, the personal and collective identities of humanitarians act as a signifier that refers back to collective memories of exploitation, violence or conflict. The meanings of these identities are fluid rather than fixed, localised rather than universal, and have to be

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[140] *Ibid.*
[141] "*Situation de conflit ouvert au Nord Kivu.*" 2006. MSF internal archives, Paris.
[142] My thoughts were quoted in Brabant (2018).

understood in relation to their political, historical and social context – for example, the way whiteness functioned in the context of Ebola in the *Grand Nord* was different to the way the donkey rule operated in the *Petit Nord*. Ultimately, to maintain access, humanitarian agencies draw on the networks, *savoir faire* and personal identities of their well-connected local employees in order to build trust, adapt interventions in line with cultural sensitivity, and analyse the political and social landscape, whilst considering how all employees are perceived and understood in a particular political environment in order to select the right person to represent the organisation.

To conclude this thesis then, I first unpack the key argument: that humanitarians use instruments of identity to gain and maintain access to work in areas of protracted conflict. Second, I argue that this presents a paradox for humanitarianism, because working for the universal depends on the particular. Humanitarians leverage (and reproduce) the very social and political borders between people that they work to overcome. Third, I tease out the broader contributions of this thesis for understanding humanitarianism, and conclude with some final reflections on some potential avenues for further research.

INSTRUMENTS OF IDENTITY

In this thesis, I set out to answer one central question: how do humanitarian organisations gain and maintain access to operate in areas of contested authority and cyclical violence? By focusing on the everyday experience of MSF fieldworkers negotiating with armed groups in the *Petit Nord* territories of North Kivu, I argue that the personal and collective identities of different humanitarians become instruments for access in a context of protracted conflict. I shift the focus to the politics of everyday humanitarian practice to describe how humanitarians negotiate access together as a brokerage "club" (Bierschenk et al., 2000): different people in the team play different roles, because they have different perceived identities, access to different networks, have different experiences and *savoir faire*, as well as different personal histories, and therefore face different risks. Humanitarians work together in an attempt to reduce the risk for everyone as they interact with a web of armed actors in the fragmented governance of protracted conflict. During this process, different identities in the team are *put to work* by humanitarians working together – they become tools or instruments - because these identities affect who can perform the role of a neutral humanitarian in practice, who can wield power and influence, and who is at particular risk of violence in different areas.

In the four key empirical chapters, I described how different forms of identity become operational instruments during humanitarian practice, focusing on two different, but interconnected, forms of identity: personal and collective. First, MSF draws from the *personal* identities of its staff. Humanitarian organisations need to build networks and trust among a constantly shifting web of different actors, analyse and navigate the shifting political terrain, and translate principles and pre-planned policies to the specifics of that political and social environment in real time. In order to do this, the identities of locally embedded employees become a resource. What does this look like in practice? Its power is in the personal elements: putting someone who is known locally in the front of the convoy, or asking someone in the team to ring their friends or family to ask for information about the security conditions in a particular areal, or using drivers with the necessary experience and contacts to negotiate access at roadblocks, or other employees' personal contacts in armed groups, or family members who are embedded in local authority structures. In effect, humanitarians have multi-faceted personal, military, political and professional histories in the area, as well as extensive interpersonal networks and forms of situated *savoir faire* about how to navigate a social landscape (Scott 1998). Although these employees are representatives of their humanitarian organisation, at the same time, their personal identities, histories and networks become central to their everyday humanitarian practice.

Second, I argue that overlapping and intersectional *collective* identities (such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, nationality) are considered carefully, and sometimes instrumentalized, by humanitarians when negotiating access. Each empirical chapter added another layer to the complex intersecting identities that play a role in humanitarian negotiations with armed groups in North Kivu. I highlight the importance of looking at the granular specifics of a political context in order to understand the meanings such identities acquire, because these identities are neither fixed nor static, but have unstable, fluid and historically contingent boundaries and meanings in different localities. They become entangled in relations of power. As a result, such identities are understood through a security logic: influencing who in the team faces risk, whose life is perceived to be worth more than others, and who can perform the role of a neutral and impartial humanitarian in a turbulent political environment with most ease. Forms of collective identity hold specific *functions* in the context of the delivery of humanitarian relief in a violent context.

In chapters five and eight, for instance, I described how the perceived "ethnic" identities of Congolese employees map onto highly politicised discourses of *autochthony,* as well as collective histories of past violence in North Kivu, situating some humanitarians in local histories and impacting how they are received in different areas, as well as their security. As a result, the perceived "ethnic" identity of different staff was a tool for negotiating access to some areas, but a risk in others (Pottier 2006). The experience of in-pats, however, illustrates how class, regional origin, as well as personal histories and networks intersect in complex ways with perceived ethnicity to affect the ability of Congolese humanitarians to perform principles in practice. In chapter five, I described how nationality continues to act as an internal border within MSF, dictating who felt most at risk or exposed to potential violence, who could wield power or perform neutrality, but also who was trusted to represent the organisation's flag. Yet, as chapter six illustrated, race matters too: whiteness became a strategic tool of access for the MSF brokerage club, intersecting with mobility, and language as well as different foreign nationalities, which each have their own historically informed (and shifting) connotations. Chapter seven described how gender intersects with race, nationality and class to affect who has situated forms of power or who can perform a humanitarian role during interactions with armed combatants.

Throughout the thesis, I described three levels in which identity is used strategically for humanitarian access – these processes often take place simultaneously. First, at an institutional level, MSF recognises that the ability to maintain access depends on *who* they recruit to represent the organisation in that context. Humanitarian agencies therefore consider how their employees' personal backgrounds and collective identities might impact on their ability to work in a particular political and social context, and adjust the composition of the team accordingly.

Second, at a team level, I describe how different staff perform roles depending on their local situation, histories and networks, and also how their race, gender, nationality and perceived "ethnicity" might be experienced or used strategically in that locality. Humanitarian teams have to decide who can perform humanitarian principles and represent the organisation in that particular place. Not everyone in a humanitarian T-shirt can perform principles with the same ease, and this is recognised on the ground. Instead, different humanitarian workers use the identities of their colleagues in order to maintain access to travel and to run medical operations. For example, in chapter five, I illustrated how foreign and Congolese humanitarians use one another's identities and networks together in the brokerage club based on notions of complementarity. In chapter six, the donkey rule showed how Congolese employees use their

colleagues' whiteness as a symbol that facilitates mobility and access in militarised zones. Whiteness is revealed for what it really is: a particular form of power. These kinds of everyday practices and decisions provide an insight into how power and difference function in an industry that is built on the idea of universal humanity.

Finally, at an individual level, I argue that all humanitarians do creative identity work: they learn to position themselves strategically for different audiences whilst negotiating access in the everyday. This is important because it emphasises how these identities are neither fixed nor static, but are fluid, ambiguous and performed. Aid work involves impression management; humanitarians cast and recast themselves during encounters with different armed actors, playing on their own personal histories, backgrounds, contacts, and also the identity markers assigned to them by others. For example, foreigners tried to use their lack of personal networks or ties to construct themselves as detached from the conflict dynamics, whilst Congolese employees from North Kivu used their own personal, military or family histories as a means of building trust and gathering information. Women played on gender stereotypes in order to present themselves as unthreatening and apolitical, while in-pats performed either localness or distance at different times to different audiences, playing on their personal backgrounds and "doing ethnicity" (or constructing their position in relation to "ethnic" identity markers) in different ways. The donkey rule illustrates how humanitarians not only constructed their own identities, but also helped to position their colleagues strategically during encounters with armed actors. Black expatriates were actively made *muzungus* with the help of their Congolese colleagues: difference had to be "done" or made through interaction (West and Fenstermaker 1995). In sum, humanitarians become "identity entrepreneurs" when negotiating access (Bierschenk *et al.,* 2002:28): the fluid and ambiguous personal and collective identities in the club become instruments or tools.

REPRODUCING BORDERS: THE "PARTICULAR" FOR THE "UNIVERSAL"

Ultimately, I argue that this strategic use of identity presents a paradox for humanitarianism. In violent contexts, political actors often accord the value of life unequally between different groups. Humanitarian organisations, in contrast, call for the reestablishment of solidarity amongst all human beings, with all lives valued equally. In other words, humanitarians intervene in the name of universal humanity. However, in practice, humanitarianism relies on the strategic deployment of identities – the very borders between people that its humanitarian ideals seek to

transcend. In effect, humanitarians leverage and reify the very political and social borders that they work to overcome.

On the one hand, MSF is committed to the universal equality of all human life. The central principle of humanitarianism is humanity. Borders based on geographical location, political identity or any other marker of difference are not important: everyone is deserving of emergency assistance. "*Médecins Sans Frontières* provides assistance to populations in distress…They do so irrespective of race, religion, creed or political convictions,"[143] the charter explains. By focusing on humanity, MSF tries to transcend the importance of other forms of difference: the identity that matters is that of the human and this is considered to be universal. In this way, the organisation's vision and work is *sans frontières* - without borders.

Humanitarian employees perform a humanitarian identity during their everyday work. In order to operate in an area of violent conflict, humanitarians negotiate their access based on shared interests with the political and armed authorities in control (Magone et al., 2011). However, maintaining access also depends on the behaviour of fieldworkers, which is seen as essential to prevent an upsetting of the negotiated arrangement with the authorities in power. MSF must remain in contact with everyone, but *be seen* to be close to no one. In this sense, it is a performance. In other words, what is being done is absolutely crucial, but *how* it is done matters too. Impression management is understood as key to security management, because the organisation is literally what its employees, vehicles, and objects do in its name. The humanitarian principles – neutrality, impartiality, and independence – are slippery, abstract and aspirations. When applied in practice, they are interpreted and translated through interaction, and compromise is inevitable. Nonetheless, these principles are seen as crucial *tools* to maintaining access in practice. Principles must be *performed* during everyday interactions: enacted through particular practices, behaviour and interactions so that they gain symbolic meaning and become recognisable to the people humanitarians encounter "in the field."

Inspired by Erving Goffman's idea of dramaturgical analysis (1956), this thesis described how humanitarian workers perform their humanitarian principles. Aid workers on the ground *are* the organisation, and are expected to become embodiments of MSF with no political affiliations, leanings or links: people without history, race, gender, ethnicity or class. The personal behaviour

[143] MSF charter: https://www.msf.org/msf-charter [Accessed April 2020].

of every humanitarian employee is seen as crucial to the security of the team as a whole. They are involved in a team performance of principles. Employees are required to perform a humanitarian identity at all times: they are always on stage. A slip-up – individual behaviour that suggests partiality in a conflict or damages the organisation's image – is understood as a threat to the organisation's security and access.

Yet, on the other hand, in order to maintain presence, humanitarians have to adapt to specific situations. Not everyone can perform neutrality with the same ease in every place. First, humanitarians have personal identities, histories and networks that situate them locally. While working as humanitarians, they are interacting with people they know, and are not easily viewed as simple representations of the humanitarian organisation. Second, overlapping, collective identities – such as gender, class, race, nationality, and "ethnicity" – impact how people are perceived and related to, drawing from complicated political and social histories. These identities influence who can perform a humanitarian identity in different environments, who has access to power, and who faces risk. In short, the particulars of the setting influence who can position themselves as neutral. To maintain access then, humanitarian agencies select the employee who can best perform the humanitarian role, exercise power, or work without risks in that particular context. This is why identity becomes an instrument of access: working for the universal depends on the particular.

Using identities in this way produces several dilemmas or tensions in practice. At an institutional level, by using identities as a resource, humanitarian organisations' everyday practice is shaped by, and reproduces, the very forms of difference that their egalitarian values seek to transcend. MSF is underpinned by a commitment to the equality of all humans, valuing universal humanity, but in practice, not only does MSF use different identities as a potential approach for negotiating access, but as the experience of in-pats shows, the organisation has the unintended social consequence of creating new forms of identity. In other words, MSF tries to transcend the idea of political and social borders, but its reliance on different forms of identity effectively reifies borders between social-identity groups, and in the case of in-pats, creates new borders within the organisation and beyond, becoming entangled in local processes of social stratification.

At a team level, these borders are visible in everyday practice. Only some members of the team occupy top positions in the brokerage club: in particular, foreigners remain in top positions. Power inequalities are reproduced between categories such as "local" and "non-local", and

sometimes, even white and black employees. National and racial borders are reproduced, whilst a new in-pat category creates borders between "nationals." To work without borders, MSF ends up producing borders within its own staff body and beyond.

At an individual level, the humanitarian encounter becomes one of tension. On the one hand, humanitarians are required to perform principles at all times, to adopt a humanitarian role and represent their organisation in practice. On the other hand, humanitarians draw on and play on their own deeply personal identities, contacts, histories and ties in order to conduct their humanitarian work. In other words, in order to negotiate access based on solidarity with universal humanity, humanitarians paradoxically leverage the very forms of personal history and markers of difference that their organisation describes as a risk to their performance of humanitarianism, and which their humanitarian mandate seeks to transcend. In their everyday lives, humanitarians perform overlapping and multiple roles to different audiences in a context of cyclical violence, balancing their humanitarian and personal identities.

CONTRIBUTIONS

Beyond the bunker: People and their interactions

This research makes several broader contributions. First, I move away from conceptualising humanitarianism as a set of values, or a collection of institutions, and instead analyse what humanitarianism looks on the ground: people and their interactions. I describe how humanitarian principles, institutions and ideas are represented by people who have their own identities, stories, and histories, which in turn shape how humanitarian intervention unfolds in practice. Rather than starting with the institution or its transnational frameworks, I took as my starting point the experience of MSF employees like Yannick: a longstanding Congolese member of the team in North Kivu, whose own story and networks were central to understanding how MSF as an institution maintained access to run medical operations.

A shift in focus from institutions to the people representing them provides a greater understanding of how humanitarianism operates *beyond the bunker*. By focusing on individuals, their personal histories and networks, it becomes clear how humanitarian agencies do not occupy a bounded enclave or "land" (Autesserre 2014), but are just another governance actor in a messy web of relationships that determine how power is negotiated at a local level (Lombard 2016; Harrison 2013). The personal histories, networks, and identities of humanitarian

employees on the ground are central to *the politics of presence* (rather than the politics of distance (Andersson 2019)) - how aid institutions maintain their position in a process of negotiated governance. Louisa Lombard (2016:32) aptly concludes that understanding conflict "requires looking at the relationships among all of the people present and how these relationships structure what people do." She calls for research that examines "how people understand each other and how these perceptions shape their collaborations and conflicts" within this complex set of cross-cutting relationships (Lombard 2016:23). This thesis, then, describes how humanitarians are some of the people embedded in this broader ecosystem of negotiated governance – with its complicated relationships and perceptions - in the fragmented politics of conflict.

The emphasis on humanitarianism as people and their interactions also renders visible the important work conducted by local humanitarian employees - work which shapes how intervention unfolds on the ground. Although local employees are the majority working "in the field", the interpretive and relational labour they do is too often overlooked in analyses of how foreign aid interventions are implemented in practice (Peters 2020). As I have described, the majority of MSF humanitarians "in the field" in North Kivu are not foreign doctors, but Congolese employees with complex and diverse social and political histories locally. They are crucial to the story: essential to understanding how MSF works in North Kivu. Focussing on their perspectives not only provides an insight into how interventions are negotiated and translated into practice, but also an insight into the risks employees face during their work, and the way that power hierarchies remain embedded in aid implementation as well as how security is "practiced" on the ground. Whilst there has been a recent decolonising push to recognise the crucial role of local "research assistants" or "fixers" in academia and journalism (Palmer 2019; Nyenzi et al., 2020), there has not been the same examination of the experience and invisible labour of local staff rolling out interventions in areas of violent conflict. Their perspectives enable both academics and humanitarian practitioners alike to better understand the sorts of risks and difficult situations these individuals face, as well as the dilemmas that arise from organisational approaches to "security management" in the everyday.

Negotiations: relationships as well as interests

Second, by shifting the analysis from the institutional to individual level, this thesis illustrates the importance of relational aspects of humanitarian negotiations, rather than only interest-based dynamics. This is important because it illustrates how humanitarians' personal identities,

histories and networks, but also how power, trust and perception shape how humanitarian negotiations unfold in practice. My aim is not to dismiss the importance of shared interests with political and armed authorities – indeed, to begin, I highlighted how shared interests in MSF's medical services are the essential starting point for humanitarian access (Magone et al., 2011). However, I argue that solely examining institutional-level interests does not capture the complexities of how access is maintained over time on the ground. People are not always rational actors whose behaviour can be modelled (Green and Shapiro 1996), nor are organisations made up of homogenous individuals who think, act and react in the same way. Instead, the delivery of humanitarian aid takes place in a messy world of human subjectivity: specific individuals, their histories, backgrounds, identities and relationships matter too. Crucially, interest-based and relational aspects of negotiation *interact*. The work being done is absolutely crucial, but *how* it is done and *by whom*, is also important.

MSF's access in North Kivu, for instance, relies on powerholders' interests in MSF's contribution to the political economy, in free medical services, and the symbolic legitimacy that service delivery and interactions with the organisation might provide. However, an armed group's relationship with an MSF team is also shaped by individual networks. Whatever their "official" job titles, local members of the MSF team with personal contacts are central to the everyday politics of presence. They help smooth over misunderstanding and build trust whilst rearticulating the benefits of MSF's presence – the interest-based elements are therefore *translated* through relationships. The relationship between a project coordinator and local commanders may also influence how willing someone is to pick up the phone and share information with the MSF team, whilst offensive behaviour on the part of a coordinator can challenge MSF's ability to maintain working at all. Institutional interests in MSF's health services does not mean that all members of the team will be trusted during daily interactions in a context of cyclical violent. The recent Ebola epidemic has only reemphasised the importance of understanding how humanitarians are perceived and related to by actors on the ground according to the complex social and political histories of a particular context.

Localisation, security and identity

Third, this thesis provides an empirical insight into how a politics of identity functions in an industry underpinned by the concept of universal humanity. As I have argued, the question of who can perform neutrality is contextual and relational. This is important because it moves past the discursive ethos of universalism to reveal how power operates during the everyday practices

of teams on the ground. Intersectional axes of difference shape everyday humanitarian work and reinforce power hierarchies between different humanitarians. But I move beyond just criticising the way power operates along these structures of difference (thereby reproducing global structures of inequality), to describe also how humanitarians endeavour to *work together* in symbiosis in order to maintain access and provide security for the team as a whole. In other words, I emphasise the *interdependence* among different humanitarians working together in brokerage clubs, who play different roles and try to leverage each other's personal identities, networks, histories and *savoir faire* as a resource to negotiate access and provide collective security for everyone.

This makes an important contribution to the debate about the localisation of aid. In particular, it illustrates the complexities of "localising" humanitarian operations in conflicts, the importance of analysing intersectional identities other than only the "international/local" binary, and the need to recognise how identity categories, which are often taken for granted, are so often strategically performed (Peters 2019; Rossi 2006). Recent reform efforts in the humanitarian sector have concentrated on the need to hand power and responsibility to "local" actors, shifting the disproportionate power away from Western institutions which are often dominated by former colonial powers. This is, of course, a morally important and forceful argument. The historical roots of humanitarianism and its focus on the need to help a distant, victimised "Other," remain laced with imperial duress (Kothari 2006; Ticktin 2011b; Stoler 2016). There has been widespread criticism of the humanitarian aid complex in Africa as an industry that seems to serve itself, reproducing the disparate power dynamics between local communities and powerful, Western NGOs (de Waal 1997). In North Kivu, Chèrie Ndaliko (2016) describes a form of "charitable imperialism", in which powerful foreign NGOs and UN institutions run projects to respond to poverty and violence, whilst at the same time undermining local initiatives, and ensuring thousands of local lives (as well as livelihoods) "hang in the balance of global strategies of aid" (Ndaliko 2016:5). This dominance of a foreign aid infrastructure, its lack of accountability and the local dependency it has created is starkly evident in a context like North Kivu, where both the "problems" and the appropriate response to those problems are often defined by outsiders.

Despite this, in the current "localisation" debate, there remains little critical discussion surrounding the conceptualisation of who is "local", and little empirical research into the challenges of "localising" humanitarian aid in practice in specific contexts (Roepstorff 2020).

As several scholars have recently highlighted, the conception of "local" in a binary to "international" overlooks the fact that who is "local" is a matter of perception (Roepstorff 2020:291), and people strategically position themselves in an aid infrastructure or during their interactions "in the field" (Peters 2019; Heaton Shrestha 2006). As I have described in this thesis, the roles and identities of aid workers are overlapping and ambiguous, fluid and strategically constructed. Nationality is not the only important marker of difference. Instead, personal networks, political and military histories, professional backgrounds, as well as race, class, gender, language and regional origin shape the experience of different people working in the humanitarian sector. These complicated, overlapping identities influence how humanitarians are perceived and the sorts of risks they face, as well as the sorts of power they possess during interactions with armed actors, as well as in the aid hierarchy itself.

The debate about "localisation" in MSF has centred on the position of "national staff." I argue that putting "locals" in senior decision-making positions in North Kivu is more complex than it might seem: indeed, according to Congolese humanitarians themselves, it might expose them to greater risk. MSF prioritises speed, security and *direct* operational presence on the ground in order to run medical operations in areas of violent conflict. This makes the localisation debate different from within development agencies, which make the support of local partners, resilience and livelihoods more central to their work. MSF, in contrast, provides a public service directly. The empowerment of "local" actors in MSF in a context like North Kivu might, in fact, make these staff's jobs more difficult and dangerous – endangering certain lives, all in the name of valuing all lives equally. Congolese staff, even those who came from great distances away, described the continued importance of "expatriate *parapluies"* and the strategic (if depressing) use of whiteness as a form of protection. The point is that humanitarians work together. They described how they need one another. It seems that underlying power structures cannot be changed simply by altering who is in charge. The fact that different employees face different risks depending *on who they are* poses a challenge for humanitarian agencies like MSF: how can these organisations continue to do their work and provide security for *all* their staff, whilst valuing all lives equally? By recognising that different employees face different risks, MSF ends up reproducing hierarchies between its employees with uncomfortable colonial echoes, all in an attempt to value lives equally and provide security for all.

A more concrete attempt to "decolonise" would require shifting the focus to interrogate some of the concepts underpinning this form of humanitarianism - concepts which legitimise and

frame institutional priorities and decisions. MSF prioritises speed, security and access because it is responding to an "emergency" in order to save lives. The organisation's mandate is minimalist in this way (Redfield 2012) – focused on the here and the now. As Craig Calhoun (2010:30) aptly describes, humanitarianism is underpinned by an "emergency imaginary," which constructs events as *exceptional,* unpredictable, and disrupting a "background of ostensible normalcy." The label "emergency" dictates the understanding of, and appropriate response to, an event. Crucially, it de-historicises the structural and historical reasons behind human suffering. The function of humanitarianism is often framed as restoring "normalcy" (Calhoun 2010:20), rather than engaging with and addressing the structural (and inherently political) causes of that situation (Redfield 2012). This gets at one of the oldest critiques of humanitarianism – that it reinforces and helps perpetuate the broader structures of inequality that cause suffering in the first place (Marx and Engels 1998:7).

This concept of emergency shapes institutional priorities, facilitating some action and preventing others. The priority given to access in MSF has become caught up in dilemmas about power imbalances and how these might be remedied. Because MSF's priority remains *being there,* it selects who it deems the right person for the job, even if this reproduces hierarchies. In response to the push to work through partnerships with local NGOs, one MSF think-tank described the organisation's conceptual disagreements with the "ideological conviction" behind localisation - that "international actors should make themselves redundant by building local capacity and enabling local actors to run their own response, thereby suggesting that the objective of humanitarian action must be to achieve sustainability and lay down the foundation of long-term development" (Schenkenberg 2016:3). As this organisational report described, "building local capacities is not an objective for MSF *per se*": it would "diminish" humanitarian assistance's "essence" and the "specific role it plays in conflict settings where a distinct and principled approach is required" (Schenkenberg 2016:9). As a result, it "made sense" to MSF that localisation has been driven by organisations that conduct longer-term work aiming to link humanitarian relief with societal transformation (Schenkenberg 2016:8). However, a focus on the emergency, on saving lives in the here and now, changes the prioritisation – MSF intervenes directly and picks the best person for the job to do the work it has set out to do.

Beyond MSF and the DRC

How do the arguments in this thesis move beyond the DRC and MSF? On the one hand, the empirical ethnographic description is specific. MSF's mandate makes its operational decisions

surrounding security and access different from that of other agencies. In addition, this thesis delves into the specificities of North Kivu, and I have emphasised throughout how the meanings of different, intersecting identities are specific to a time and place, and shaped by historical experience. The way whiteness was used strategically in humanitarian operations in the *Petit Nord* territories by MSF, for example, was the opposite to how whiteness played out in the Sahel or the subsequent Ebola response. Nonetheless, the key argument of this thesis – that humanitarian agencies use the personal and collective identities of their employees as instruments to maintain access – can provide insights in other contexts, *if* the analysis examines how the meanings of different identities are not fixed but fluid, and shaped by the shifting historical and political context in which humanitarians are operating.

For instance, different social identities have been politicised and imbued with historical meaning in different ways in other contexts where my humanitarian interviewees had worked.[144] Humanitarian recruitment was profiled differently according to nationality or gender. In the wake of the global war on terror in Afghanistan, for example, some agencies stopped hiring American or British nationals, whilst MSF's maternity hospital there profiled by gender: all employees were female. In other contexts, language became politicised. In the Ambazonia War in Cameroon, for example, the Anglophone minority began a secessionist struggle against the French-speaking government, which meant the constructed identity "Anglophone" was imbued with historical and political significance.[145] Humanitarian employees needed to be bilingual, but having a French passport was politically sensitive. In other instances, race was taken into account. After the rise of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in the Sahel, humanitarian agencies "Africanised" their workforce because whiteness was seen as a marker of the West, associating aid workers with the foreign military intervention and identifying them as a target for kidnappings (Issoufou 2018; Chkam and Hofman 2013). Religion was also politicised. In the Central African Republic, in the context of the war between Muslim *Séléka* and Christian Anti-balaka militias, religion was understood in relation to CAR's historical violence and relationship with its neighbouring countries – Chad, in particular, which was seen as a party to the conflict (Lombard 2016:20). Humanitarians in Bangui described the careful composition of convoys

[144] These examples were mentioned during interviews with humanitarians who worked for a range of organisations: MSF, but also Oxfam, ICRC, CAFOD, Save the Children, ALIMA, various UN agencies.
[145] This was shaped by the country's colonial history: in 1916, the German colony was divided between France and Britain. The former British territories voted to join French Cameroon after independence, but have long felt marginalised by elite Francophone circles.

crossing frontlines, and the profiling of non-Muslim foreigners: candidates with "Arabic names" were deemed a risk to acceptance and access.

Ultimately, I make the simple point that humanitarian access depends on *who* is representing the organisation, and the way that person is received in relation to the political and social histories of the landscape in which they are working. Humanitarians are not somehow detached from the political and social ecosystems within which they work – they are entangled within them, and understood in relation to them.

Final reflections

By recording the stories of humanitarians in North Kivu, this thesis provides a new perspective on what negotiating humanitarian access looks like on the ground. I have illustrated how who you are and who you know matters. At the heart of this research, I foregrounded the experiences of Congolese humanitarians and I try to do justice to the complexities of their experience and highlight the importance of their perspectives to understanding how an organisation (that remains headquartered in European capitals) works in practice. Like any study, this research has its limitations. This thesis was shaped by opportunity and by chance: the people who were there and willing to talk to me at the time. I have not been able to include everyone's experiences, however, so there remain many more avenues for future research: what about the experience of south Asians, or African nationals and diaspora working as humanitarians in North Kivu? I am writing from the perspective of a European, and as the Congolese philosopher Valentin Mudimbe (1988) describes, the lived experience of Africans is still too often decontextualised through Eurocentric theory. Yet, this research does shift the focus to recognising Congolese staff's work as crucial to the dynamics of aid implementation in the region.

At times, the analysis may appear critical in tone. An important part of a researcher's role is not to shy away from things that make them (and others around them) uncomfortable. I have tried to convey some of the complicated relationships of power involved in delivering humanitarian assistance, whilst highlighting that I am not exempt from similar structures of power, and neither is academic research. I am also aware that, as Darryl Stellmach (2016) has depicted, when catastrophes happen in real time, responders have to make difficult decisions with imperfect and incomplete data. My time in North Kivu gave me an insight into this, and the impressive work MSF employees manage to carry out as well as the considerable risks they face. But, as Alex de Waal (1997:65) put it, "Nobility of aim does not confer immunity from

sociological analysis or ethical critique." The humanitarian endeavour is no exception – a fact that MSF itself embraces by fostering an organisational culture of self-reflection and debate. This is important, because when people "put good intentions into material practice" (Calhoun 2010:33), the contradictions of their work are often laid bare (Fassin 2007:159). Moments of "crisis" do not heal divisions between us; unfortunately, they often reveal them. On the ground, moral clarity is quickly clouded by the reality of putting principles into practice.

Does it matter that humanitarian practices are sometimes shaped by, and reproduce, the forms of difference that their universalist mandate seeks to transcend? Is this contradiction really a problem? Rather than strictly deontological, my argument is no, not necessarily. The fact that people use forms of identity, individual characteristics and the related power structures to navigate particular situations and pursue broader collective goals is a part of everyday life. We all do it, often subconsciously, sometimes strategically. However, it is important to at least consider the consequences. A short-term consequentialist position would argue that using existing identities and power hierarchies is pragmatic, enabling humanitarians to reach people in need to save lives and alleviate suffering. MSF is, after all, a medical organisation: it prioritises the preservation of human life. The possibility of further reproducing inequities between employees is a price it is willing to pay - changing underlying power structures is not the role of the organisation. One should nevertheless not lose sight of the long-term consequentialist argument: that over time, this erodes the value of universality of humanity that is so central to the humanitarian endeavour itself. After all, for some humanitarian employees, their position is not just shaped by who they are, but is also limited by their (albeit useful) identities, histories and knowledge. There are no quick fixes. But the first stage of remedying some of these power inequalities is to better understand how they operate in practice.

To end, I want to return to the words of Luc, an experienced Congolese humanitarian in North Kivu, whose metaphors have featured throughout this thesis. He summarised the tension that was to become the central focus of this thesis when he told me:

> Access here, for us, means a constant reflection on: who is going to do what? We think about who they are, who they know, and how it will all be perceived. We [MSF] have the lyrics, the principles, charter, the work. That has already been decided in Europe. But we have to decide: who is going to sing the song? We help decide who can be the face and voice of MSF.

By examining who has been selected to sing the song, how that decision came about, and who was assumed to be a "natural" singer, this thesis has shown how power and paradox remain embedded in everyday humanitarian practices – even the most essential practice of trying to remain present and be there to assist people in the name of universal humanity.

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