

## 1. Militarized youth in western Côte d'Ivoire: Who are they? Why did they fight?

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### Introduction

The recent conflict in Côte d'Ivoire has led to the militarization of many young civilians on both belligerent sides. While some participated in combat and fought on the frontline when violence was at its peak (fall 2002 – spring 2003), others assumed more backstage functions, ranging from maintaining military positions when places were captured from the enemy, to securing particular locations through the set-up of checkpoints. Some of the youths had only been with the military a few months, having usually joined at the onset of conflict; others were involved in armed groups over many years, even after the main clashes were over. What is of particular interest is that many of these youths have assumed a function of 'commuting' conscripts, alternating periods of semi-military work with periods at home where they were back to a quasi-everyday routine. This became particularly characteristic as the Ivorian war evolved over time into a situation of 'no war, no peace', with sporadic violence occurring, but only at certain periods and within specific settings.

As the main theatre of violence, the west of the country – and particularly the area stretching between Danané, Man, Duékoué and Toulepleu, which was chosen as terrain for this analysis – has been particularly affected by the militarization of the civilian population. If the initial rationale behind arming the youths was probably linked to self-defence in the case of counter-insurgent movements and to the necessity to increase the numerical base to push back the aggressor, the civilians who had joined armed groups were usually quite negatively perceived by those who had not taken part in these mobilization processes. In mainstream media and through the eyes of a dominant public opinion, there has been a strong inclination to amalgamate armed youths with

thugs and petty thieves, and the way they have been publicly framed has fed the 'loose molecule' hypothesis popularized by Kaplan (1994), which argues that the base of contemporary armed movements is mostly composed of jobless, uneducated, and dissocialized people who have no other alternative than resorting to violence to make ends meet. This view is quite well-anchored in popular sociology, and despite having received a great deal of criticism (Guichaoua 2007; Peters and Richards 1998; Peters et al. 2003; Richards 1996), it is still rather popular in certain circles of academics, donors and practitioners.

But surely, not every youth drawn into an armed group has turned bandit in western Côte d'Ivoire. If it is likely that some recruits saw an easy way to earn their living by turning criminal and by extorting civilians, many did not take part in such activities and limited themselves to performing what was asked of them by their commanding officers, which often only meant filling a shift at a checkpoint every fortnight or so. The scapegoating of these youths has undoubtedly been convenient for strategic purposes, and by proposing a simple and plausible explanation to violent events, may even have triggered a certain propensity for retaliation by fuelling existing tensions. But such a distorted view had the detrimental effect of concealing important differences in characteristics across settings and between the different movements. After all, who joins armed groups and why remain empirical questions, with answers that vary considerably across contexts. Why did some Ivoirian civilians follow certain leaders into war? Were certain profiles more likely to enlist than others? This chapter explores these questionings by drawing on over 200 semi-structured interviews conveyed with young militia members and rebels. The bulk of the data was gathered in two towns of western Côte d'Ivoire severely affected by the war: Man, a district capital, then located in a rebel-controlled area, and Guiglo, a rural town under government control.<sup>1</sup>

### **Some theoretical considerations**

The literature is particularly prolific when it comes to conceptualizing mobilization processes and much has been written on the propensity of youth to join violent movements. Theories can be roughly divided into four standpoints, none of which being mutually exclusive and some being given much more credit than others. A first trend relates violent engagement to structural circumstances and consists of theories that suggest a causal link between the fact of being affected by adverse structural conditions and the fact of being prone to engage in violent action. It is well documented that young people were particularly vulnerable to the abrupt structural adjustments that occurred in the 1980s in African countries and they were notably among the first to be affected in terms of access to employment and access to studies. Linking 'joblessness' to the propensity to join groups of contestation is therefore a step many analysts took and youth became dichotomized in mainstream literature and institutional reports, alternatively presented as 'vanguards' or 'vandals', 'makers' or 'breakers', the first view emphasizing their potential to be agents of positive change, the other conceptualizing them as a societal problem. If several scholars have warned against such oversimplification (Abbink 2005; Abbink and van Kessel 2005; Honwana and de Boeck 2005a, 2005b), the view that 'youth', as an apart category, is being pushed to the margins of society has come to be firmly anchored in the popular sociology. It is genuinely believed that young people are more prone to become involved in social unrest because they are expected to take up any opportunity perceived as having the potential to relieve them of their condition of outcast. Variants of such theories include the argument of 'blocked social mobility' (Abbink 2005; Abdullah 2005; Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 1998; Chauveau and Bobo 2003; Peters and Richards 1998; Richards 1996) which, to a certain extent, echoes theories that explain forms of mobilization through grievance motives: when local populations feel that they are not getting a fair share of resources, one of their options is to join violent groups to claim what they consider theirs (Gurr 1970; Murshed and Tadjoeeddin 2007; Stewart 2008). But if there are some examples that show that resorting to

violence can be one response to a situation of stagnation and a lack of future prospects, it should not be taken as a norm, the precise dynamics of mobilization processes being empirically grounded and varying widely across contexts. There are many cases where structural lack of opportunity does not necessarily translate into political insurgency.

A second group of theories stresses the importance of 'political culture' elements. Based on the fact that the mere combination of lack of opportunities, demographic generational imbalance and socio-political tensions is not enough to explain extreme forms of violence, they take the stand that there clearly must be other factors that play a role in mitigating (or fuelling) the escalation of violence in a given area. Abbink (2005:17) stresses the importance of a strong central state tradition and the existence of a pattern of values within society that encourages cooperation and discursive conflict mediation. According to this view, a society used to a plurality of beliefs and multiple ethnic identities – like the Ivoirian society is – should, in theory, be less likely to transmit values that promote intolerance between groups. This perspective clearly places a strong emphasis on the role of leaders and elite in promoting certain values within society (or within the social movement they represent). It also relates to issues of framing: in Guiglo and Man, how were specific facts disseminated to the population? Who were the players capable of framing the local discourses? What was the context in which a demand for action was presented? How were such demands interpreted? (Ellis and van Kessel 2009; Kaarsholm 2006; van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2009).

A (timid) third trend focuses on political geography and the importance of immediate contexts in explaining processes of violent mobilization (see Chapter 7). This view stresses that who mobilizes and who does not is perhaps simply a matter of geographic and military factors after all, and that the armed group in control of a given place is potentially the most decisive factor in influencing people's behaviour.

Since any form of collective action is a group rather than an individual phenomenon, a fourth trend of theories focuses on what connects the individual to the collective in matters related to mobilization. It propounds that conflict cannot be solely explained from individualist perspectives

and that there is the need to study the mechanisms that lead individuals to identify with others (Cramer 2006:108). Framing the reflection in such way has the merit of suggesting an angle to reflect on differential responses to the same structural conditions: why do people who share roughly similar characteristics act so differently when placed in the same context? Why does violence occur only at particular times and in particular places? And why does not everyone participate in violent action? Little is known about the influence of emotions on protest behaviour, yet it is acknowledged that it permeates all phases of participation in social movements. They inform and drive individual behaviour during the recruitment stage, during the stay in the group, and, at a later stage, they may even bring people to quit the movement (van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2009:32-33). Emotions clearly play a role in connecting individuals to collective forms of action. The challenge is nonetheless to find satisfactory ways to analyse them properly.

### Particularities of the Ivorian case

Côte d'Ivoire has been split in two for several years. In September 2002, rebel forces (which later came to be called *Forces Nouvelles*) took control of the northern half of the country while the southern part remained under government control. The current conflict is deeply rooted in history and partly results from the exhaustion of a regime, which is no longer able to provide plenty for everyone given the context of economic recession. It also results from political struggles for power, which have come to challenge long-standing social contracts and a patrimonial system of governance that has long privileged certain groups over others.<sup>2</sup> The war also stems from the political instrumentalization of part of the population, when certain leaders used a mild form of 'hate speech', which crystallized existing tensions between *autochthones* and *non-autochthones*. Rural areas were particularly affected as pressure around land is traditionally at the heart of local social interactions.<sup>3</sup>

The Ivorian society was thus already fragmented at the start of the war in 2002. If the State has regained some form of legitimacy in the North in recent years (notably with the partial redeployment of its administration), many challenges remain with rebel forces continuing to control key socio-economic sectors in certain areas.

On the two belligerent sides, a significant portion of the civilian population got involved in contentious politics at different levels, with some taking a direct part in warfare and in violent action. While some analysts went as far as describing Côte d'Ivoire as having engaged in a process of 'militianization' of society, privatization of violence and militarization of the youth by the government in place (Banegas 2008), it is worth exploring the extent of this phenomenon. The links between engagement in armed groups and political loyalty is more complex than it seems and processes of mobilization took several forms across the country, depending on individuals' affiliations, beliefs and social networks, but also depending on geopolitical elements such as proximity to the front line, dynamics of the local politics and characteristics of the immediate

context. Although this diversity of factors is usually recognized in explaining processes of mobilization, there is somehow a tendency to emphasize grievance-based motives and individuals' characteristics when the base of an armed group shows a certain ethnic homogeneity. Yet, if the majority of recruits in the *Forces Nouvelles* were of northern origin, rebel forces have always denied having a specific regional or ethnic affiliation (Langer 2003). Even if their political demands had some kind of ethnic connotation in the beginning (one of their announced objectives was 'to put an end to the domination by the Southerners'<sup>4</sup>), at the root of the failed September 2002 coup were primarily discontented soldiers who were facing demobilization under an army reform programme decided by the new government. Despite submitting several pleas to be retained or at least be given a demobilization package, these soldiers were accused of offences under the former presidential regimes,<sup>5</sup> and many were thrown out of the army and forced into exile in Burkina Faso.

As the failed coup evolved into a civil war, many Northerners (living in both government and rebel-controlled areas) were drawn into the movement because the recruitment rhetoric had somehow struck a note. As one recruit put it: 'When people come and say: we're fighting for you, because we know that day and night, you get hassled. You are called foreigner... Such a discourse generates energies' (Fofana 2009). Many observers therefore hastily concluded that the current conflict had only crystallized a long-standing North-South divide and the term 'Northerner' became synonymous with 'rebel'. In government-controlled areas, large-scale mobilization was boosted by Minister of Defense Bertin Kade's call on 8 December 2002, which came amid reports that rebel factions were advancing eastwards from the Liberian border, that the town of Bolequin had been taken and that rebel forces were threatening Guiglo: 'We are calling for mobilization because, with the increase in the number of fronts, we need to increase the size of our defence forces' (BBC News 2002). Young men between 20 and 26 years old were asked to volunteer to strengthen the base of the national army.

Being given the opportunity to start a career in the military was surely an attractive prospect for many youths but equating pro-governmental militias with opportunistic young men would be a

mistake, especially in the west of the country. By the same token, rebel recruits were not confined to Northerners. If we look at the ethnic composition of the group of people I interviewed, the picture appears much more nuanced. In Man (rebel-controlled area), Western and Northern ethnic groups were roughly even in size. A lot of youths drawn in the rebellion were of Yacouba origin, the local *autochthones*. Other 'Western' ethnic affiliations included Touras, Mahous, Wobés. The other half of respondents were of Northern origin and consisted of Dioulas, Senoufos, Mossis, Malinkés, Lobis, and Odiennakas (table 1.1). Although, outside my sample, I could not collect detailed information on the composition of all rebel forces, the multiplicity of ethnic backgrounds among my respondents was striking in Man compared to the quasi mono-ethnic situation I encountered in Guiglo (government-controlled area). There, the large majority of respondents were of Guéré origin, the local *autochthones* in this area, and the recruitment of the pro-government militia members appeared strikingly local. This was confirmed when examining a larger dataset from the National Program of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reinsertion (PNDDR), which showed that 90 per cent of the 5,074 recruits on the list were from Guéré localities (table 1.2).<sup>6</sup>

Table 1.1 Respondents' ethnic group

Man - Rebel forces		Guiglo - Pro-government militias	
Yacouba/Dan	46	Agni	2
Dioula	11	Wobé	2
Sénoufo	15	Guéré	93
Toura	4	Bété	2
Mossi	6	Krumen	1
Mahou	3		
Djimini	1		
Koyaka	2		
Malinké	7		
Agni	1		
Lobi	1		
Wobé	1		
Samogo	1		
Odiennaka	1		

Source: fieldwork (2007)



Table 1.2 Cities of origin of recruits of pro-government militias listed by the PNDDR

	Nber	%
West	5,074	90
Bangolo	317	6
Bolequin	1552	28
Duékoué	588	10
Guiglo	988	18
Péhé	394	7
Tai	260	5
Toulepleu	707	13
Other locations in the West (<100 recruits)	268	5
Centre	62	1
Bouaké	31	0.5
Other locations in the Centre (<100 recruits)	31	0.5
North East	47	1
Tehini	46	1
Other locations in North East (<45 recruits)	1	0
Centre West	44	1
South West	23	0
East	15	0
South East	15	0
North / North East	15	0
Abidjan & suburbs	133	2
Abidjan	111	2
Other locations in Abidjan (<100 recruits)	22	0
Location unknown	213	4
TOTAL	5,641	100

Source: fieldwork / PNDDR dataset (2007)

### Description of armed factions

#### *Insurgent movements*

If the *Mouvement Patriotique pour la Côte d'Ivoire* (MPCI) led the initial revolt in September 2002, the conflict was complicated by the emergence of two rebel movements in the west of the country in November the same year: the *Mouvement Populaire Ivoirien du Grand Ouest* (MPIGO) and the *Mouvement pour la Justice et la Paix* (MJP). None of them was signatory of the 17 October 2002 ceasefire agreement. MPIGO, whose declared goal was to avenge the assassination of General Gueï (killed in Abidjan in the first hours of the revolt), claimed the capture of the town of Danané on 28

November 2002. The movement was estimated to comprise 6,000 recruits and was mainly composed of Ivoirian Yacoubas, Sierra Leonean and Liberian fighters, which included pro-Taylor militias and local recruits of Gio origin.<sup>7</sup> The movement became associated with Liberian mercenaries and gained a reputation of being extremely violent as uncontrolled elements were known to perform acts of extreme cruelty on civilians. The second movement born in November 2002, the MJP, was the smallest of the rebel groups. In practice, it was the western extension of the MPCI. Initially composed of local traditional hunters ('dozos') and of Liberian and Sierra Leonean fighters, the connection between the MPCI and the MJP was evident from the beginning as vehicles and equipment stamped with the MPCI logo were seen in Man shortly after MJP commanders claimed responsibility for the attack of the city. MPCI laissez-passer were recognized in MJP-controlled areas (and vice versa) and MPCI leaders were frequently seen in town.

Following particularly violent clashes in Duékoué between the French peacekeeping forces and the rebel forces (it was the first time an international peacekeeping force had opened fire in order to stop a rebel advance), the three rebel factions MPCI, MPIGO and MJP issued a first joint statement on 23 December 2002. They clearly stated that they would consider any other attack on their positions as an 'act of war' and they openly threatened retaliation against any military force that would interfere. In February 2003, MPCI, MPIGO and MJP officially merged and the name *Forces Nouvelles* started to appear in the press to designate the coalition of these three movements (PANA 2003). Since then, all military and political negotiations on behalf of the rebel forces have been conducted by the head of the military or by the political branch of the *Forces Nouvelles*<sup>8</sup> (International Crisis Group 2003; Langer 2003; Reuters 2003).

#### *Counter-insurgent groups*

It is primarily in western Côte d'Ivoire that counter-insurgency movements took the form of structured militias. In reaction to unprecedented levels of violence in the area, existing rural/urban vigilantism evolved into self-defence groups to secure areas and places not yet taken by the enemy

with the support of local leaders. The groups rapidly connected with each other and developed links with more structured military and paramilitary movements, including with the Ivoirian army (FANCI).

This testimony is particularly telling:<sup>9</sup>

I first joined a self-defence group. In the beginning, we were not yet with the FANCI. We were posted at various entries in town to secure the city and to prevent rebels getting in. When we noticed someone suspicious, we used to call the FANCI to investigate further. The soldiers were not particularly keen on us. They were saying we were different and that we had a different way of seeing things. At the checkpoints, we were on our own. We had wooden clubs and 12-calibres, those who had a gun. We were given ammo. At first, the self-defence group had no name. Then, once it was decided that we had to give a hand to the FANCI, we were called AP-*Wê* and we were given green tee-shirts, with the AP-*Wê* name on it. We could not really tell people that we were suppletive militias. There were quite a lot of us, and because many of us were from neighbouring villages, we got transferred to Bolequin [a small town west of Guiglo]. Other people replaced us in Guiglo, including some who had come from Abidjan. They created their own alliance, the *Front de Libération du Grand Ouest*, and they had grey tee-shirts with the FLGO name on. They were based in Guiglo, we were based in Bolequin. *Général Maho* united the two movements later. Because he had not fled Guiglo, he was trusted, so all information was passing through him, even messages of encouragement. He was the one who had motivated the youth to protect their town. He merged the two groups and he became our chief. We all became FLGO. There was another group in Zagné and another group in Duékoué. Both had come to Guiglo to receive military training. In Bolequin, we had our own military camp. We started fighting with our own guns, then we got access to kalachs, usually taken from [dead] rebels. Sometimes, we found more sophisticated weapons. A few FANCI soldiers trusted us and gave us weapons. They knew we

were there to help. We learnt how to use military guns in Bolequin: how to field strip and reassemble weapons, how to unjam guns in the heat of combat...

Despite repeated government denials, counter-insurgent movements' links with the Ivoirian army were reflected in similar testimonies. In early December 2002, a press release from the Agence Ivoirienne de Presse (2002) reported that the municipal authorities in Bolequin had announced the mobilization of *Wê* youths to support the Ivoirian army to push the rebels back, out of the region. The article also stated that a mayor's assistant would provide the volunteers with the necessary equipment. Local '*comités de crise*' emerged relatively quickly in the West, usually at the initiative of municipal or district authorities. If one of their genuine mandates was to alleviate the suffering of the local population, these committees also played a role in motivating the local youths to give a hand to an Ivoirian army already struck by cases of desertion. Local leaders toured the region and called for volunteers to participate in the war effort. Each village was asked to send between 30 and 50 youths but there was no retaliation when there were less. A particularly large mobilization occurred in Guiglo in the beginning, as many youths reported having been extremely shocked when they witnessed the distress of the displaced people from Toulepleu or Bolequin, who were passing through their town as they were fleeing combat. A recurrent concern was that such a thing could happen to them if Guiglo was attacked and if there was no resistance. What would happen to family members who would be unable to flee on foot? What would happen to the sick and the elderly? From the testimonies heard, registering in a militia was very simple and whoever volunteered could enlist at the local city hall, at the FANCI military camp, or directly at one of the militias' bases (usually, the leader's compound). If some volunteers had previous experience in local vigilantism before the war, they were usually new to warfare and had to receive some kind of accelerated military training dispensed by experienced soldiers.

Pro-governmental militias played a major role in pushing the rebels back from Taï, Toulepleu, Bolequin and Bangolo in December 2002. They were composed of the *Alliance Patriotique Wê* (AP-

Wê), the *Forces de Libération du Grand Ouest* (FLGO), the *Mouvement Ivoirien pour la Libération de l'Ouest de la Côte d'Ivoire* (MILOCI), the *Union des Patriotes pour la Résistance du Grand Ouest* (UPRGO), and the *LIMA*. The different groups collaborated with each other and with the Ivoirian army. Some were more 'local' than others (table 1.2), some were more important in scale (table 1.3) and some were created before others. All encompassed a diversity of recruits, ranging from poorly-armed and ill-trained villagers to individuals who had clearly received extensive military training in a short period in order to fight on the frontline.

Table 1.3 Claimed affiliation of the pro-government militias listed by the PNDDR

Faction	Nber	%
APEWE	950	16.8
FLGO	3,260	57.8
UPRGO	580	10.3
MILOCI	14	0.2
FAT/FATCI/FSAT	145	2.6
FDS	1	0
LIMA	1	0
MPIGO/FAFN	2	0
None	688	12.2

Source: fieldwork / PNDDR dataset (2007)

Several testimonies of the 'early-joiners' I interviewed tend to suggest that the *AP-Wê* group was the first militia to be formed in Guiglo at the end of 2002 at the initiative of the local crisis committee (Fofana 2009). The official discourse had a strong ethnic connotation: 'Wê youths' had to be mobilized to defend the 'Wê territory' and sometimes, *AP-Wê* was openly hostile to people of 'Dan' origin (the Yacoubas), which was the ethnic group that had come to be associated with the assailants. FLGO was also founded in the early stage of the counterinsurgency. It was in majority composed of young people of Wê origin and had been initiated by a local politician, Maho. The FLGO leader was then third assistant to the mayor of Guiglo, President of the Association of Wê Chiefs, and active member of the President's political party (International Crisis Group 2004). The UPRGO

group was created a few months later. An article in the Ivoirian paper *Soir Info*, dated 3 June 2003, reported that a public meeting had just been held in Guiglo at which local officials announced the creation of a new militia: the *Union des Patriotes pour la Résistance du Grand Ouest* (cited in International Crisis Group 2003). Why a third structured armed group emerged in the same area is unclear from the information we have, but we know that UPRGO retained close links with the FLGO movement. UPRGO eventually relocated to the nearby rural town of Zagné, and stayed relatively small compared to FLGO. MILOCI appears on the militias' scene much later, in early 2005, when the MILOCI leader claimed responsibility for the attack on Logoualé (IRIN 2005). The movement was based in Kahadé, a Guéré village, 25 km from Guiglo and had close links to FLGO and the Ivoirian army. Contrary to the bulk of *AP-Wê* and FLGO recruits, it was not an 'ethnic' movement and its base was made up of *Young Patriots* who used to be active in Abidjan. They had first responded to the Ministry of Defense call for volunteers and had taken the tests to join the army, but since it was impossible to integrate them all, they were sent to the west as auxiliary forces with the promise to be integrated later into the national army<sup>10</sup> (Le Patriote 2005). When it became clear that they would never be incorporated in the army, some of these youths gathered in Duékoué and decided to form the basis of a new movement. Table 1.4 presents the first faction integrated by the people I interviewed. There were some movements across factions, especially on the same belligerent side, but transfers seem to have been relatively contained and have remained marginal.

Table 1.4 First faction integrated by respondents, by locality

Man		Guiglo	
MPCI	34	AP-WE	22
MPIGO	32	LIMA <sup>11</sup>	45
MJP	33	FLGO	16
Other	1	UPRGO	10
		<i>Jeunes Patriotes</i>	1
		FANCI	2
		Rural vigilantism	3
		Other	1

Source: fieldwork (2007)

### Who took up arms in the west?

When he studied ethnic militias in Nigeria, Guichaoua used three indicators to characterize the profile of recruits: 'levels of education', 'occupations' and 'social connectedness' (Guichaoua 2007). His results showed that militia members were educated above average, a large majority had a side job outside the militia, and most were not dissocialized at all. Many recruits were married, had children, were well-settled in a place they rented, and known as militia members in their neighbourhood. In contrast, Humphreys and Weinstein (2004) pointed out a different trend, based on a study of ex-combatants in Sierra Leone. Across factions, the majority were uneducated and poor, with a pre-war background as student or farmer.

The question of who joins armed groups is foremost an empirical one. It is a function of several factors, which include individual characteristics, and individual and collective perceptions of a given context. Perhaps there is some kind of profile for those more likely to join a violent movement. Perhaps there is none and it is more a matter of circumstances. In western Côte d'Ivoire, as I dug into the pre-war educational, professional and social trajectories of the recruits I interviewed, I came across a diversity of patterns.

*Educational trajectories: no need for war to disrupt them...*

Education is not to be taken for granted in Côte d'Ivoire, and for the ones who go to school, each additional year of education is the product of a fierce struggle against poverty and familial priorities. Militia members interviewed in Guiglo/Blolequin were much better educated than the rebels interviewed in Man. In Man, half of the respondents had never been enrolled in an education system recognized by the state, while in Guiglo/Blolequin nearly all had gone to school, and a large proportion had entered the secondary cycle (table 1.5). These results are not surprising *per se* and only reflect the structural regional disparity that existed before the war in terms of enrolment rates, use of infrastructure, and completion of schooling (Chelpi-den Hamer 2007; Hugon and Bommier 2002; Le Pape and Vidal 1987; Proteau 2002). In Côte d'Ivoire, formal education is the least popular in rural areas, in the North, and among the populations of northern origin, partly because they compete with Quranic schools.<sup>12</sup>

Table 1.5 Last year of schooling before dropping out, by locality

		Man	Guiglo	TOTAL
Primary education	CP	9	5	14
	CE	6	8	14
	CM1	3	7	10
	CM2	12	24	36
	Total	30	44	74
Secondary education	6 <sup>ème</sup>	6	7	13
	5 <sup>ème</sup>	5	8	13
	4 <sup>ème</sup>	8	14	22
	3 <sup>ème</sup>	6	16	22
	2 <sup>nde</sup>	1	1	2
	1 <sup>ère</sup>	0	3	3
	Total	26	49	75
Technical education (formal)			1	1
Post-secondary education			3	3
TOTAL		56	97	153

Source: Fieldwork (2007)



Lack of means, including lack of means after a parent's sudden death, was the main reason put forward in both locations, to explain why respondents had dropped out of school – this strikingly came up when examining respondents' individual trajectories. Another reason to drop out of school was the loss of interest in general education, the willingness to work and/or the necessity to help parents by either entering the family business or by working for a third party to generate an extra source of income. At adolescent age, many respondents had not yet completed their primary education. Some reported feeling too old to continue going to school and a minority stopped because of educational failure. They usually had repeated a class first, but then had failed a second time, which eventually made them decide to drop out. Continuing was no longer worth their time and financial sacrifices. Many respondents had already stopped attending school years before the start of the war. The few who reported having done so because of the conflict mentioned their school's closing as the main reason.

*Professional trajectories: the tribulations of 'hyper-mobile' youths in the informal sector*

Most recruits I interviewed earned money before the war. Some were doing contractual work and their income varied according to contract opportunities, some were working as day labourers, and some had a regular income. The majority was employed in the informal economy, a few had very decent jobs. Variable income was the norm, and only a minority were earning the same amount every month (about 10 per cent of respondents). In Man, a rough quarter was self-employed before the war, another quarter was employed by some kind of boss, and another quarter was enrolled into some kind of informal apprenticeship. The rest did contract and day work and only a minority were studying. In Guiglo, two-thirds of the respondents were self-employed or involved in the family business, 15 per cent were apprentices, 10 per cent were employees, and only a few were still at school.

At the one extreme, I met quite entrepreneurial young men. One respondent, for instance, was combining two jobs before the war. He was an employee of the sugar firm *Sucrivoire* in Borotou,

where he was paid CFA 75,000 a month to pile up sugar bags (the equivalent of EUR 115). After his day shift, he ran his own electronic workshop and a proximity radio. He had several apprentices to help him through, and his daily sales varied between CFA 5,000 and 40,000. Another respondent was running his own business as a building painter and was registered at the local Chamber of Commerce. He had won several bids before the war and once economic activities resumed after the main clashes were over, he got involved in contracts for renovating public infrastructure. At the other end of the spectrum, I met young men who led quite dependent lives. They would not work and would blame their family for that, 'for failing to place us somewhere'. There were not many of them but their discourses were in sharp contrast with the rest. Out of the 10 per cent of respondents who had never worked for a wage before the war, a minority fell into that category. The rest was simply very young in 2002, under 19, and usually still under parental care. They were either at school, in their first years of apprenticeship, or doing rural or urban petty jobs.

The flexibility and geographical mobility of the youths I interviewed was rather striking. It is a real struggle to work, and earning one's living requires more than goodwill and individual skills. In respondents' own terms, '*on part pour se chercher*'. That literally meant that they had left home behind in search of better prospects elsewhere. They were helped by relatives in the process, or relied on acquaintances to find their way, but this stage recurrently came back in their professional trajectories and helped them make the transition to adulthood and financial independence. At a certain point in their lives, it is implicitly expected that young people – especially young men – stop being a burden to their relatives. Thus, from the day they start working, they are usually pushed and pulled into a range of activities, from one region to another, following work opportunities and/or responding to obligations they have. Respondents usually worked in several locations before the war, alternating urban and rural settings in the hope of reaching financial independence. Some went back to their place of origin after a few years elsewhere and not necessarily for lack of options. An implicit set of obligations exists among family members and several testimonies showed that one may simply go back to meet familial obligations, regardless of the possible consequences in terms of

individual well-being. One respondent was an accomplished tailor in town who had been running his own business for several years when his brother asked him to return to their village to take care of their mother and the grandchildren she had in her custody. Their three sisters were married and had left home, leaving the old woman alone with the children. The person I interviewed was 26 years old when he moved back to his village to take care of twelve people. He started a small tailoring workshop with four apprentices and three sewing machines. His brother paid for two of them.

*Social connectedness: alternating practices of 'tapping' and 'giving'*

About a third of respondents in Guiglo were head of their household before the war and another third were still under parents' direct care. In Man, familial ties were looser. If a third of respondents were still under their parents' care, another third lived with extended family and a quarter were fending for themselves with no relatives to rely on (living with acquaintances, staying in the home of their boss, or simply living on their own). This is not to say that they were disconnected socially (I only remember one or two cases that I could qualify as being socially 'lost'), but respondents in Man were more likely to use weak ties and extra-familial networks to get along on a daily basis. To some extent, this is not surprising since Man is a regional hub (much bigger than Guiglo in terms of size) and a source of attraction for a lot of youth in search of better prospects.

One way to assess how much the young recruits I interviewed were socially connected before the war is to look at their degree of financial dependence. Were the youths I interviewed supported by someone before the war? Or were they supporting someone themselves? If a majority of respondents claim to have received some kind of financial assistance, many also claim to have been providers for close relatives before getting involved in an armed group. It was not rare for a 'supporter' to become someone 'supported' later on, and vice versa. The scope and frequency of support generally varied depending on timing, available resources and upcoming expenses, but a common pattern was that even in a difficult position, they were doing their best to send something to their parents and spouses. This did not impede them from tapping into their social network when

they were in difficulties (father/mother, relatives in better economic conditions, creditors). Several youths mentioned having been helped by relatives to set up their own business. Some were regularly receiving Western Union transfers from siblings overseas. It was also not uncommon to see a younger sibling supported by an older brother in a better socio-economic position, even when it was not necessary. Help could be given with no expectation of payback or could be linked to some sort of investment, in which case the 'supporter' retained some rights to expected returns. But in general, respondents' testimonies show that family members were merely helping one another in a context marked with features of structural poverty quite unlikely to disappear any time soon.

### **What drove civilians to military life?**

#### *Protection from real and perceived threats*

'I joined the militia because transport was too expensive.' I would never have thought of such an argument if I had not come to Guiglo to hear it, repeatedly. If the causal relationship does not strike the reader at first sight, it quickly makes sense when you put the sentence into context. At the start of the war, the West was the heart of violence and there was sharp fighting between government troops, the rebelling forces and their respective allies. Civilians were not spared and people had to act quickly in towns and villages close to the frontline to save their families and their main assets. Those wealthy enough to own cars, minivans, buses or trucks had an important advantage compared to the others and could flee faster than those on foot to safer places. But since vehicles are valuable assets for belligerents and are often quickly requisitioned in warfare, there was no time to lose. Transport prices to safer locations skyrocketed during that period, making it very difficult to transport everyone.<sup>13</sup> In addition, not much room on board was available and vehicle owners' families had priority over clients and acquaintances.

Many respondents considered their involvement in armed groups as the most logical move in response to a potential threat. By taking up arms, they were protecting themselves from an

extremely violent context (they were at least making an effort). Many felt that they would be better off in than out. One individual, for instance, joined to be allowed to continue farming: 'It was very common then to arrest someone for no reason. But if I am within the movement, I am one of them. They can no longer accuse me of being against. I can therefore go and work without being arrested.' Other respondents felt they had to become soldiers to protect their family from abuse and to save the little they owned: 'Militaries were annoying the population, so we joined to protect our parents. No-one bothers them anymore since we are in.' Many said 'took up arms' because everybody in town was in uniform and could break into their homes with total impunity.<sup>14</sup> When families were unexpectedly split up in the panic surrounding the flight, the youngest were particularly vulnerable if they were left on their own, and joining an armed group, under the custody of a chief, could come as a real relief (Chelpi-den Hamer 2010).

If it would be over-simplistic to describe the Ivoirian war as 'ethnic' in nature,<sup>15</sup> ethnic polarization did occur and long-standing tensions between *autochthones* and *non-autochthones* were crystallized by contemporary politics. One respondent described how government soldiers would come into town to conduct identity checks on foreigners and Ivoirians of northern origin. Being the latter, he thought he would be better off if he enlisted with rebel forces: 'Gbagbo people<sup>16</sup> were killing the Malinké. Because of the rebellion, we were killed. Because we did not have papers, we were killed. Because we were dressed with dirty clothes, we were killed. They were even killing insane men. We were scared.' (interview fragment, April 2007). In November-December 2002, Man changed hands three times in a couple of weeks, from government to rebels and from rebels to government troops, leading each time to violent retaliation against suspected opponents.

#### *Unwilling and coerced*

If most respondents could exercise some kind of agency in their decision to enlist (with the little room to manoeuvre they had), many were also taken by force, especially those who joined groups led by Liberian mercenaries: 'They would have killed me if I had refused to carry their ammunitions

in the bush.' Others were taken because their skills were useful to the group, blacksmiths, for instance, or technicians. The former can repair guns, the latter can maintain communication equipment. Here is his testimony:

We heard on the radio that Côte d'Ivoire was under attack, but our boss decided to continue working. Some workers fled, others stayed, and I continued at the factory. One night, I heard gunshots. It sounded like shooting in the air. We were then busy loading sugar bags in trucks. Rebels entered the plant and requisitioned a truck. They asked us to load sugar bags in it. We were at gunpoint, so we had to obey. They came back shortly after. They were looking for a technician to change the frequency of their walkie-talkie. The staff was scared and pointed at me. They asked me to do it because they wanted to communicate with their chiefs. I did not want to but they had guns, so I could not refuse. When they were finished radio-talking to their commanders, they told me I was an important asset for them, therefore, they could not let me go. I did not want to go with them. I told them I was no military, I had no war experience before, I did not know how weapons worked. But they told me they would protect me. The more we discussed, the more they became angry. Why was I annoying them? they said. One rebel took his Kalashnikov and hit me with the butt. He told me that if I wanted to die now, he would kill me. I was therefore obliged to follow them. We left for Séguéla to receive military training. I did not want to be part of it, but the ones who refused were killed in front of me. I had to stay calm.

Interestingly, some people reported having first been coerced into an armed group and then having stayed for lack of better alternatives elsewhere. Some were taken by force (usually by the Liberians), then fled, and then joined another armed group willingly. Being coerced was not necessarily presented as a traumatic event: 'In the beginning, there were not enough men in the rebellion, so they were taking people by force. At the military camp, we were told that it is now war and that we

have to fight. We were given two days to visit our parents to get their blessing and anti-bullet medicine. After that, we all boarded a military truck and we were sent as reinforcements to fight in the battle of Man.'

#### *Opportunistic young men?*

Contrary to the widespread idea that the base of armed groups consists of opportunistic young men, relatively few respondents reported having joined for work. If some people mentioned having been attracted in a group by the prospect of receiving subsequent incentives, they also said that they were quickly disabused: "They told me that if I go and fight, they will give me 100,000 or 200,000 francs CFA. I got money once, after the first fighting. Afterwards, I got nothing.' Some were told that there might be an opportunity to enter the regular army afterwards (quite an interesting prospect since it meant stable work, and decent and regular pay, with retirement benefits). Others were promised implicit rewards if their group was victorious. Still, many reported to have enlisted because there was nothing else to do. At the heart of the conflict, in areas close to the frontline, economic activity had either stopped or was very slow, and a lot of people could not resume the activity they had been doing before the war. A lot of youths therefore pragmatically decided to join an armed group to have something to do and to at least be fed.

Table 1.6 First reason advanced by respondent for joining an armed movement, by locality

	Man	Guiglo	TOTAL
To protect himself	14	4	18
To protect parents and community	22	42	64
To defend 'his' region	-	19	19
Taken by force	24	-	24
Encouraged by friends	5	5	10
Harassed too often for being of northern origin	10	-	10
To avenge the death of General Guei	1	-	1
To work	10	5	15
To respond to a call for volunteers	4	5	9
Encouraged by soldiers	2	3	5
In response to the death of someone close	7	15	22
Other	1	2	3

Source: fieldwork (2007)

### Concluding remarks

Finding clear boundaries between motives is a difficult task as respondents' narratives are rarely divided into distinct categories. The youths I interviewed usually enlisted for a range of reasons and it makes little sense to search for one single cause. If we look at what people mentioned spontaneously (table 1.6), there seems to be relatively little support for grievance-based motives and only a minority enlisted to express their frustration concerning a past event or to seek revenge. Land-related grievances were strikingly absent in the discussions despite the fact that the Ivoirian history of land tenure is closely intertwined with that of inter-ethnic violence. In contrast, belligerent side clearly mattered when explaining local mechanisms of recruitment. In Guiglo, the bulk of the youths enlisted to protect their region and community, while in Man, the bulk was coerced to strengthen the numerical base of the rebellion. If grievance-based theories of conflict have often been put forward to explain the reasons that motivate people to join a violent group, they are not the most relevant analytical tool in the case of western Côte d'Ivoire. The characteristics of the immediate contexts have much more strongly influenced the local dynamics of mobilization processes, from the ways the mobilizing discourses were framed in Guiglo and Man, to the ways



they were individually and collectively interpreted. That said, recruitment appeared strikingly local in both towns, despite the fact that the two mobilizing contexts had varied tremendously from one place to another. In terms of profile, if there was no single pre-war pattern, perhaps one noteworthy one was the hyper-mobility of these youth, both in terms of moving from one place to another and between sectors of activity.

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<sup>1</sup> The bulk of respondents were identified using supporting NGOs as point of entry and were involved in a reinsertion program at the time of the interviews. A few self-demobilized recruits were selected through other networks, mainly through young people I spoke to who referred me to other youths who were not involved in NGO programming. They were all young men and women, between 15 and 35 years old. To try to minimize possible confusion with humanitarian staff, I always took the time to introduce myself as a researcher/writer interested in hearing some of the youths' life stories to compile them in a book. I emphasized that I was not interested in names, but in understanding how and why they had ended up the way they had and how they were seeing their current prospects. Interviews were done in a quiet room in the reinsertion centres and some follow-up interviews occurred in respondents' homes and workplaces.

<sup>2</sup> The 1990s were in fact a decade characterized by very tense political struggles and the institutionalization of an ethnic polarization with the political crystallization of autochthonous ideologies (referred to as 'Ivoirité' or Ivoirian-ness). It led to the exclusion of certain political figures from quite high political functions.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on the role of cultural and historical factors in making sense of the current conflict, see: Banegas 2008; Banegas and Marshall-Fratani 2003; Ceuppens and Geschiere 2005; Chauveau 2000 and 2005; Chauveau and Colin 2005; Chauveau and Dozon 1987; Chauveau and Richards 2008; Dozon 1997, 2000a; Dozon 2000b; Le Pape and Vidal 2002; Marshall-Fratani 2006; Vidal 2003.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Mission in Côte d'Ivoire (MINUCI), Conflict Background (cited in Langer 2003). Other demands included the resignation of the current President, holding inclusive national elections and an in-depth revision of the Ivoirian Constitution.

<sup>5</sup> Throughout the 1990s, Côte d'Ivoire could not avoid slipping deeper towards violent authoritarianism and economic ruin after decades of prosperity. In a bloodless coup on 24 December 1999, a group of young non-commissioned officers took power, protesting against President Bédié's refusal to pay them overdue wages, the severely diminished material conditions in the army, and the corruption and authoritarianism of the Bédié government. General Robert Gueï was chosen to lead the junta. After the coup, Gueï became head of state until elections were held in October 2000, then Gbagbo took over after defeating Gueï in the presidential election in a very tense climate. Gueï was murdered in Abidjan in the early stage of the 2002 insurgency.

<sup>6</sup> The table includes people who no longer lived in their area of origin before the war but who went back to fight in Western Côte d'Ivoire. It provides the nominal listing of 5,641 pro-government militia members with specifications on the faction integrated, their sex, age, civil status, place of birth, origin, place of current residency, pre-war activity, education level, and the 'wishes' they expressed to the PNDDR staff in terms of place of residence and activity should the official DDR program ever start at a large scale.

<sup>7</sup> In Liberia, the Gio are the ethnic 'cousins' of the Yacoubas.

<sup>8</sup> The *Forces Nouvelles* were not free of internal dissension. Shortly after the signing of the Linas-Marcoussis agreement in January 2003 which stipulated a series of actions to take (notably the set-up of a government of reconciliation and the preparation for the Presidential and legislative elections in 2005), violent strife broke out amongst rebel commanders, some refusing to make too many concessions and viewing any progress in the political resolution of conflict as a capitulation. Some kind of 'internal cleansing' therefore took place in various places in the rebel-controlled areas.

<sup>9</sup> The text has been slightly adapted for better reader comprehension.

<sup>10</sup> They notably fought the battles of Toulepleu and Bolequin in the FLGO ranks.

<sup>11</sup> The LIMA forces were also active in the West in the very beginning, led by Liberian mercenaries. The precise chain of command is not fully clear, yet it is likely that they were led on the ground by the Ivorian Lieutenant Delafosse and by Liberian commanders (United Nations 2006). They had direct links with the Ivoirian State and fought alongside FLGO and MILOCI elements. Several respondents mentioned having first integrated the LIMA.

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<sup>12</sup> In 2001, five years was the average duration of schooling in rural areas compared to fifteen years for the country as a whole. Literacy rates were 60 per cent in Abidjan, 10 per cent in the North, 30 per cent in rural areas and 70 per cent in urban zones. Primary enrolment rates were 40 per cent in Korhogo and 80 per cent in Man (Hugon and Bommier 2002).

<sup>13</sup> The trip from Guiglo to Abidjan could cost up to CFA 20,000 per person. One respondent mentioned that since he could not afford to pay for the 10 relatives he supported, he decided to stay and fight.

<sup>14</sup> When fighting broke in Man, all civilian population fled to neighbouring villages. After a few days, some young men returned, usually sent by close relatives, to keep an eye on family assets.

<sup>15</sup> Against all odds, I heard anecdotal experiences of Yacoubas fighting on the same side as Guérés.

<sup>16</sup> 'Gbagbo people' refers to government soldiers.