

# How MONUSCO Contributed to Constructing the DRC as the 'Dark Heart' of Africa

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2020/10/16/how-monusco-contributed-to-constructing-the-drc-as-the-dark-heart-of-africa/>

SOFIA ROMANSKY, OCT 16 2020

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Africa's geographical and metaphorical 'heart', has become infamous for its violent resource-driven and ethnic conflicts (Kabamba, 2010). Simultaneously, the DRC gained attention through the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission (UN, MONUSCO): the UN's largest peacekeeping operation, which despite over 20 years of involvement has not achieved sustainable peace (Lopor, 2016). This has led to extensive criticism of MONUSCO's on-the-ground practices, however, the very way the UN speaks about the DRC may also have unintended consequences for its effectiveness (Martinez & Eng, 2016). By problematizing the discourses of MONUSCO resolutions and practices this essay aims to answer the question *'How has the construction of the Democratic Republic of Congo as the 'Heart' of the 'Dark Continent' shaped MONUSCO peacekeeping?'* After giving background information on the DRC and establishing a constructivist postcolonial theoretical framework, this essay will argue that based on historical perceptions of Africa as the 'Dark Continent', MONUSCO adhered to constructions of the DRC as trapped in 'immutable' cycles of violence which limited the focus on root causes of conflict and inhibited the visibility of complex local actors. This analysis makes a relevant contribution to debates on the perverse consequences of well-meaning international interventions (Autesserre, 2012) as in 2019 the UN Security Council (UNSC) extended MONUSCO's mandate for 2020, creating opportunity for change.

### Background

The various conflicts in the DRC can be attributed to pre-colonial tensions and Belgian control from 1885-1960 (Kabamba, 2010). However, most recent instability stems from the 1994 Rwandan Genocide and resulting influx of Hutu refugees in the DRC's eastern provinces (Ndangam, 2002, p. 5). Since independence, the DRC struggled to maintain economic growth while battling secessionist and ethnic disputes (p. 4). As volatility rose in refugee camps in 1996, the DRC army (FARDC) became thinly spread, accommodating the emergence of armed groups to fill the security deficit. Most notably, the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire (AFDL) led by Laurent Kabila took advantage of then President Mobutu's absence, due to a cancer treatment in Switzerland, to start a Tutsi campaign against Hutu extremists. Soon other states, namely Rwandan, Burundi, Ugandan, Angolan, and Eritrean national forces joined, initiating the First Congo War (1996-1997) which culminated in a military coup and collapse of Mobutu's DRC (p.6). Yet, the war's diverse civil and transnational armed groups triggered new conflicts, sparking the Second Congo War (1998-2003), which claimed the largest civilian death-toll since WWII. To moderate fighting, the 1999 Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement was signed between the warring states, prompting the UN Secretary General to recommend that a peacekeeping mission be deployed (Barrera, 2015, p. 3). This established MONUSCO's presence in the DRC, mandated by UNSC Resolution 1258 (1999). After less than a year, the need for more on-the-ground personnel became apparent, thus with every new UNSC resolution the mission grew larger and acquired more tasks: "disarmament, demobilization and reintegration, protection of civilians, strengthening of State Authority and organization of the first democratic elections" (p. 5). Since the war's end, MONUSCO had successes, including the suppression of the insurgent National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP) in 2012 (Luthuli, 2016, p. 36), formation of a Transitional Government, and elections in 2006. Yet, MONUSCO is widely criticized for failing at its core mandates (Karlsrud, 2015), though specific criticism of the UN's discourse remains widely absent. This essay argues that language shaped MONUSCO by creating limited knowledge structures which affected its

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efficacy.

## Theoretical Framework: Constructivism and Postcolonialism

In constructivist ontology, social reality is continuously created and recreated through discourses: interrelated 'speech acts' which establish knowledge frames about given aspects of society (Salter, 2010, p. 120). The knowledge stemming from discourses is fundamentally related to power, as the ability to shape or restrict them affects what social actors perceive as acceptable in given contexts (Autesserre, 2012, p. 207). This power is most visible through norms: social expectations which establish intersubjective contexts where behaviour is either condoned or condemned (Carpenter, 2003, p. 670). Networks of norms create logics of appropriateness that dictate behaviour, as norms become leverage in favor of specific power relations (p. 679). When norms are institutionalized, they are perceived as unproblematic, making it difficult to recognize how they further shape social reality in someone's favor (Jacobsen & Engell, 2018, p. 368).

When analyzing the actions of international actors, like the UN, it is necessary to acknowledge power relations inherent in their norms. UN peacekeeping aims to impartially and consensually stabilize a given conflict through minimal force and facilitate a transition to ceasefire, bringing conditions back to 'normal' (Luthuli, 2016, p. 5). Meanwhile, robust peacekeeping connotes a transition to the use of force at a strategic level to enforce stability, not necessarily with the host state's consent (Karlsrud, 2015, p. 43). The UN's capacity to simplify narratives and derive 'truths' from social contexts is seen as necessary to pragmatically make sense of and orient action in complex environments (Autesserre, 2012, p. 202). However, understandings of 'normal' crucially depend on limited knowledge, thus becoming an exercise of power (Jacobsen & Engell, 2018) when the UN identifies what 'normal' is and for whom, violating the UN's normative commitment to neutrality (Martinez & Eng, 2016, p. 155). Meanwhile, robust peacekeeping is often seen as problematically mandating the conduct of war, contradicting the 'peace' aspect of an operation (Karlsrud, 2015, p. 43).

Additionally, UN discourses exist in a postcolonial context. Popularized Western literature, like Joseph Conrad's 1899 novella *Heart of Darkness*, narrating a brutal voyage through the Congo Free State (modern day DRC) (Ndangam, 2002, p. 19) and racist foundations of sociological practices, as satirized in *How to Write About Africa* (Wainana, 2005), have closely associated Africa as a whole with metaphorical 'darkness', alluding to the continent's supposedly inferior, unknown, and intrinsically violent nature (Jarosz, 1992). The simplicity of the metaphor has potent ideological power in International Relations, as media, academic writing, and policy have developed the tendency to group diverse cultures under pessimistic labels of "dark", "broken", and "primordial" (Wainana, 2005). Such discourses reconstruct the West's colonial dominance in a social reality where the 'African norm' is perpetual conflict and laggard development, in need of rescue through 'enlightenment' based on Western norms of liberalism, statehood, legitimacy, and democracy; from savage darkness into progressive light (Jarosz, 1992, p. 105). The UN's logic of 'pragmatic simplification' and truth-seeking can reinforce these limited frames, undermining local relations, and reaffirming Africa's dependency on 'saviour[s]' via Westernized state-institutions by creating limited narratives and one-size-fits-all approaches to peacekeeping (Kabamba, 2010, p. 266).

Through the televisionisation of the DRC's conflict in the 2000s, media allusion to Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' metaphor, and MONUSCO drawing continuous international attention, the DRC specifically has come to be seen as emblematic of everything 'wrong' with Africa, shaping MONUSCO's problematic practices (Kabamba, 2010).

## Argument: Constructing the 'Dark Heart'

The ensuing two-part argument contends that MONUSCO's adherence to norms of the DRC as the 'heart' of the 'Dark Continent' first prioritized Western norms over a focus on root causes of conflict and second, it accommodated generalizations of complex local actors which together prevented MONUSCO from fulfilling its mandate (van der Vleuten, 2017, p. 13).

### Root Causes

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MONUSCO's entrance as a peacekeeping mission initially required the UN to simply gather information and monitor (Jacobsen & Engell, 2018, p. 366). However, as media reported on the despair and brutality in 'the heart of darkness' in 1999-2000, human rights violations became more blatant and pressure mounted (Ndangam, 2002, p. 20). Thus, the priorities of MONUSCO shifted to military enforcement of security to re-establish the DRC's "sovereignty... territorial integrity and political independence" (UNSC, 2000). From that point on, UNSC resolutions focused on combating violence and state-building, by employing military personnel to control strategic points, granting MONUSCO the power to "take *all* necessary measures to fulfil its mandate" (UNSC, 2003), and forming the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) in 2010, a specialized weaponized unit (Karlsruud, 2015). This prompt transition from peacekeeping to robust peacekeeping correlates with international actors' pessimistic conception of the DRC; as a Belgian diplomat commented in 2005, "[v]iolence was the usual mode of relations between the Congolese state and its population... *in the same way as they had always been*" (Kabamba, 2010, p. 271). Understanding violence as the 'normal' state of affairs prevented questioning why it even came about, supporting expansion of force and providing a straightforward solution based on conceptions "entrenched [in] organizational culture and interests" (Autesserre, 2012, p. 209). Simultaneously, it reinforced perceptions of the DRC as the 'Dark Heart', where progress could only be achieved through a top-down imposition of order to 'save and fix' a 'broken' state whose traditional "informal networks of civil society leadership" (Menkhaus, 2014, p. 165) were insufficiently stable (Kabamba 2010, p. 266).

Consequently, root causes of conflict such as ethnic disputes, colonial exploitation and resulting poverty were dismissed in favor of Westernized understandings of why states fail: weak government and institutions, and insufficient administration (Menkhaus, 2014, p. 155). This focus on Western statehood is exemplified by MONUSCO's apparent "obsession" (van der Vleuten, 2017) with organizing democratic elections and reestablishing state administration, mandated by all resolutions since UNSC resolution 1493 (2003). Elections were prioritized over ensuring civilians' access to basic needs, despite most deaths occurring due to absent medicine and malnourishment (Human Rights Watch, 2012). Meanwhile, efforts of Deputy Special Representative for the Congo to focus on local conflicts were faced with hostility and abandoned (Autesserre, 2009, p. 268). This simplification of violence contributed to the UN's alleged "powerlessness...in a hopeless situation", as MONUSCO staff disclosed (p. 264). But this revealed that MONUSCO lacked long-term strategic thinking (Karlsruud, 2015, p. 50) and was "not intended to do an exceptional job in the first place" (Luthuli, 2016, p. 37), rather only to provide minimal supervision to a forlorn state. Historical conceptions of the DRC as trapped in cycles of violence trapped MONUSCO itself in frames which failed to account for non-Western dimensions of conflict, limiting the operation's focus on root causes (Kabamba, 2010, p. 276).

## *Local Actors*

After 1999, UN resolutions institutionalized knowledge frames condoning top-down 'fixing' of DRC's statehood, enforcing discourses of Western superiority. However, in 2004 the "protection of civilians and disarming rebels and foreign combatants" (UNSC, 2004) was added to MONUSCO's mandate. This created a fundamental clash within MONUSCO's logic of appropriateness between generalization and locality which limited MONUSCO's ability to perceive local actors as complex. Under the mandate, civilians were to be protected from "*imminent* threats of physical violence" (UNSC, 2004) which left ample space for interpretation of urgency. In accordance with dominant peacekeeping logics, framing conflict in (inter)national terms, local peacekeeping was "intermittent, and largely left until it was too late", being seen as an "unimportant, unfamiliar, and unmanageable task" (Benner, 2011, p. 174). This reinforced perceptions of 'dark' Congolese localities as too complex and problematic to integrate in simplified narratives, justifying absent broad civil protection beyond physical violence (Kabamba, 2010, p. 270). Additionally, UNSC resolutions did not formally recognize the usefulness of "experiential linkages to...indigenous cultures and situated knowledges" (Jarosz, 1992, p. 108) that civilians had to offer, rather seeing them as simply passive 'bodies' to protect (Lopor, 2016, p. 46). This maimed the autonomy of civilians and limited local trust for MONUSCO. Without widespread security civilians struggled for survival as internally displaced peoples (IDPs) or involuntarily began supporting local militias (Hayes & Burge, 2003, p. 5).

Simultaneously, while MONUSCO was initially authorized to back the FARDC (UNSC, 2004), one of the only *legitimate* armed forces in Western statehood terms, FARDC soldiers substantially contributed to offenses against civilians (Luthuli 2016 p. 39), forcing the UN to backtrack cooperation. This demonstrated a fundamental lack

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of interest in thoroughly understanding local actors' motivations and actions, as by taking sides MONUSCO compromised its ability to protect civilians and impartiality, and delegitimized other groups (Lopor, 2016, p. 33). The "lack of interest" is attributable to both the perceived complexity of the conflict and the rigidity of existing frames (Autesserre, 2012, p. 209), as for the last 10 years UNSC resolutions focused solely on extending, not necessarily improving MONUSCO's mandate or developing an exit strategy (UNSC, 2019). Despite Joseph Kabila's (Laurent Kabila's son who took over power after his father was assassinated in 2001) demands for withdrawal in 2006 and 2009, the UN continued to deploy MONUSCO "becoming party to the conflict" (Luthuli, 2016, p. 37) as an enemy of the state. Consequently, MONUSCO continued to fail its mandate to protect civilians and restore institutions, rather furthering the DRC's conflict.

## Counter Arguments

Conversely, two essential rebuttals must be recognized. First, MONUSCO's mandate fits well within internationally defined norms of peacekeeping<sup>[1]</sup>, rather being limited by common operational constraints. The specification of 'imminent threat' in MONUSCO's mandates purposefully gave personnel sufficient discretion to respond to complex situations with minimum violence, rather than reflecting an implicit bias. The UN also justifiably prioritized state-building, believing that reestablished institutions and administration would trickle-down to provide order on society's lower levels (Autesserre, 2012). Furthermore, MONUSCO's shift to robust peacekeeping was a valid response to the severity of the situation on-the-ground, necessitating permission to use 'all necessary measures.' Mission failures, therefore, can rather be explained by operational constraints such as poor pre/in mission training, lack of effective leadership, and communication difficulties (Novosseloff, 2019). However, these peacekeeping norms do not explain why MONUSCO's mandate kept expanding and why despite MONUSCO's focus on state-building and large budget, new conflicts emerged every year (Barrera, 2015, p. 1). This essay aimed to exemplify exactly how *existing* norms limited the range of perceived viable peacekeeping practices. Locked-in on an overwhelming focus of combating violence with violence, the FIB, MONUSCO's specialized military unit was established "on an exceptional basis...without creating a precedent or any prejudice to the agreed principles of peacekeeping" (Karlsrud, 2015, p. 45). Meanwhile, the UN explicitly sided with 'legitimate' actors, violating impartiality, and granted excessive freedom to choose when to 'protect civilians', as demonstrated in Ituri in 2003 where personnel were seen simply "shooting in the air" during inter-ethnic conflicts (p. 44). If the urgency and seriousness of MONUSCO was emphasized through resolutions, beyond frames necessitating armed responses to 'immutable' violence, using conventional methods, there would have been less space for personnel's "contingent unwillingness to execute the mandate" (Novosseloff, 2019), laziness, and apparent hopelessness of the situation in the DRC and more for local peacekeeping to create bottom-up security.

Second, the constraining effects of discourse are overemphasized, thus the critique neglects the success of MONUSCO given the complex circumstances. Undoubtedly, MONUSCO has provided valuable assistance to alleviate human suffering (Barrera, 2015, p. 12). As mentioned, MONUSCO's military action against the CNDP prevented further violence in the DRC's eastern provinces and the formation of the Transitional Government in 2003 eventually led to elections in 2006. However, many more attempts to focus on other areas of conflict, such a fighting over resource extraction, the use of rape as a weapon, and corruption rarely resulted in successes (p. 12). Even the Transitional Government, seen to mark the post-conflict period only resulted in more in-fighting based on ethnic rights and local insecurity (Human Rights Watch, 2012). Yet, MONUSCO's mandate did not adapt. Instead, it further imposed Westernized conceptions of state-building despite extensive evidence of their limitations and ineffectiveness, proving that the UN failed to draw lessons from its efforts to deal with complex conflicts, continuously relying on existing, rigid, frames (Benner, 2011, p. 171). Therefore, it is necessary to evaluate discourse as a facet which fundamentally shapes peacekeeping and creates opportunities for future change.

## Conclusion

The goal of this essay was to add another dimension to explain why MONUSCO largely failed to fulfill its mandate. Evidently, there are countless aspects of DRC's conflict that this research could not cover, while the constructivist lens offers only a limited scope for specific issues. However, in the context of MONUSCO peacekeeping, the adherence to and reinforcement of constructions of the DRC as the 'dark heart' limited the range of possible actions

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which could contribute to peace and carried powerful associations which confused interpretations of the conflict (Ndangam, 2002, p. 18). This coincides with broader critiques of Westernized international intervention; through this mindset change, the UN would break away from limiting logics of appropriateness based on outdated stereotypes and norms. With this in mind, the UN needs to invest in reflexive and evaluative capacities of locally-sourced knowledge and acceptance of non-state sovereignties, making each new resolution not a reiteration but rather an improvement for smarter peacekeeping (Kabamba, 2010, p. 287). In International Relations there has been a clear shift towards context-based conflict resolution, with which MONUSCO remains at odds, making future change a matter of the extent to which the UN is willing and able to facilitate radical changes (Benner, 2011, p. 177).

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## Note

[1] Outlined in the Theoretical Framework

*Written at: University of Amsterdam*

*Written for: Conflict and Cooperation in Global Politics*

*Date written: May 2020*