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Understanding Violence and Economic Crimes in the City of Kasumbalesa, DRC: The Tears of the Ruminants

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Abstract: ***This article presents an academic analysis of urban violence in Kasumbalesa, a strategic border town between the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Zambia, frequently perceived as a mere commercial transit zone. The study reveals a far more complex socio-political landscape, characterized by recurrent acts of vandalism, extortion, and insecurity, which emerge from intricate interactions between political, economic, and institutional actors. By examining the narratives of those who perpetrate these acts (often legitimized through mechanisms of neutralization) the research delves into the psychosocial, identity-based, and economic dimensions of deviant behaviors within this urban context. The study aims to understand how localized political, economic, and social tensions contribute to the persistence of violence, and how such acts function as strategies of spatial appropriation, quests for legitimacy, or forms of resistance to state authority. The central hypothesis posits that institutional fragility, compounded by political manipulation and the complicity of certain state agents, fosters the emergence of parallel authorities and the normalization of violence. This process ultimately undermines local governance and compromises long-term security in Kasumbalesa.***

Keywords: violence, economic crime, techniques of neutralization, social interrelation paradigm

1. Introduction

Guay, Proulx, and Cortoni (2013) emphasize that criminal violence, with its deeply destructive consequences, requires rigorous scientific analysis. Kasumbalesa, a border town in the Haut-Katanga province, serves as a vital logistical hub connecting Southern Africa via the Katanga Border Parking and Whisky border posts. Despite an appearance of prosperity driven by commercial exchanges and mineral exports, the city conceals a range of informal and illicit practices, commonly referred to as bilanga, a local term for smuggling. It is within this hybrid context (marked by the coexistence of legality and illegality) that this study employs criminological concepts to examine the violence and social deviations observed in this territory.

Kasumbalesa is marked by recurrent socio-political tensions and urban violence, often exacerbated by political activists posing as law enforcement agents, thereby undermining traditional markers of authority. The resistance of customs facilitators to new truck inspection reforms further fuels conflict. Minor incidents can rapidly escalate into looting, assaults, public humiliations (particularly targeting women), and extortion, fostering a climate of collective fear and casting doubt on the effectiveness of local governance. In response to this growing insecurity and economic criminality, the Governor of Haut-Katanga has taken measures to reinforce public security. Adopting a qualitative ethnomethodological approach, this research analyzes these forms of violence by exploring the aspirations of the local population, the rationalizations provided by perpetrators, and their relationship to institutions—focusing specifically on the social meanings attributed to these acts.

2. Theoretical Foundations

This study explores forms of violence and economic crime in Kasumbalesa by analyzing the narratives and behaviors of perpetrators through the lens of neutralization techniques and the paradigm of social interrelations. It critically examines the justifications put forth to legitimize transgressive acts in an urban context characterized by instability, the contestation of authority, and the normalization of violence as a mode of expression.

2.1. Definition of Key Concepts

The key concepts underpinning this study (violence, vandalism, economic crimes, techniques of neutralization, and the paradigm of social interrelations) require precise definitions from the outset. Clearly establishing these notions not only ensures conceptual clarity but also provides a coherent analytical framework for interpreting the behaviors and narratives observed. These definitions serve as essential tools for understanding the dynamics of deviance and transgression within the socio-political and economic context of Kasumbalesa, where normative boundaries are frequently challenged and redefined.

- Violence, derived from the Latin vis, meaning force, refers to the use of physical force or excessive intensity that disrupts order or balance (Gaffiot, 2016). Pierre Carli (2002) defines it as behaviors that inflict physical or psychological harm on others. This dual understanding highlights both the structural and interpersonal dimensions of violence, positioning it not only as a physical act but also as a social phenomenon with deep emotional and moral implications.
- Economic crime involves the violation of another person's property, whether in the form of goods, services, or financial assets, and may also include harm to individuals,

as seen in practices such as pimping (Mbale Kizekele, 2023). This type of crime blurs the line between material exploitation and personal victimization, reflecting broader dynamics of inequality, opportunism, and systemic dysfunction within both formal and informal economies.

- Techniques of neutralization refer to the strategies individuals use to deny responsibility or guilt when confronted by agents of social control. These mechanisms allow offenders to justify or minimize the moral weight of their actions, enabling them to maintain a positive self-image despite engaging in deviant behavior. They play a crucial role in understanding how individuals rationalize transgressions within contexts marked by contested norms and weakened institutional authority.

Finally, the paradigm of social interrelations (Pena Pires, 1993) analyzes problematic behaviors through a dual-axis framework. The horizontal axis focuses on the genesis of such behaviors, examining the social, cultural, and individual factors that contribute to their emergence. The vertical axis, in turn, considers the processes through which these behaviors are objectified and recognized as crimes : whether through factual, moral, or legal judgment. This paradigm offers a comprehensive approach for understanding how deviance is both produced and constructed within specific social contexts.

2.2. Theoretical Approaches

Stéphane Guay, Jean Proulx, and Franca Cortoni (2013, p. 14) emphasize that "the specificity of the various forms of violence and violent individuals must be recognized and taken into account, requiring specific theories" to explain their multiple dimensions. The violent acts observed in Kasumbalesa, along with the reactions of local actors towards law enforcement, the justice system, and our research team, led us to prioritize two theoretical frameworks that remain underutilized in Congolese criminology.

The first framework is based on the principle of mental energy buildup and release, while the second draws on neutralization techniques; both originate from behavioral psychology. The content of these theories and the rationale for their application in this context will be elaborated upon in the following sections.

2.2.1 Principle of Mental Energy Buildup and Release (Sigmund Freud and Anna Freud)

Freud's psychoanalytic theory identifies three key principles for understanding psychic functioning. First, the dynamic principle posits that multiple instincts coexist and conflict, with the strongest prevailing. Second, the economic principle asserts that accumulated psychic energy must be released to avoid tension, frustration, and aggression. Third, the topographic principle structures the psyche into three components: the id (unconscious desires), the ego (reality management), and the superego (internalization of norms). These principles provide insights into human behavior that extend beyond purely rational explanations.

In our study, the principle of psychic energy discharge is particularly relevant for interpreting urban violence in Kasumbalesa. Aggression frequently emerges as a mechanism to release accumulated frustration stemming from economic, social, or political constraints. Young people, frustrated by unmet expectations or obstructed ambitions, accumulate psychic tension that manifests through violent acts, vandalism, or defiance of established order. This psychoanalytic framework thus conceptualizes violence not simply as deviance but as a response to emotional and social overload.

2.2.2 Techniques of Neutralization (Gresham M. Sykes and David Matza, 1954)

Techniques of neutralization, theorized by Sykes and Matza in 1954 within the framework of juvenile delinquency, aim to reduce the emotional burden associated with transgressive behavior. Roger Dufour-Gompers (1992) summarizes these strategies as ways in which offenders acknowledge their actions while minimizing their significance to preserve a positive self-image. Five primary techniques are identified: denial of responsibility (downplaying one's fault), denial of injury (refusing to recognize harm caused), denial of the victim's rights (questioning the victim's legitimacy), condemnation of the condemners (challenging the legitimacy of authorities), and appeal to higher loyalties (justifying acts by appealing to external factors). These psychological mechanisms serve to alleviate guilt in the face of social control.

In essence, as Dufour-Gompers and Matza highlight, offenders' discourse not only functions to neutralize guilt or manipulate but also reveals their awareness and acceptance of social values, while adopting modes of conduct that are often normalized within society, including among law enforcement. In this research, analyzing the justifications of perpetrators and their reactions to social control institutions through the lens of neutralization techniques enables a deeper understanding of how they legitimize their actions and attempt to evade norms and public security regulation.

2.3. Literature Review

According to Mucchielli, the literature review is a crucial step in any scientific research. It situates the study within the existing body of knowledge, identifies key theories, concepts, and established findings, and highlights gaps, controversies, or blind spots that the research can address. This process helps avoid redundancy, clarifies the researcher's theoretical choices, and justifies the relevance of the research questions. For Mucchielli, this critical approach is essential to construct a rigorous analytical framework and to examine the studied phenomena with depth and coherence.

2.3.1. Violence Outside the DRC

Pierre Carli (2002) emphasizes the complexity of urban violence, rejecting simplistic biological or sociological explanations and advocating for the use of multiple analytical frameworks. Robert B. Cialdini (2004) sheds light on the imitation of law enforcement by militants in Kasumbalesa, showing that clothing and accessories symbolize authority and can engender misplaced trust, illustrating the adage that "clothes do not make the man." This insight is useful in understanding how symbols of power can be manipulated within contexts of social unrest and instability.

2.3.2. Forms and Causes of Violence in the DRC

Kasumbalesa, a cosmopolitan city hosting Congolese from across the country, reflects a diversity shaped by migratory movements within the DRC. According to Sumata, Trefon, and Cogels (2004), the massive exodus of professionals abroad in the 1980s (particularly to South Africa) marked a significant migratory shift. Following a period of openness, South Africa eventually closed its borders, turning Kasumbalesa into a crucial transit point for Congolese migrants seeking passage to Europe.

This positioning renders Kasumbalesa pivotal not only in migratory flows but also in understanding the profiles and aspirations of local populations, especially clandestine migrants. The city's role as a gateway to Southern Africa intertwines with social tensions and violence, shaped by economic hardships, political instability, and contestations over space and authority. This context provides a lens through which the specific causes and manifestations of violence in Kasumbalesa can be analyzed.

2.3.3. Urbanization and Youth Violence in the DRC

Ramata Thioune, Ndeye Fatou, and Mbenda Sarr (2016) describe rapid urbanization in the DRC characterized by high demographic growth, widespread poverty, and a specific form of youth violence exacerbated by rural exodus and lack of state support. This situation creates urban risk zones where newcomers live in precarious conditions, fueling urban disorganization. Kienge-Kienge Intudi and Liwerant (2017, 2019) explain that youth violence in Kinshasa, embodied by the Kuluna gangs, is linked to social marginalization. These groups are often manipulated by shadowy political figures who recruit them for violent actions intended to consolidate power, thereby rendering state repression ineffective and undermining urban security.

3. Procedures

This field research primarily relies on the testimonies collected from participants. These discursive data, complemented by non-participant direct observations, are analyzed in relation to the Congolese security apparatus, notably the penal code, as well as the interviewees' reactions to security forces and judicial institutions in Kasumbalesa. This methodological approach enables a comprehensive understanding of how violence is experienced, justified, and regulated within this complex socio-political context.

3.1. Survey

The population of Kasumbalesa expresses contradictory demands: while advocating for democracy and security, certain parties and groups contest public order and oppose law enforcement, creating a social paradox. This qualitative research aims to understand these tensions by giving voice to the involved actors through direct observations and semi-structured interviews.

Non-participant observation enabled analysis of behaviors in relation to formal norms and local customs, such as police tolerance toward acts of vandalism and demonstrations where militants wear attire mimicking armed forces. Semi-structured interviews, based on open-ended questions, provided a free space for participants to express the meanings they attribute to their actions and to Kasumbalesa, incorporating discourse, gestures, and silences.

3.2. Interview

According to Florent Gatherias and Emma Olivera (2018), understanding a crime requires reconstructing it from the lived experiences of both perpetrators and victims. In our study conducted in Kasumbalesa, we focused on perpetrators of violent acts (extortion, vandalism, assaults) that frequently occur during political or social events. Accessing these actors within their communities allowed us to explore how their personality, socialization, and sociocultural context influence their recourse to violence, as highlighted by Pierre Carli (2002).

Being residents of Kasumbalesa, our proximity to participants fostered the trust necessary to collect life stories, some of which glorify violent acts, illustrating self-reported delinquency. This stance aligns with the social interrelations paradigm; as noted by Muncie, Boltanski, Hayward, and Young (cited by Nagels, 2016), for some individuals, rule-breaking is also a source of pleasure or celebration despite the suffering it causes. Boltanski emphasizes that such transgressions may reveal a quest for authenticity, while Hayward and Young remind us that crime is accompanied by strong emotions experienced by all involved actors. Hayward critiques traditional criminological approaches for neglecting this emotional dimension, which is crucial in societies that value expression and the pursuit of intense experiences. These perspectives underscore the importance of integrating emotions and behaviors in contemporary analyses of violence.

3.3. Measures

Our research, conducted in Kasumbalesa from June 2022 to June 2025, is based on an empirical approach rooted in local immersion. Epistemologically, we employed ethnomethodology (Alex Mucchielli, 2009) to understand how actors construct their social worlds through life narratives and everyday practices. This method enabled us to identify the implicit rules guiding their judgments and actions. Additionally, hermeneutics was used as an interpretative method to grasp the meanings participants attribute to their aspirations, behaviors, perceptions, and reactions toward institutions and our research process.

4. Results

The paradigm of social interrelations relies on two complementary axes: the horizontal axis, focusing on deviant behaviors (here, violence, assaults, extortion, and vandalism observed in Kasumbalesa), and the vertical axis, concerning their criminalization by social control institutions, notably the criminal justice system. This dual perspective allows, as Carla Nagels (2016) highlights, an analysis of problematic situations not only through their transgression but also through the social reactions they provoke. Thus, this paradigm provides a relevant framework for understanding the dynamics between perpetrators of deviant acts and the authorities responsible for maintaining order.

4.1. Legal and Regulatory Framework (Congolese Penal Code)

No act can be punished unless it is defined as an offense by the Penal Code. In Kasumbalesa, the analysis of violence and extortion is based on Congolese legal texts, notably Article 103 of the Military Penal Code (addressing violence in contexts of war or law enforcement) and Article 138 of the Ordinary Penal Code (violence against representatives of authority). Penalties range from penal servitude to the death penalty depending on the severity of the offense, allowing for the legal qualification of recorded acts.

Violence against the State or its agents is severely punished: up to three years of penal servitude depending on the victim's status, and from six months to two years for law enforcement officers. Simple assault is penalized less severely, but intentional bodily harm can lead to up to two years imprisonment or more in cases of premeditation. Article 84 defines extortion as the forced surrender of property by threat or violence, punishable by five to twenty years of penal servitude. Article 85 criminalizes the illegal wearing of uniforms with penalties up to five years. These offenses correspond to the practices observed in Kasumbalesa, involving both civil and military forms of criminality.

Despite Ministerial Order No. 25 of March 31, 2020, which strictly prohibits the wearing of defense and security force uniforms by unauthorized individuals, many young people affiliated with political parties in Kasumbalesa continue to do so. This violation, although sanctioned by the Congolese Penal Code, reveals an illegal appropriation of symbols of authority used for intimidation, extortion, or the assertion of power. This gap between the law and actual practices reflects weak enforcement and illustrates the normalization of deviant behaviors, often locally tolerated or even institutionalized.

Having outlined the legal framework, we now present the findings related to our sub-research questions focused on the motivations of ordinary Kasumbalesa residents. The qualitative sample includes customs facilitators, drivers, motorcyclists, bar owners, hairdressers, political activists, business operators, and public officials. These groups represent the diverse actors involved or affected by the local dynamics and allow us to capture their perceptions, social expectations, and action logics in a context marked by violence and insecurity.

4.2. Aspirations of Kasumbalesa's Active Population

Kasumbalesa has become a transit point for many Kinshasa residents seeking to leave the DRC due to visa refusals in the capital. Migrants engage in informal jobs (such as hairstyling, manicures, and commission-based work) as temporary survival strategies while awaiting opportunities to travel to Europe or South Africa. These activities are not choices but provisional means of survival, as illustrated by a hairdresser dreaming of reaching London via Johannesburg. In this context, the city functions as a temporary refuge, often painful, for those who, caught between humiliation, expulsion, and broken dreams, silently harbor their anger while still nurturing hopes of departure.

This metaphor of the ruminant highlights the silent resilience of migrants in Kasumbalesa, forced to endlessly digest experiences of exile and humiliation while maintaining hope of leaving. With increasing informal visa fees and tighter controls, the dream of a fresh start grows more distant, turning the city into a waiting room of survival tactics. Attracted by rumors of prosperity, internal migrants from Kalemie or Northern Katanga settle here hoping for renewal. However, many, like Mpanga or Petit Howo, end up as "Katako" (pushcart operators), facing a harsh economy. Kasumbalesa thus concentrates the cumulative effects of visible and invisible crises, transforming hope into precariousness.

Deadly conflicts in Kasai (e.g., Kamwina Nsapu) and Tanganyika (between Pygmies and Bantus) have caused significant population displacements towards Angola and Burundi. Haut-Katanga, particularly Kasumbalesa, has received some of these displaced persons seeking stability and survival. Though perceived from afar as a land of opportunity, the city confronts these newcomers with harsh realities: widespread unemployment, precarity, and day-to-day struggle for survival.

Kadima observes that many women in Kasumbalesa, ostensibly engaged in selling goods, are in reality seeking partners, exploiting the gender imbalance. The sex trade thrives there, with women engaging in multiple relationships to survive. Neither this sector nor the informal small-scale trade generate revenue for the Congolese state, revealing an economic void and a lack of effective local governance. Kasumbalesa's daily rhythm is marked by shifting flows: in the morning, motorcyclists transport residents to the pedestrian border corridor for the bustling Zambian market; in the afternoon, the flow reverses. Politically, Philippe Mwant (UNAFEC) describes the city as a laboratory of influence, where parties test their power through corruption. According to Andrico, internal divisions within parties such as the UDPS and UNAFEC fuel violence, disrupt traffic, and exacerbate instability.

By the end of 2023, the DRC had over 500 political parties, often fragmented into dissident factions, driven by co-optation strategies from both the ruling power and the opposition. These divisions foster local power struggles, but in practice, few militants genuinely change their ideology: many switch from one party to another based on opportunity, changing their shirt rather than their convictions. This instability weakens the political landscape and renders commitments frequently opportunistic.
In Kasumbalesa, "Tanzania" does not refer to the country but to a popular nightclub in the Koyo neighborhood, predominantly frequented by hostesses from Tanzania (82% according to testimonies). The expression "going to Tanzania" thus serves as a local code referring to this entertainment venue. This coded language reflects cross-border cultural and economic dynamics, where interactions between Congolese and Tanzanians also manifest in gendered social representations, such as the terms "small size" or "large size" used to describe hostesses based on their physique.

The manager of the "Tanzania" venue explained the workings of the Tanzanian young women who work there. Officially, they provide hospitality and nightclub services, housed and

fed by their Congolese importer. However, after 2 a.m., they are "released" to manage their own nighttime activities. Interested men can then register with the manager, pay twenty dollars, and leave their contact information to arrange a private meeting. The manager specifies that the price of these encounters is not included in his contract, which allows him to absolve himself of responsibility for local security risks, such as burglaries or bodies found lifeless in the area.

The "Tanzanian" label in Kasumbalesa holds significant commercial value, prompting many young women from Lubumbashi, Kolwezi, Kinshasa, or Kasaï to pose as Tanzanian. They associate with the genuine Tanzanians, adopting their behaviors— notably shisha consumption— to gain credibility with clients. This phenomenon illustrates social isomorphism, where adolescents imitate not only appearance but also habits, pressured to conform to this lucrative model, often at the expense of their health and safety.

Furthermore, according to Philippe Mwant, Kasumbalesa is primarily the "customs of the indigenous people," a border territory of the Balamba who view customs as a key pillar of their identity and political power. Any mismanagement or conflict within customs triggers blockades and protests, mobilizing the local population to defend their authority and interests. State agents, often attracted by per diems, are frustrated by the strict rotation system. This dynamic highlights the central importance of customs in the social and economic tensions in Kasumbalesa, expressed as follows:

> "This is how I manage the overabundance of staff assigned under my supervision here on site. I do not have enough space or offices to work with everyone every day. I also cannot send these people back to my personnel manager in Lubumbashi." Mulpwe added: "...Since the per diem is reduced, instead of returning to my family in Lubumbashi, I pass the time here with my friends, away from the acquaintances in Lubumbashi..."

In the administrative jargon of Katanga, the term "per diem" refers to informal tips received for services rendered to economic operators, also known as "invisibles" or "supports" by the financial authorities. Kasumbalesa, perceived as a land of opportunity, attracts both neighboring populations and public officials seeking supplementary income. However, faced with disappointment due to lower-than-expected earnings, some officials resort to personal compensations, notably sexual favors, transforming their frustration into a pursuit of pleasure. This contrast reveals a significant gap between the idealized representations of Kasumbalesa and the lived realities, with individuals pursuing goals often far removed from the actual situation.

4.3. Relationship between the Interviewees and Their Acts

Urban violence in Kasumbalesa undoubtedly causes trauma, stress, and injuries, and is unanimously condemned by both authorities and the population. However, beyond moral condemnation and victim support, it is essential to question the perpetrators themselves. Understanding how they perceive their actions allows for an analysis of the internalization (or lack thereof) of social and legal norms, shedding light on the mechanisms of justification they employ. This introspective approach, centered on their narratives and logics of action, enriches the analysis of local social dynamics by providing an insider's perspective on deviant practices.

Safina, Khota's partner, views Kasumbalesa as a place of temporary survival. She admits to participating in looting, which she justifies through a sense of social injustice. For her, violence becomes a response to exclusion, a means to "recover" what the system denies them. Together with others, she organizes collective survival strategies, taking advantage of unrest to access resources normally out of reach. These statements are supported by the following interview excerpt:

> "…When shops and supermarkets were looted in South Africa, we played the pastor and the priest. But our colleagues who looted and snatched people's watches and money have become 'somebody' today. That's why, if Kasumbalesa burns, we take part in everything that happens, to get out of this state of sleep…" According to her, "playing the pastor and the priest" means abstaining from acts of vandalism. "Becoming somebody" refers to attaining material comfort, and "getting out of this state of sleep" means becoming active, by participating in looting.

This testimony reveals a growing desensitization to violence among some residents of Kasumbalesa, particularly those deported from countries like South Africa. For Safina, acts of vandalism, looting, or even loss of life appear "normal" when compared to her past experiences elsewhere. This normalization fosters a tacit legitimization of local violence, perceived as lesser or even tolerable so long as it doesn't escalate dramatically. Such relativism contributes to the recurrence of violence.

This denial is expressed through a form of moral neutralization: these actors do not perceive looting or vandalism as deviant because, in their previous lives, compromise and enrichment through dubious means were normalized and even valorized. As a result, they reject guilt while embracing material gain, regardless of the harm caused to others.

Deportees from Southern Africa, drawing from their violent pasts, often present themselves as mentors in combat techniques, downplaying the violence in Kasumbalesa. Their casual attitude ("There is no very problem here") reflects an habituation to chaos and a projection of past traumas onto the local setting. Their influence contributes to a utilitarian culture of violence, passed on to politicized youth seeking recognition. This dynamic (characterized by weak post-act solidarity) exposes a social fabric weakened by instability, with repercussions felt beyond Kasumbalesa, notably in recent outbreaks of violence in the Haut-Katanga region.

In Kasumbalesa, young political militants, referred to as "combatants," are engaged in a territorial power struggle between rival parties : primarily the UDPS, UNAFEC, and Ensemble. Each group claims legitimacy over its "base," which functions both as a political stronghold and an economic hub. The death of Kyungu wa Kumwanza marked

a turning point, intensifying tensions between UNAFEC and UDPS as they compete for control of areas near the border.

Hostile rhetoric, symbolic insults such as "little dogs" or "little birds," and mutual threats reflect deeply rooted animosity, despite public calls for unity. The fragmentation of parties into dissident wings only fuels this violent dynamic, while security forces remain passive, allowing this atmosphere of urban conflict to flourish unchecked.

4.4. Relationship Between Respondents and the State

Young militants from UNAFEC and UDPS justify their illegal wearing of official uniforms as a form of political self-protection, perceiving themselves as auxiliary security forces in the absence of effective state presence. To them, the uniform symbolizes authority, loyalty to their party, and serves as a deterrent against rivals. This appropriation of state symbols gives them a sense of power and immunity, often reinforced by their collusion with certain police officers. By deliberately blurring the boundaries between legality and political activism, they establish a parallel authority that fosters confrontation and undermines institutional legitimacy.

According to Mwant, Kasumbalesa is a generally peaceful city, but destabilized by customs reforms he opposes, especially physical inspections of goods. Beneath his discourse lies a fear of losing the illicit gains derived from fraudulent practices. Facilitators, facing stricter controls (on weight, wheel count, containers), manipulate street protests to generate disorder, weaken customs authority, and preserve their benefits. In this context, protest becomes a tactical strategy to obstruct the implementation of good governance, to the detriment of national security and state revenue.

Violent youths in Kasumbalesa, when questioned about acts of extortion, often legitimize their behavior through discourses laced with political or identity-based claims. Some argue that stealing phones is a way of reclaiming what rightfully belongs to them as "Katangese," while others (such as the perpetrators of the April 2025 robbery of a parliamentarian) assert that the money extorted "belongs to the people," in the name of the so-called "Union Sacrée." These rationalizations reflect a mechanism of moral neutralization, whereby guilt is replaced by collective or ideological justification. Nonetheless, such actions constitute criminal offenses under the Congolese Penal Code, regardless of the rhetoric used to justify them.

At the same time, reactions toward the police reveal a troubling level of complicity. Although the 2011 organic law clearly defines the mandate of the Congolese National Police (PNC), multiple testimonies in Kasumbalesa indicate a dubious proximity between certain police officers and youths involved in illicit activities. This familiarity extends to sharing cannabis or consuming homemade alcohol together under makeshift shelters, thereby blurring the lines between enforcers of order and sources of disorder. These practices undermine the authority of the PNC, rendering it ineffective in enforcing laws despite the explicit prohibitions dating back to the ordinance of January 22, 1903, concerning cannabis.

Young individuals affiliated with political parties in Kasumbalesa reject the legitimacy of the Republican Guard (Garde Républicaine, GR), arguing that urban security does not fall within its mandate. During one incident, an arrested youth openly challenged the authority of a GR captain, labeling their presence as mercenary. This discourse reflects an attempt to delegitimize a force perceived as external or oppressive, particularly in a context where violence is politically instrumentalized. For these youths, only agents of the Congolese National Police (PNC) are considered competent to intervene in local conflicts: thus symbolically excluding the GR from the sphere of legitimate security authority.

However, the rise in urban violence (ranging from assassinations and arson attacks on police stations to armed assaults) has compelled authorities to deploy the GR in support roles. This intervention is legally grounded in Article 184, paragraph 2 of the Constitution, which authorizes the Armed Forces (FARDC) to intervene during peacetime to protect people and property in support of the PNC. The local commander has publicly stated that any threat will be neutralized without negotiation. Despite public criticism, the GR's presence in Kasumbalesa remains constitutionally justified, especially in a context where the PNC is frequently overwhelmed or directly targeted by rioters.

Challenging the GR's presence thus constitutes a delegitimization strategy aimed at securing the release of detainees or avoiding sanctions. Nevertheless, this opposition does not excuse the violent acts committed. Favoring police intervention over military presence does not absolve perpetrators of their responsibility. Much like the tactics used against customs officers, protesters often question the legality of interventions to deflect accountability for their own involvement in acts of violence.

In Kasumbalesa, street vendors (particularly women from Lubumbashi and deportees from Southern Africa) operate within the informal economy, conducting trade without complying with legal requirements. Although some of the goods sold carry significant value, these vendors tend to downplay the scope of their activity when arrested, resorting to emotional appeals or economic arguments to evade sanctions. However, the law mandates business registration and the payment of a license tax, as stipulated in Ordinance-Law No. 90-046, under penalty of legal sanctions. This denial reflects a normalization of tax evasion and a structured resistance to state authority, a pattern common in the local informal economy.

Meanwhile, customs facilitators like Mr. Kabedi attempt to minimize their responsibility for the state's fiscal losses during city-wide shutdowns, claiming that taxes on minerals are already paid at the factory. However, such blockades lead to substantial losses in toll and municipal taxes: estimated at approximately USD 159,000 per day for 300 trucks. This narrative of minimization conceals a deliberate avoidance of parafiscal consequences and reveals a strategic justification against criticisms of their role in the border economy.

5. Discussion

The dynamics of urban violence in Kasumbalesa can be analyzed through the lens of Merton's theory of anomie (1938), which posits that social tensions arise when cultural aspirations are not matched by institutionally available means. Young political militants and migrants, excluded from formal channels of socio-economic integration, adopt deviant behaviors, justifying theft or violence as symbolic acts of resource or power reappropriation (Merton, 1938). This theoretical framework sheds light on the rationalization of violent acts and the objectification of victims, whereby dehumanization serves to legitimize identity-based and territorial struggles.

Bourdieu's work (1984) on symbolic capital also offers valuable insight into the valorization of illegal police uniforms by young "combatants." The appropriation of such state authority symbols grants them a form of parallel legitimacy, enhancing informal power and influence in a context marked by weak state presence and chronic insecurity. This phenomenon illustrates a blurring of political and institutional legitimacy, fueling tensions between official security forces and political militias.

Furthermore, the literature on informal practices and local governance (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004) helps contextualize customs facilitators within a hybrid system, where corruption and fraud function as adaptive strategies to bureaucratic constraints. The resistance to customs reforms in Kasumbalesa reflects a confrontation between top-down state modernization efforts and entrenched local interests, with grassroots mobilization by non-institutional actors exposing the depth of resistance to externally imposed change.

Scott's (1990) political sociology approach on "hidden forms of resistance" also sheds light on the mobilization of local populations and young militants during "dead city" days. These acts of protest, combining violence with symbolic strategies, represent a way of negotiating power and access to resources within a borderland space characterized by precarity and a lack of effective institutional mediation.

Finally, Goffman's (1971) concept of "legitimated violence" helps explain the ambiguous relationship between law enforcement and certain complicit youth militants. This complicity illustrates the porous boundary between illegal violence and the legitimate use of force, blurring the line between legal and illegal actors in a fragile state context. Such interactions not only reinforce social instability but also create grey zones within security governance.

6. Study Contribution

This research contributes by offering a nuanced, contextualized, and empirical analysis of the sociopolitical and economic dynamics specific to the border town of Kasumbalesa. By examining local tensions through the lens of interactions among young political militants, customs facilitators, state agents, and marginal actors (such as street vendors and deported migrants), the study highlights the informal mechanisms that govern daily life in this strategic location. It sheds light on how informal survival strategies, institutional disengagement, and partisan loyalties fuel cycles of violence, instability, and urban fragility.

Furthermore, this research helps document a territory that remains underexplored in studies of governance and security in the DRC. By exposing the local roots of certain violent political practices (such as the illegal wearing of uniforms or the use of street mobilization as a pressure tool) it questions the emergence of alternative forms of legitimacy constructed by groups often operating outside formal power structures. As such, the study contributes to academic debates on the fragmentation of authority, the local production of order (or disorder), and the ongoing crisis of state legitimacy.

This research explores the social, political, and economic dynamics in Kasumbalesa, with a focus on urban violence, informal customs practices, and the behaviors of young political militants. Drawing on testimonies from a diverse range of local actors, it offers an in-depth analysis of interactions among indigenous populations, migrants, state agents, and political groups in a borderland context. However, the study's focus on Kasumbalesa limits the generalizability of its findings to other cities or regions of the DRC. It is also based on interviews with voluntary participants, which may introduce perception bias. Moreover, restricted access to official data on crime and customs management limits the possibility of a thorough quantitative analysis.

Finally, this study offers concrete avenues for reflection for public policymakers, international organizations, and social science researchers: strengthening the capacity of the customs administration, regulating informal economic practices, improving the working conditions of security forces, and integrating youth into socio-educational programs to prevent their involvement in partisan violence. In this way, the research provides not only a scientific contribution but also operational value in terms of local governance and conflict prevention.

7. Scope and Limitations of the Study

This research examines the social, political, and economic dynamics of Kasumbalesa, with a focus on urban violence, informal customs practices, and the behavior of young political activists. It draws on testimonies from various local actors, offering a nuanced analysis of the interactions between indigenous populations, migrants, state agents, and political groups within a borderland context. However, the study is primarily focused on Kasumbalesa, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other cities or regions of the DRC. It is also based on interviews with voluntary participants, which may introduce perception biases. Furthermore, limited access to official data on crime and customs management constrains the possibility of a more in-depth quantitative analysis.

8. Conclusion

Daytime urban violence in Kasumbalesa remains largely "invisible" due to the lack of scientific studies and limited media coverage, despite the deep sense of insecurity it generates. Local media tend to focus on nighttime burglaries and traffic accidents, neglecting these other forms of violence

that warrant thorough analysis. Psychocriminological insights from this study reveal that such acts hold specific meanings for different actors: obstructing customs reforms (for facilitators), engaging in entertainment through prostitution, transmitting techniques of violence or rapid enrichment, asserting existence, or expressing power: especially among youth affiliated with political parties.

In their pursuit of monopolizing violence, these youth, transcending tribal or provincial divisions, are embedded across all major local political parties, simultaneously acting as allies and adversaries: akin to "carpenter bees that produce honey but sting the beekeeper" (Harbulot, 2018). The enforcement of customs reforms faces pushback from conservative declarants who threaten to mobilize street protests as a means to pressure the state and resist public revenue mobilization. Moreover, prolonged proximity between security forces and civilians has led to familiarities that weaken state authority and foster passive resistance rather than submission among demonstrators.

Thus, Kasumbalesa experiences a form of latent violence, comparable to a dormant volcano, which manifests as a defensive response from actors in direct contact with state mechanisms. This underscores the need for a thorough diagnostic as a prerequisite to any meaningful intervention aimed at curbing local violent and economic criminality.

The future prospects of this research open several avenues for further exploration. First, a longitudinal study would allow for the tracking of evolving social dynamics in Kasumbalesa, particularly the transformation of informal practices and the relationships between the population, the state, and political parties. Second, a comparative analysis with other border cities in the DRC (such as Goma, Bukavu, or Uvira) could enhance the understanding of coping mechanisms and urban violence in similar contexts.

Moreover, adopting a more anthropological or psychosocial approach would deepen the subjective dimensions of migratory trajectories, political disillusionment, and the sense of abandonment experienced by youth. Finally, collaboration with institutional actors (municipal authorities, NGOs, customs services) would provide a concrete application of the findings, helping to better structure public reforms, improve local governance, and strengthen the capacities of security forces in addressing informality and violence.

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