**IV. REALITIES OF DURESS**

# Introduction

Understanding Experiences and Decisions in Situations of Enduring Hardship in Africa

*Mirjam de Bruijn and Jonna Both*

**Abstract:** The enduring experience of hardship, in the form of layers of various crises, can become deeply ingrained in a society, and people can come to act and react under these conditions as if they lead a normal life. This process is explored through the analytical concept of duress, which contains three elements: enduring and accumulating layers of hardship over time, the normalization of this hardship, and a form of deeply constrained agency. We argue that decisions made in duress have a significant impact on the social and political structures of society. This concept of duress is used as a lens to understand the lives of individual people and societies in Central and West Africa that have a long history of ecological, political, and social conflicts and crises.
**Keywords:** Central Africa, Chad, choiceless decisions, constrained agency, duress, normalization, social fabric, West Africa

**Ethnographic Encounters**

In the Guéra region in central Chad, people experienced a long period of civil war and ecological problems when rebels occupied the countryside for various times from 1965 to 1990. This concurred with long-standing impoverishment and a complete ecological disaster as a result of the droughts in the 1970s and 1980s. A research project was developed in 2002 to understand how people had managed life during this period.[1]

One person we conducted research with is Adoum, originating from the village called Bourzan in the Guéra. He must have been around 55 in 2002. He explained in the various chats and life history interviews we had with him how in fact he and his family and community had lived through various hardships in their lives. In his community's collective memory, the forced displacement of the village from the mountain slope to the roadside by colonial officials was prominent. The community was displaced for easier control (levying taxes, road maintenance, labor recruitment). Adoum explained that his childhood was good, but he migrated already in his early adulthood to Khartoum because of droughts and to escape the high taxes being levied by the regime of the first president. While he was in Sudan, the first rebellion broke out in Chad, and he was asked to become a rebel fighter, something he refused to do. He decided it would be better to return, despite the risk of being regarded as traitor by the Chadian government and being killed. He escaped persecution by explaining to a Chadian army commandant what had happened in Sudan, and he was in fact forced to betray his friends. The national army was also an important party to the violence in the region during this and later episodes.

Family conditions were extremely hard, reflected by the loss of children and the need to migrate to survive. The droughts of the 1980s were a particularly difficult time, when the

whole village was emptied of its people. Adoum's family also had to cope with the new waves of rebel groups that came through the region where they lived. One of his most violent memories was of how he was tortured and forced by a group of rebels to convert from animism to Islam. This happened in the early 1980s in his recollection of facts.[2] Many people in the region underwent the same fate. Others chose refuge, which was often, though not always, synonymous with rebellion. Despite his forced conversion, Adoum was now a Muslim praying five times a day. He had also become a seasonal migrant to N'Djaména, earning income to support his family during the recurring ecological crises in the region.

When Adoum grew old, he went back to his village, where we met him regularly during subsequent research trips. In his village, many households were headed by women, and poverty was extreme. Numerous people had died or had never returned to the village. Most others in his village were also Muslim, but Adoum still venerated some elements of the old religion. As he explained, the correct "infrastructure" for such animist beliefs (secret places, preparation of local beer) were largely absent or destroyed, or had vanished in the forced conversion to Islam, and there was no way back. For him, this was now the normal situation, though the memory of his violent conversion still disturbed him. His son had started to travel as a migrant laborer to N'Djaména, replacing his father, because the ecological conditions in their home area were permanently fragile. Adoum's life is an example of a life shaped by various layers of hardship. The ways of dealing with life have been formed in these hardships, which have had a decisive impact on the steering of people's lives (see de Bruijn and van Dijk 2007; de Bruijn et al. 2004).

This example shows how an individual, as part of a larger community, is affected by severe constraint and how the individual chooses—if indeed we can call this choice—very

particular courses of action, in this case, migration and conversion. Converting to Islam was an undesirable choice but one that could not be avoided. Migration was an attempt to escape hardship but turned out to become part of the lived reality of new hardship. It is important to bear in mind that a considerable part of the Chadian population has been living through changes in beliefs, norms, and violent rules imposed by different regimes and rebel groups since the start of civil war in 1965—and before that, through colonial conquest and slave raiding (Abdoulaye Adoum 2017; Debos 2009). As explained elsewhere, the effects of such impositions are not the same for everybody, but what is the same is that people are influenced and take decisions they would probably not take if the long exposure to conflict and war, to oppression and ecological crises, was not part of their lives (see de Bruijn and van Dijk 2007). In the case of Chad, where we still do our fieldwork, we must accept that these circumstances of hardship with a long *durée* are multilayered and a permanent feature of life. They are part of the historical and everyday experience of people and have become deeply internalized and normalized to a certain extent (de Bruijn et al. 2004; Both et al. 2018). This raises significant questions about how to understand these individual lives and the societies they are part of and contribute to. How can we understand the shape and feel of individual lives in such contexts? What distinguishes the social fabric (Breton et al. 2004: 5; Das 2007: 60; Short 1984: 716) of societies in duress from other societies? What kind of social and political dynamics are created? We propose an analytical lens, the concept of duress, to be able to understand some of the workings and consequences of the normalization and internalization of complex and enduring hardship.

**Duress**

In this introduction to this special section of *Conflict and Society*, we explain what we mean by

duress. We are building on discussions of violence, chronic crisis, and agency in conflict and crisis situations that have been the focus in recent anthropological studies. We aim at understanding the internalization of experiences of enduring hardship and the actions taken on this basis (i.e., duress), and the visible and tangible sociopolitical outcomes of this internalization (i.e., realities of duress). The articles in this section are all based on ethnographic and biographical studies situated in specific parts of Central and West Africa, where the conditions of life exemplify the notion of duress as we propose it here.

The concept of duress is extrapolated from a juridical context. We use it as a lens through which to view and clarify the experience of acting under enduring hardship. Duress, in a juridical context, refers to threats, violence, constraint, or other actions used to coerce someone into doing something against their will or better judgment. The concept in jurisprudence refers to the search for the accountability and culpability of a person who committed a crime. While we are not interested in these questions here,[3] we believe many dimensions of this concept have analytical value in the situations we describe. In Central and West Africa, many people lived and continue to live through crises of various types: everyday life is full of stories, memories, and experiences not only of oppression, violence, and threats of war but also of famine and ecological crises, daily hardship due to corruption, and discrimination and lack of state services; it is a complex of hardships that are both social and material (Giddens 1979 used this distinction for the description of structure in the structure and agency dialectic). As researchers, we observed that these diverse experiences of hardship often intersect and endure (the notion of *durée*, which one can read in duress, captures this well). Coming together, these experiences have an important bearing on people's decisions. We observed that hardships of different kinds became part and parcel of the lives and decisions of people as an almost normalized situation (Both 2017; de Bruijn et al.

2004). We sought to understand how people who live under such normalized and enduring hardship steer their lives. With the juridical notion of duress in mind, we argue that such conditions lead to constrained agency, particularly observable in "choiceless decisions," a concept we explain later (see Coulter 2008, basing herself on Aretxaga 1997).

Having presented the outlines of the concept as it transpired from our ethnographies, we will elaborate on the concept of duress in relation to authors that have inspired our thinking, and explore the different dimensions of duress: *durée*, normalization, and constrained agency. Then, a short reflection on methodology will follow. In the articles in this special section, the authors focus especially on how duress may translate into specific tactics (Berckmoes 2014, 2015; de Certeau 1984; Vigh 2006) or pathways (de Bruijn et al. 2005) and how it finds its place in ordinary lives (Das 2007; Scheper-Hughes 1993). Each case study presented in the articles of this special section makes tangible the impact of this enduring and internalized hardship, these realities of duress, through a focus on such elements (tactics, pathways, and ordinary lives).

## The *Durée* in Duress: Layers of Hardship Accumulating over Time

Through the notion of duress, we emphasize the factor of *durée* that one can read in the concept: the enduring experience of hardship that many societies are subjected to. This resonates with the work of Ann Stoler (2016), who sees colonialism's enduring presence—its entailments—as informing present-day duress in the so-called postcolonial era (a demarcation in time that Stoler is rightfully critical about). Indeed, many Central and West African societies that are in focus in this special section lived through difficult times during the colonial period. Colonial projects often had violent effects—for instance, the violent displacement of people in the military conquest and following "pacification" of regions that remained opposed to colonization, with

6

economic deprivation and starvation as potential consequences; the displacement and death of workers in the construction of infrastructures; or the subjection of people during the imposition of cultivating cash crops (see, e.g., Adoum 2017; Carayannis and Lombard 2015; Debos 2009; de Brazza 2014; Headrick and Headrick 1994). In her book *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times*, Stoler elaborates on the enduring effects of such violence, suggesting that "colonial constraints and imperial dispositions" still "have tenacious presence" in our present-day world (2016: 4); hence, she contests that we are actually living in "postcolonial" times. In the regions of our research, more recent conflicts, rebellions, and political regimes are indeed connected to (or even products of) colonial histories, but they also come with their own particular forms of hardship, new forms of duress that endure in the lives of people and societies—hence our emphasis on the existence of layers of hardship.

These more recent histories and their durable "impress" on society leave their own "indelible if [sometimes] invisible gash" (Stoler 2016: 6). They also often inform patterns of agency, especially when they are compounded with recurring ecological crises (Amadou, this section; de Bruijn et al. 2004) and new disorders accompanying rampant globalization and neoliberal economic policies (Good et al. 2008: 2). As our research in Chad has shown explicitly, the populations living in the countries we work in have encountered enduring confrontations with hardship, which often sediment in layers on layers of experiences in people and communities.[4] Even if some people managed to escape certain episodes of hardship and did not experience them personally, the textures of kinship ties and social fabrics that are affected are difficult to escape.[5]


**A Normalization of Hardship?**

When duress simultaneously consists of an accumulation of different layers over time (*durée*) and different forms of hardships, no real ruptures or pauses are experienced in that hardship—for example, when there is no clear demarcation between war and peace (Debos 2016; Richards 2005), ecological crises are part of life and never end (de Bruijn et al. 2005), or the hardship becomes just an ordinary fact (Rechtman 2017: 137) and part of everyday life (Das 2007). In such cases, there is no "dealing with hardship or violence" after a particular historical crisis (war or eruption of violence) (cf. Kidron 2010; Uvin 2009); rather, a continuity of violence and hardship that determines life permeates everything. In this sense, duress has become part of being, shaping subjective experience, and does not exist outside the actor; it is internalized and carried along.

The notion of chronic crisis, introduced by Henrik Vigh in 2008, comes closest to the idea of a continuum of hardship as the structural element of the experience of living in duress. Emphasizing the continuing conflict and decline found in many parts of the world, Vigh argues that in these locations, crisis is not a time-bound experience but has rather become chronic— hence the need to see crisis itself as context instead of placing a crisis in a context (2008: 7–8). Drawing our attention to the chronicity of crisis in many parts of the world, Vigh's conceptual exploration still foregrounds the experience of "crisis" more than that of its chronicity. As in much contemporary work by anthropologists, the analysis centers on notions of uncertainty and unpredictability (see, e.g., Berckmoes 2014, 2015; Cooper and Pratten 2015; Vigh 2009).

Following Vigh (2008), we think of duress as chronic but not as something that people refer explicitly to as if it were something tangible, something "out there" that solicits comments or reflection (see also Mbembe and Roitman 1995). When experienced as an enduring or chronic condition, duress as we understand it—consisting of intersecting layers of hardship caused by,

for example, corruption, lack of state services, everyday violence, the threat of war, oppression, or memories of past violence—does not always abruptly dislocate people in their orientation (normatively, ontologically) and cause uncertainty. Although this may occur with some forms of hardship, hardship in many places may have become rather predictable, already embedded in existing structures (see, e.g., Buch Segal 2013: 134 on predictable uncertainty for Palestinian women with husbands in Israeli prisons). The hardship we refer to, besides being rather predictable, may also be less extreme at times than chronic crisis, but it may be just as powerful in force and effect when it comes in disguise. For example, it may be in the form of a dictator's slowly growing security apparatus, which makes people increasingly suspicious of their social surroundings, as is the case in Chad—though this is not the first time in their history: a notorious security apparatus of this type also existed during Hissène Habré's presidency (1982–1990). How people therefore relate to this new development is related to their earlier experiences and memories of hardship, as well as to their present experience, prompting a need for us to focus also on memory when trying to understand societies in duress (cf. Argenti and Schramm 2010; Fabian 2003).

When crisis or hardship is enduring and chronic, Vigh suggests that there is quantitative normalization at play—that is, events related to crisis happen so often that the occurrence of crisis becomes the "norm" (see also Mbembe and Roitman 1995). But he warns against assuming that qualitative normalization (i.e., a shifting of norms under crisis and hence crisis becoming the normal state and no longer reflected on) also takes place in such situations. In his perspective, habituation to chronic crisis is, by the nature of the concept of crisis, impossible. Crisis constantly turns one's world upside down, or the possibility of such reversals is always on the horizon, thus preventing the development of a habitus (2006: 154; 2008: 20). This is an

indication that the term "crisis" does not always fit the situations we describe: hence our reference to enduring hardship instead, suggesting that "qualitative normalization" of duress *can* take place—that is, these conditions and how people act on them can also come to be perceived as "normal."

We argue that there is a need to explore whether, and in what forms, a normalization of duress *does* occur. We try to understand duress as something that becomes internalized and is no longer a quality only of the world outside (cf. Vigh 2008). Hence, we deliberately use the preposition "in" with duress: to indicate that people internalize these conditions of hardship, often without even consciously realizing it. "Under" duress, which is the more common formulation in English, still positions duress outside the person. Speaking of being "in duress" means that we consider duress as having become part and parcel of a person's emotions, their being, and their repertoire of acting.

## Constrained Agency

Agency is always already constrained. Anthony Giddens (1979) emphasizes that a structure enables and constrains people's actions. Agency is the outcome of the "negotiation of many of the structural limitations encountered in daily life" (van Dijk et al. 2007: 1). Limitations are therefore already key to the idea of agency itself. But the notion of duress invites us to think of agency as particularly constrained in situations of enduring hardship—as our case studies from Chad illustrate—legitimating our focus on understanding more of life as lived in such places.

To grasp the extent of constraint and how people engage with it is not easy (see also our section on methodological questions). Our cases, however, show that an emphasis on decision-making over time may prove important—in particular, the frequent occurrence of "choiceless

decisions" (Coulter 2008). In such conditions, it is relevant to focus on understanding how duress

steers, apart from the individual life course, the social and political fabric in particular directions.

After all, duress is often shared, leading not necessarily to collective action but to tactics and

pathways that are not unique but shared (see Berckmoes 2014, 2015; Debos 2016; Lombard and

Batianga-Kinzi 2014; Amadou, de Bruijn, and Wilson Janssens, this section).

Agency is more than people's intentional action as rational actors (Coulter 2008), more

than their resistance to domination (Mahmood 2006),[6] so a focus on decisions is only one way of

studying the more complex workings of agency. But at the same time, it is a very relevant focus

for understanding the workings of duress—not only because "choiceless decisions" are often

steered by duress but also because the outcomes of these decisions may offer the researcher

access to a better understanding of the duress underlying the decisions. Chris Coulter (2008)

writes extensively on the notion of "choiceless decisions," which she borrows from Begoña

Aretxaga (1997). Coulter speaks of war/battlefield decisions (becoming a fighter) that women

had to make in order to save their lives. The emotion of fear (of violence, of rape, even of death)

was an important motivating factor in making these decisions to become fighters in the Sierra

Leonean civil war. Whereas they made a decision to do so, the decision was made under heavy

constraint (fear and the very serious threat of real violence).

With our focus on constrained agency, we are interested not only in forced soldiering

(Coulter 2008) or forced conversion (de Bruijn and van Dijk 2007). One can equally think of

other examples—of people allying themselves to the country's ruling party as the only chance to

gain access to a job or to keep their family safe, of self-censorship, of retreating from the public

sphere, of choosing exile—as relevant to understanding conditions of profound constraint. These

are all examples from our studies in Chad but are similar to decisions made by people living in

other specific situations of hardship. When we add the component "time" to this model, we understand that decisions of these kinds often do not take place just once in the life trajectory of the people we came to know; they can recur throughout time.

If we extend our analytical perspective from the individual making specific decisions to the society as a whole, we become aware that, through such choiceless decisions, almost all people in such social configurations may be affected and repeatedly pushed in directions they do not wish to go,. These are not always extreme decisions: ordinary life is more often full of smaller decisions made as a consequence of hardship over time. This raises significant questions about how to understand the social fabric and the shape it takes under such conditions. What do the social fabric and the political field look like when the act of making choiceless decisions becomes part of the daily life of communities for *decades*?

We agree with Patrick Chabal (2009: 16), who embraces the agency approach as a way "not to rehearse yet again the fact that Africa is the 'victim' of history but to honor the day-to-day lives of those who strive to maintain human dignity in the face of overwhelming odds." This resonates with what Rijk van Dijk and colleagues (2007: 2) have described: "No matter how constraining . . . environmental, economic, political or social-cultural terms . . . such conditions never become so totalizing or hegemonic that all creativity in countering or coping with the situations African societies are confronted with is annihilated." We also recognize this approach in the work of Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1993), Veena Das (2007), and Veena Das and Shalini Randeria (2015), who try to understand the agency of poor people in India and Brazil under what could be labeled structural and everyday violence or a continuum of violence (Farmer 1996; Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2003). These studies emphasize that people always strive to preserve their dignity, even under very compromising circumstances. For us as researchers, it is

important to understand this attempt.

Having said this, we should also not lose sight of the enormous differences in agency in situations of enduring hardship. The internalization of hardship is not the same for everybody. As already came to the fore in an early critique on Giddens by Kieran Healy (1998)—who proposes adding the notion of access to structure as an important factor that determines the outcome of agency—hierarchies and rules of access shape things such that some people have more influence than others. Healy emphasizes the role of inequality in the creation of the structure-agency dialectic relationship (see also Whyte 2008).

Indeed, our own research and the articles in this special section show that how the environment is constraining, how severe hardship is, what room is left to maneuver, and which forms of creativity or coping can be expressed all make a difference. Hence, we learn from researchers who have researched life in very difficult conditions—where the set of choices is severely circumscribed (Coulter 2008, 2009; Dolan 2009: 246; Vigh 2006, 2008) or where such limited choice in the past has already very much determined the structures of the present (Adoum 2017; Leopold 2006; Stoler 2016). By the notion of constrained agency, derived from the juridical concept of duress, we therefore aim to draw specific attention to the disproportionate constraint at play in certain situations, places, and times.

**Realities of Duress: Methodological Reflections**

Duress, the internalization of enduring hardships, has practical outcomes: in action, in realities of daily life. However, it is difficult to study duress as such if it is "an invisible gash"—a black box that is difficult to open. While we are addressing enduring hardship here, the "entailments" and continuous presence thereof are not always obvious: "Duress rarely calls out its name. Often it is

a mute condition of constraint" (Stoler 2016: 7). Richard Rechtman (2017), reflecting on the work of Das, uses the concept "subjectivation" to describe the methodology Das uses to grasp the invisible, to know the almost "unknowable" that is part of subjectivity. In our case, we search for the more tangible outcome of living in duress by a focus on the decisions people make but also on the words they use to reflect on their lives. Studying decisions, how they are made, how they are embedded in a life course, how they are explained, in which words, what their outcomes are—this offers us access to how duress is felt and to what is produced as a consequence: visible and tangible social realities, realities of duress that come to the surface. Indeed, such decisions and actions and the reflections thereon are always subjective interpretations.

The studies closest to our quest to understand life in duress are those in which there is room for the understanding of the daily practices of people in situations of war, uncertainty, crisis, and continuous decline. Ethnographic work in the context of hardship in African situations, for instance, concentrates on tactical agency (Berckmoes 2014, 2015; Utas 2005; Vigh 2006) or on social navigation (Vigh 2006, 2009). These studies focus on the study of tactics as a repertoire of improvisation in the midst of crisis. Our study of duress has a more constraint-/coercion-oriented focus, in order to grasp the realities of actions and the meaning-making processes that accompany these actions, when people operate under conditions of hardship (see also Aijmer and Abbink 2000).

The study of the ordinary and the daily, especially in duress, cannot ignore emotions. The study of emotions takes us beyond a focus on the endless improvisation in, and movement of, the social field toward an understanding from within. Emotions are mediators between duress and constrained agency, as we have learned from Coulter (2008) and the decisions made by female fighters. Here, we follow Michael Jackson's insights (see also Ligtvoet, this section): "We do

violence to the complexity of lived experience when we make analytical cuts between emotion and thought, or emotion, the senses, thought and action" (2010: 35). A focus on emotions that steer choiceless decisions brings us closer to understanding the black box of acting in duress.

We also cannot gloss over how people's emotions, choices, and actions are shaped by and potentially contribute to the aggravation of duress (Mbembe and Roitman 1995: 338). Based on interpretations of the continuum of hardship built up from historical experiences, memory informs these emotions, choices, and actions. Both lived historical pathways (de Bruijn et al. 2005) and the practices of remembering (and forgetting) (Argenti and Schramm 2010; Dickson-Gomez 2002; Fabian 2003) are crucial to understanding the dynamics of meaning-giving and decision-making in duress. The historical—as lived experiences and as source for individual and collective memory and for shaping mental dispositions—is central to present-day decisions and actions in duress (see, e.g., Both 2017; Leopold 2006; Lombard and Batianga-Kinzi 2014). The biographical method, in which there is room for historical pathways, emotions, and decisions, is apt to grasp such situations, as is shown in the contributions to this special section (see Ligtvoet in particular, but also Adamou Amadou, Mirjam de Bruijn, and Heitz-Tokpa).

**Articles in This Special Section: Realities of Duress in Central and West Africa**

In this special section, our aim is not to present all the detailed histories of crisis and the harsh environments in each country of study. However, what we find in common is that nowhere in our study regions is a crisis singular: it is part of a sequence of wars, famines, economic crises, and other events that have been endured under dictatorships or in weak states. The different case studies included in this section do not negate the idea that agency exists in such circumstances, but they do question the extent to which room is left for people to maneuver. We aim to

understand why people make the decisions they do under such constraining circumstances, and the emotions involved.

The articles illustrate how using the lens of duress leads to ethnographic descriptions in which the emphasis is on detailed analysis of biographies, of daily experiences, of pathways, of historical-ethnographic accounts. This may help us to understand the dynamics of constrained agency. At the same time, these articles fill some ethnographic "gaps" with regard to recent anthropological/historical studies in Central Africa. Together, these empirical studies provide an ethnographic dimension to what is experienced in many places in particular ways and with specific outcomes depending on people's positions in society and how they internalize and act on duress. The process of enduring hardship as internalized and influencing people's agency sometimes has tangible outcomes, which we describe in this special section as the realities of duress. These are the practices, in which duress translates into concrete new realities.

A clear example of a reality of duress is the emergence of the messianic movement, described by Meike de Goede, after decades of people's interaction with colonial violence in Moyen-Congo (nowadays Congo-Brazzaville). The author shows how a process of violence and repression almost coerces people to take up a specific political position. The colonial state is an obvious repressive actor in this narrative, constraining and shaping the direction of agency of the people. In this article, a messianic movement is the "new reality of duress." In the article that narrates the experiences of refugees from the Central African Republic by Maria Catherina Wilson Janssens, we witness an ethnographic exploration of constrained agency. We follow two of the author's interlocutors closely as they try to find their way in Kinshasa—a particularly harsh environment for locals, and even more so for foreign refugees—and we come to understand how a layered experience of hardship informs the refugees' trajectories.

For Katharina Heitz-Tokpa, an investigation of the relationship between living in duress and the development of distrust is the main point of departure. What does living under rebel occupation in Côte d'Ivoire do to the social fabric, and what if distrust as an outcome remains in place when the rebels are no longer there? Has a new reality of duress then been created? Adamou Amadou addresses the differences between normalized duress for nomadic Mbororo and extreme, new realities of duress that his interlocutors encountered in the Central African Republic recently, before they became sedentarized as refugees in Cameroon. The author accesses the distinction between different forms of duress through the analysis of memories, emotions, and the words used to describe them.

In the next article, Mirjam de Bruijn examines how young people in Chad express their experience of duress on Facebook, and the relation between a group of Facebook activists and people on the ground. Here, a reality of duress clearly comes to the surface in the expressions, emotions, moral indignation, and calls for action on Facebook. But what do these Facebook authors achieve? Does the platform facilitate the alleviation of the duress in their country, duress that is primarily attributed to an enduring, repressive regime? The author addresses this question directly. Related to a similar area of information and communication technologies (ICTs), Inge Ligtvoet focuses on a particular life history in her article. The author describes the everyday reality of duress experienced by a young man in southeast Nigeria whose past and present experiences of hardship and duress shape his aspirations. New ICTs have played an influential role in his recent years, but do they offer him an escape from duress? This remains the question. The author's contribution is methodological, elaborating on the biographic method as essential to understanding the workings of duress.

Together, the articles in this special section show that using the lens of duress allows us

to better understand situations in which people live in and through enduring hardship and how this influences both their social and political being in the world. The articles also draw attention to how different modes of duress are internalized, and how such internalization depends very much on the position one has in society, in existing and shifting social hierarchies and shifting political fields.

**Mirjam de Bruijn** is Professor of Contemporary History and Anthropology of Africa at Leiden University. She is an anthropologist whose work has a clearly interdisciplinary character with a preference for contemporary history and cultural studies. She focuses on the interrelationship between agency, marginality, mobility, communication, and technology. Email: m.e.de.bruijn@hum.leidenuniv.nl

**Jonna Both** is Researcher of African Languages and Cultures at Leiden University. Email: j.c.both@hum.leidenuiv.nl

**References**

Abdoulaye Adoum, Souleymane. 2017. "Communication et violences au Tchad: Le cas du Moyen-Chari et du Guera (1900–2010)" [Communication and violence in Chad: The case of Moyen-Chari and Guéra (1900–2010)]. PhD diss., Leiden University.

Aijmer, Göran, and Jon Abbink. 2000. *Meanings of Violence: A Cross Cultural Perspective*. Oxford: Berg.

Aretxaga, Begoña. 1997. *Shattering Silence: Women, Nationalism, and Political Subjectivity in Northern Ireland*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Argenti, Nicolas, and Katharina Schramm, eds. 2010b. *Remembering Violence*: *Anthropological Perspectives on Intergenerational Transmission*. New York: Berghahn Books.

Argenti, Nicolas, and Katharina Schramm. 2010a. "Introduction: Remembering Violence— Anthropological Perspectives on Intergenerational Transmission." In Argenti and Schramm 2010b: 1–42.

Berckmoes, Lidewyde. 2014. "Elusive Tactics: Urban Youth Navigating the Aftermath of War in Burundi." PhD diss., Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

Berckmoes, Lidewyde. 2015. "(Re)producing Ambiguities and Contradictions in Enduring and Looming Crisis in Burundi." *Ethnos* 82 (5): 925–945. https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2015.1106570.

Both, Jonna, Souleymane Abdoulaye Adoum, Mirjam de Bruijn, and Sjoerd Sijsma. 2018. "C'est de cette façon que nous sommes moulés" [This is how we are molded]. In *Biographies de la radicalisation: Des messages cachés du changement sociale* [Biographies of radicalization: Messages of social change], ed. Mirjam de Bruijn, 97–114. Bamenda, Cameroon: Langaa RPCIG.

Both, Jonna. 2017. "Conflict Legacies: Understanding Youth's Post-peace Agreement Practices
in Yumbe, North-Western Uganda." PhD diss., University of Amsterdam.

Breton, Raymond, Norbert Hartmann, Jos Lennards, and Paul Reed. 2004. "Introduction." In
*Fragile Social Fabric? Fairness, Trust, and Commitment in Canada*, ed. Raymond
Breton, Norbert Hartmann, Jos Lennards, and Paul Reed, 3–20. Québec: McGill-Queen's
University Press.

Buch Segal, Lotte. 2013. "Enduring Presents: Living a Prison Sentence as the Wife of a Detainee
in Israel." In *Times of Security: Ethnographies of Fear, Protest and the Future*, ed.
Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Pedersen, 122–140. New York: Routledge.

Buch Segal, Lotte. 2018. "Tattered Textures of Kinship: The Effects of Torture among Iraqi
Families in Denmark." *Medical Anthropology*, published online 10 May.
https://doi.org/10.1080/01459740.2018.1462807.

Carayannis, Tatiana, and Louisa Lombard. 2015. *Making Sense of the Central African Republic*.
London: Zed Books.

Chabal, Patrick. 2009. *Africa: The Politics of Suffering and Smiling*. London: Zed Books.

Cooper, Elizabeth, and David Pratten. 2015. "Ethnographies of Uncertainty in Africa: An
Introduction." In *Ethnographies of Uncertainty in Africa*, ed. Elizabeth Cooper and David
Pratten, 1–16. Palgrave Macmillan.

Coulter, Chris. 2008. "Female Fighters in the Sierra Leone War: Challenging the Assumptions?"
*Feminist Review* 88: 54–73.

Coulter, Chris. 2009. *Bush Wives and Girl Soldiers: Women's Lives Through War and Peace*.
Ithaca, NY: Cornell University.

Das, Veena, and Shalini Randeria. 2015. "Politics of the Urban Poor: Aesthetics, Ethics,

Volatility, Precarity." *Current Anthropology* 56 (11): 3–14.

Das, Veena. 2007. *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

de Brazza, Pierre Savorgnan. 2014. *Le rapport Brazza: Mission d'enquête du Congo—Rapport et documents (1905–1907)* [The Brazza report: Congo inquiry mission—Report and documents (1905–1907)]. Preface by Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch. Lyon: Le Passager Clandestin.

de Bruijn, Mirjam, and Han van Dijk. 2007. "The Multiple Experiences of Civil War in the Guera Region of Chad, 1965–1990." *Sociologus* 57 (1): 61–98.

de Bruijn, Mirjam, Han van Dijk, and Nakar Ndjidil Syntiche. 2004. "Central Chad Revisited: The Long-Term Impact of Drought and War in the Guera." Paper presented in the ASC seminar series, Leiden, 12 February.

de Bruijn, Mirjam, Mayke Kaag, Kiky van Til, and Han van Dijk. 2005. *Sahelian Pathways: Climate and Society in Central and South Mali*. Leiden: African Studies Centre.

de Certeau Michel. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. University of California Press, Berkeley.

Debos, Marielle. 2009. "Chad 1900–1960." *Online Encyclopedia of Mass Violence: Index Chronologiques*. https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01104080.

Debos, Marielle. 2016. *Living by the Gun in Chad: Combatants, Impunity and State Formation*. London: Zed Books.

Dickson-Gomez, Julia. 2002. "The Sound of Barking Dogs: Violence and Terror among Salvadoran Families in the Postwar." *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 16 (4): 415–438.Dolan, Chris. 2009. *Social Torture: The Case of Northern Uganda, 1986–2006*. New

York: Berghahn Books.

Fabian, Johannes. 2003. "Forgetful Remembering: A Colonial Life in the Congo." *Journal of the International African Institute* 73 (4): 489–504.

Farmer, Paul, 1996. "An Anthropology of Structural Violence." *Current Anthropology* 45 (3): 305–325.

Giddens, Anthony. 1979. *Central Problems in Social Theory*. Berkeley: University of California.

Good, Byron J., Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good, Sandra Teresa Hyde, and Sarah Pinto. 2008. "Postcolonial Disorders: Reflections on Subjectivity in the Contemporary World." In *Postcolonial Disorders*, ed. Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good, Sandra Teresa Hyde, Sarah Pinto and Byron J. Good, 1–42. California: University of California Press.

Harrell-Bond, Barbara. 1986. *Imposing Aid: Emergency Assistance to Refugees*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Headrick Rita, and Daniel R. Headrick. 1994. *Colonialism, Health and Illness in French Equatorial Africa, 1885–1935*. Atlanta: African Studies Association Press.

Healy, Kieran. 1998. "Conceptualising Constraint: Mouzelis, Archer and the Concept of Social Structure." *Sociology* 32 (3): 509–522.

Jackson, Michael. 2010. "From Anxiety to Method in Anthropological Fieldwork: An Appraisal of George Devereux's Enduring Ideas." In *Emotions in the Field: The Psychology and Anthropology of Fieldwork Experience*, ed. James Davies and Dimitrina Spencer, 35–54. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Kidron, Carolyn. 2010. "Silent Legacies of Trauma: A Comparative Study of Cambodian Canadian and Israeli Holocaust Trauma Descendant Memory Work." In Argenti and Schramm 2010b: 193–228.

Leopold, Mark. 2006. "Legacies of Slavery in North-West Uganda: The Story of the 'One-
Elevens.'" *Africa* 76 (2): 180–199.

Lombard, Louisa, and Sylvain Batianga-Kinzi. 2014. "Violence, Popular Punishment, and War
in the Central African Republic." *African Affairs* 114 (454): 52–71.

Mahmood, Saba. 2006. "Feminist Theory, Agency and the Liberatory Subject: Some Reflections
on the Islamic Revival in Egypt." *Temenos* 42 (1) 31–71.

Mbembe, Achille, and Janet Roitman. 1995. "Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis." *Public
Culture* 7 (2): 323–352.

Rechtman, Richard. 2017. "From an Ethnography of the Everyday to Writing Echoes of
Suffering." *Medicine Anthropology Theory* 4 (3): 130–142.

Richards, Paul. 2005. "New War: An Ethnographic Approach." In *No Peace No War: An
Anthropology of Contemporary Armed Conflicts*, ed. Paul Richards, 1–21. Oxford: James
Currey.

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy, and Philippe Bourgois. 2003. "Introduction: Making Sense of
Violence." *In Violence in War and Peace: An Anthology*, ed. Nancy Scheper-Hughes and
Philippe Bourgois, 1–31. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy. 1993. *Death without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*.
Berkeley: University of California Press.

Short, James. 1984. "The Social Fabric at Risk: Toward the Social Transformation of Risk
Analysis." *American Sociological Review* 49 (6): 711–725.

Stoler, Ann Laura. 2016. *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times*. Durham, NC: Duke
University Press.

Utas, Mats. 2005. "Victimcy, Girlfriending, Soldiering: Tactic Agency in a Young Woman's

Social Navigation of the Liberian War Zone." *Anthropological Quarterly* 78 (2): 403–430.

Uvin, Peter. 2009. *Life after Violence: A People's Story of Burundi*. London: Zed Books

van Dijk, Rijk, Mirjam de Bruijn, and Jan-Bart Gewald. 2007. "Social and Historical Trajectories of Agency in Africa: An Introduction." In *Strength Beyond Structure: Social and Historical Trajectories of Agency in Africa*, ed. Mirjam de Bruijn, Rijk van Dijk, and Jan-Bart Gewald, 1–15. Leiden: Brill.

Vigh, Henrik. 2006. *Navigating Terrains of War: Youth and Soldiering in Guinea-Bissau*. New York: Berghahn Books.

Vigh, Henrik. 2008. "Crisis and Chronicity: Anthropological Perspectives on Continuous Conflict and Decline." *Ethnos* 73 (1): 5–24.

Vigh, Henrik. 2009. "Motion Squared: A Second Look at the Concept of Social Navigation." *Anthropological Theory* 9 (4): 419–438.

Whyte, Susan Reynolds. 2008. "Discrimination: Afterthoughts on Crisis and Chronicity." *Ethnos* 73 (1): 97–100.

**Notes**

---

[1] Mirjam de Bruijn and Han van Dijk conducted fieldwork in the Guéra in 2003 for 10 months; after that, one or the other returned for follow-up research every following year. This section of the introduction is based on publications by de Bruijn et al. (2004) and de Bruijn and van Dijk (2007).

[2] It was difficult to examine the exact period or rebel groups responsible. As de Bruijn and van

Dijk write elsewhere about the research in the village of Bourzan: "The older people mix the first period of trouble (1967–1975) and the second period (1976–1987). For them it was a long period of extreme insecurity aggravated by periods of droughts and bad harvests" (2007: 85).

[3] But see Coulter (2008, 2009) and Dolan (2009), who, working in extreme situations, refer to complex victim-perpetrator distinctions.

[4] We stick to the notion of hardship and do not use the concept of violence with all its different adjectives (structural, ordinary, everyday, symbolic, etc.) because we feel the violence framework comes with its own challenges. With the tendency to see everything as violence, we obscure more than we reveal (see, e.g., Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2003). Our focus on the concept of duress aims to focus more on the temporal, individual, and social aspects and effects of various experiences of hardship. This includes forms of violence, certainly, but also political and ecological crises. Thus, our aim is to further an understanding of how to grasp the effects of duress as layered experiences of hardship, which include more than just forms of violence.

[5] See, for example, Buch Segal (2018) on what she calls the "tattered textures of kinship," and the literature on secondary and transgenerational traumatization (e.g., Argenti and Schramm 2010). See also Maria Catherina Wilson Janssens (in this section), who shows that "an escape" (in the form of flight by students from the Central African Republic) is seldom an escape from duress. Refuge often simply confronts people with experiences of hardship other than those they sought to escape, but not with an absence of hardship. All ethnographic studies of refugee camps (and humanitarian intervention) attest to this fact (for an early study of this kind, see Harrell-Bond 1986).

[6] Mahmood states, "I want to suggest we think of agency not as synonym for resistance to

relations of combination but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create" (2006: 34). Our focus on "constraint" in constrained agency might suggest that we try to explain why people do not resist oppression in duress. However, our aim is not to study resistance or explain the lack thereof but rather to acknowledge under which circumstances people are required to be, act, and become in relation to others. Our focus on constraint furthermore comes from the empirical case studies in Chad that show the multiple, choiceless decisions people in duress are required to make over a lifetime. While constraint is not limited to this particular country or to the region that is written about in this special section, we recognize constraint as a dominant characteristic of agency that should be at the core of the analysis of the workings of duress. This is also a reaction to studies that promote a rather endless improvisation against the odds in such difficult locations, while acknowledging that decision-making and agency are not related one-to-one.

The concept of choiceless decisions employed by Coulter (2008) and Aretxaga (1997) plays with the idea that choice is free, in its contrasting of the concepts of decision (free and rational choice) and choicelessness (disempowerment/victimhood). This offers us a more nuanced approach to understanding the complex workings of agency, one that resonates with our field in which people still make decisions with consequences for the future of relating to others and to oneself. Coulter (2008) describes how this works for female fighters and their reception back into society.