

Ethnic Tensions, Tantalum, and the Effects of the Global Market

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Abstract:

The phenomenon of illicit wealth being used to fuel conflicts around the world is a well-known subject. Such wealth can come from a variety of sources including human-trafficking, the sale of narcotics, and the exploitation of naturally occurring resources. This last source, specifically of a particular mineral known as coltan (which is also known as tantalum, the refined substance derived from freshly mined raw coltan), is a subject which this article analyzes further. Specifically, this article will attempt to discern whether the discovery and/or presence of deposits of coltan/tantalum will exacerbate previously existing ethnic tensions to the point of violent conflict. In doing so, we utilize the Democratic Republic of Congo as our qualitative case study. Further, this article will attempt to analyze whether increasing global demand for tantalum will cause the value of the mineral to increase in a way which will potentially intensify previously existing ethnic conflicts.

Keywords: Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo, Resource Curse, Regime Types, Conflict Minerals, Political Science, International Relations, Grievance, Opportunity, Ethnicity, Coltan, Tantalum, Global Market

1. Introduction

The clandestine nature of wealth being a silent broker of many conflicts when natural resources come into play has been a notion for quite some time in the civil war literature, with shared ethnicities and ethnic-based animosities in conjunction with wealth being a potentially additional destructive force in a society. In conducting our analysis, we cast a wide net to draw in a diverse body of resources from different areas of expertise so as to conduct our analysis thoroughly. These resources include overviews of regional case studies on ethnic conflict, academic literature on the nature of conflict and violence, trade publications from the tantalum industry, as well as academic articles from a variety of related subjects. These subjects include African security, resource scarcity, as well as post-colonialism and its effects on the nascent countries of Africa. We begin with an overview of this body of work before moving into background information on the so-called resource curse, followed by the examination of our case study on the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

2. Literature Review

Conflict, in any of its variants, is certainly not unique to Africa or any other geographic location on the globe. It is a phenomenon which has persistently endured throughout human history. The initial spark which began a conflict, whether it be a grievance related to religion, ethnicity, or socioeconomic class (and sometimes all three as they can often be related), may become subsumed in a cycle of violence which feeds on itself as a self-sustaining phenomenon. Giuliano Pontara observed that “The resort to violence tends to de-humanize and brutalize those who resort to it and tends thereby to beget more violence...The resort to violence as a means of conducting group conflicts tends to bring into being and consolidate repressive...authoritarian persons [and regimes] with low inhibitions against vio-

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lence” (21).³ Jonathan Honig noted that these regimes’ states may have weak civil organizations, but strong control over the military, police, and media so as to be able to potentially mold and shape the opinions and habits of the masses (1).⁴ That being said, the point shouldn’t be made that the prime origins of conflict are unimportant, far from it. The investigation into the origins of armed conflict has never been a simple one to make headway in however, but there does appear to be similar antecedents in the inculcation of conflict. According to Abiodun Alao, “Putting conflict in context, mankind has always tried to understand conflict...In defining conflict, most scholars have now agreed that two factors are central to all definitions...First, there is...at least two different units...These units may be individuals, communities, or countries, and the demarcating factor may be...ethnicity, geography, nationality, race, religion...The second is the existence...of incompatible interest” (18-19).⁵ He then goes on to note four criteria which differentiates conflict from other occurrences in the human experience. Alao writes that these four criteria for the occurrence of conflict are that conflict “can only exist where the participants perceive it as such; there must be a clear difference of opinion regarding values, interests, aims, or relations; the parties may be either states or ‘significant elements of the population’ within the state; and the outcome of the conflict must be considered important to the parties” (19).⁶ With these four criteria in place, the stage is set for violent conflict. This article itself focuses in the geographic backdrop of Africa (central Africa, specifically). The continent’s collective pedigree of post-colonialism has given rise to certain earmarks of its own variant of cyclical violent conflict. Alao ticks off some of the characteristics of conflict in contemporary Africa:

- Tensions between subnational groups stemming from the collapse of old patterns of relationships that provided the framework for collaboration among the many ethnic groups in most states.
- Disputes over resource sharing arising from gross disparities in wealth among different groups within the same countries and the consequent struggles for reform of economic systems to ensure an equitable distribution of economic power.
- Absence of democratic structures, culture, and practice, and the consequent struggles for democratization, good governance, and reform of political systems.
- Systemic failures in the administration of justice and the inability of states to guarantee the security of the population.
- Issues relating to religious cleavages and religious fundamentalism.⁷

For the purposes of this article, we will be investigating the first two conflict characteristics primarily. However, these characteristics will often overlap, as some ethnic groups may be more prone towards a certain religion that is also marginalized, or ethnic/religious groupings may be split down socioeconomic lines. Assis Malaquias reflected that these sources of conflict and the national divide they represent had echoes of post-colonialism, and that “This schism was the result of various domestic conflicts related to class, race, ethnicity, and overall inability to cope with the administrative challenges of post-colonial governance...the elite’s grip on the state assumed hegemonic proportions and represented a throwback to colonial times when power, prestige, and privilege were closely associated with...race” (319).⁸ It is this hangover of ethnic bias from post-colonialism which seems to stalk the relatively nascent countries of Africa. Often times colonial administrators would favor one ethnic group over the others, and national and territorial boundaries were drawn with little regard for previous relations, acrimonious or not, between native ethnic groups. This resulted in territorial and land disputes, as well as the split of socioeconomic class along ethnic lines.

³ Giuliano Pontara, “The Concept of Violence,” *Journal of Peace Research* 15, no. 1 (1978): 21.

⁴ Jonathan Honig, “Public Policies on Broadcast and the Fairness Doctrine: History, Effects, and Implications for the Future,” *Public Policy and Administration Review* 7, no. 1 (2019): 1.

⁵ Abiodun Alao, *Natural Resources and Conflict in Africa, The Tragedy of Endowment* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2007), 18-19.

⁶ Abiodun Alao, *Natural Resources and Conflict in Africa, The Tragedy of Endowment* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2007), 19.

⁷ Abiodun Alao, *Natural Resources and Conflict in Africa, The Tragedy of Endowment* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2007), 37.

⁸ Assis Malaquias, “Diamonds are a Guerrilla’s best friend: The impact of Illicit Wealth on Insurgency Strategy,” *Third World Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (2010): 319.

It seems oftentimes that disparity in the fair distribution of wealth across clan and ethnic lines leads to conflict in these newer countries, and economic weakness and mismanagement can be the spark which takes a conflict to a violent turn. Steven Metz was apt in his observation that “Many African societies face the bleak prospect of decades of political turbulence...Often, national leaders did not share the same priorities as those of the societies they led...national debates...[are] very rare in Africa” (3-4).⁹ But it is not simply the fault of any one particular individual leader regarding aforementioned political turbulence. There is broad ethnic, clan, and cultural issues at play with economic issues as the underlying factor. According to Jonathan Honig, “Although geographically connected, some regions [and the states within them] have a different history that has shaped their culture in...[alternant] ways than the nations in other parts of the continent” (pg. 86).¹⁰ Metz elaborates:

Economically, [many] African states were burdened by the legacies of their past. As European powers developed their African colonies, they did not seek to create self-sustaining economies...Cultural factors have also complicated economic development...Frequently, an African who acquires power, prestige, or wealth feels a moral obligation to use this to benefit...members of the same ethnic group...The political spoils system leads to debilitating nepotism, corruption and mismanagement that hinder development. (4-5)¹¹

This ethnically based nepotism has shown itself time and again as a factor in leading to conflict in Africa. In fact, it sometimes appears that ethnic tensions lead to conflicts in tandem with issues regarding wealth (and the resources which are linked to it) as its distribution, management, development, and discovery are all considered critical. William G. Thom wrote that “Ethnic identity almost always plays a part in...African wars...When state systems collapse, and countries are thrown into a state of extended conflict, the people often turn to...clans or larger ethnic groups for protection...This facilitates the recruitment of fighters along ethnic lines, and serves as a strong motivating factor” (4).¹² But what exactly do we mean by an ethnic group (given the consideration with which this article posits them as a source of conflict)? It will be helpful to summarize this at this time. Francis M. Deng does an excellent job with this:

Ethnicity usually implies that the group is...biologically self-perpetuating; shares fundamental values, realized in overt unity in cultural forms; makes up a field of communication and interaction; and has a membership that identifies itself, and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order...ethnicity ‘encompasses all forms of identity that have at their root the notion of a common ancestor-race as well as tribe. (47)¹³

Ethnicity and its role in both tensions and eventually conflicts are well known phenomenon in Africa. Oftentimes, this is mixed with other forms of personal identity (aforementioned religious and class lines which frequently overlap). When you mix in post-colonialism and social disparities throughout new nations, with arbitrarily drawn borders dating from when they were mere colonial possessions, the situation is rife for identity/ethnicity-based conflict. What is interesting is the different degrees with which these conflicts manifested themselves across the continent. Deng summarizes the findings of several regional case studies on ethnicity in Africa and how it leads to conflict:

Perspectives from regional case studies conducted by the Brookings Institution’s project on conflict resolution in Africa reveal a considerable variety in the way identity has generated conflicts...The studies indicate at least four possible models in the scale of the identity conflicts involved...At the lower scale of conflict would be...in which the degree of diversity of identities and the disparities involved in the allocation and distribution patterns do not pose a major problem for governance...Next...would be situations of compound or complex pluralism in which differences based on ethnicity...are serious enough to threaten

⁹ Steven Metz, “A Strategic Approach to African Security: Challenges and Prospects,” *African Security Review* 9, no. 3 (2010): 3-4.

¹⁰ Jonathan Honig, “The State of the State: A Meta-Analysis of State Involvement in Television Broadcasting in the Former Czechoslovakia,” *International Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Studies* 6, no. 3 (2019): 86.

¹¹ Steven Metz, “A Strategic Approach to African Security: Challenges and Prospects,” *African Security Review* 9, no. 3 (2010): 4-5.

¹² William G. Thom, “Congo-Zaire’s 1996-97 Civil War in the Context of Evolving Patterns of Military Conflict in Africa in the Era of Independence,” *Journal of Conflict Studies* 19, no. 2 (1999): 4, accessed November 3, 2017, <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/jcs/article/view/4358/5015>

¹³ Francis M. Deng, “Identity in Africa’s Internal Conflicts,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 40, no. 1 (1996): 47.

the...stability of the system...The third would be...in which the conflict of identities is severe and requires...various degrees of decentralization and power sharing...The fourth comprises...conflicts so intense that the very framework of a unitary state is in question...(52)¹⁴

One of the previously mentioned challenges facing African governments is the fact that the same ethnic divisions which lead to conflict in the countryside are often found in the most central institutions of the nation. This not only includes the executive branches of the government, but also law enforcement, the courts, and (perhaps most importantly) the military. The ethnic groups which took over the reins of governance after independence were often the ones favored by their colonial administrators, and thus tribalism found fertile ground in the embryonic nation-states' government institutions. For example, Metz wrote that "...African armed forces are rife with internal divisions based on ethnicity, regionalism, [or] religion...African military establishments...display a pronounced tendency toward political meddling, self-enrichment, and promotion based on ethnicity..." (9).¹⁵ The heavy-handedness of ethnically biased militaries towards members of their nations' populations whose ethnic identity doesn't align with those in power can lead to a dangerous tit-for-tat between the military and increasingly disaffected and militant ethnic segments of the civilian populace. This can give rise to the spiral model of conflict. According to the Conflict Research Consortium, "The conflict spiral model describes escalation as a vicious cycle of action and reaction...One party's punishing action provokes punishing retaliation by the other side, which in turn prompts increased retaliation from the first party...similarly, one party's defensive action may be perceived as threatening by the other side...Their defensive response is in turn seen as a threat by the first party."¹⁶

As conflict between a country's ethnically biased government/military and the restive and increasingly extremist ethnic segments of the populace spirals out of control, the possibility of a full-blown ethnically driven insurgency begins to loom larger. If not properly addressed, this can threaten the national integrity of an African (or other) state. Malaquias offers a nice summary of the contemporary view of an insurgency:

Insurgency refers to a protracted political and military activity directed towards completely or partially controlling a state through the use of irregular military forces and illegal political organizations...Typically, insurgencies are responses to chronic governmental ineptitude and corruption, or to other forms of bad governance. More proximate causes include government insensitivity and ineffectiveness in meeting popular demands...Insurgencies can be ignited...through repressive actions by the government... (314)¹⁷

It is these repressive actions which can start the spiral of conflict, pitting ethnic groups against each other as a means of addressing grievances, settling old scores, obtaining land or mineral rights, etc. And, unfortunately, it appears to be a situation which has mushroomed all across Africa. It is not just nepotism, ineffective and corrupt government, political repression, or the spiral model of conflict which is useful in explaining insurgency and armed conflict on the continent. Jeffrey Herbst wrote that a "...phenomenon that is almost uniform throughout African revolts is ethnic allegiance...the role that ethnicity plays in the organization of rebel movements does not receive the attention that it deserves...the ability to create and mobilize populations around ethnic symbols is seen as critical in many of the narratives of revolt" (280).¹⁸

Those ethnic symbols often are just that, merely symbols. Although grievances based on ethnicity are legitimate, what really seems to step up ethnic conflict is when there are financial issues in play. These frequently seem to be the real reasons which motivate the main concerns driving insurrections and counter-insurrections, with ethnicity used as a recruiting tool/symbol.

¹⁴ Francis M. Deng, "Identity in Africa's Internal Conflicts," *American Behavioral Scientist* 40, no. 1 (1996): 52.

¹⁵ Steven Metz, "A Strategic Approach to African Security: Challenges and Prospects," *African Security Review* 9, no. 3 (2010): 9.

¹⁶ Conflict Research Consortium Staff, "Conflict Research Consortium BOOK SUMMARY; Social Conflict: Escalation, Stalemate and Settlement by Dean G. Pruitt and Jeffrey Z. Rubin," accessed November 8, 2017, <https://www.colorado.edu/conflict/peace/example/pruitt.htm>.

¹⁷ Assis Malaquias, "Diamonds are a Guerrilla's Best Friend: The impact of Illicit Wealth on Insurgency Strategy," *Third World Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (2010): 314.

¹⁸ Jeffrey Herbst, "Economic Incentives, Natural Resources and Conflict in Africa," *Journal of African Economies* 9, no. 3 (2000): 280.

Alao speculated on resources as an underlying motivator for ethnic conflict by noting that “As a cause of conflict, natural resource considerations have become easily identifiable in many communal conflicts...On a wider national level...rarely have natural resources been blatantly evident as the sole cause of conflict...More often than not, natural resource issues form core considerations in conflicts that are attributable to other causes...Issues such as ethnicity...are some of the subterfuges often exploited to conceal the crucial aspects of natural resource consideration” (4).¹⁹

3. Theory and Hypothesis

The literature on the exploitation of so-called “blood minerals” has lagged behind academic and trade works focused on conflicts involving the exploitation of oil, land, conflict. or diamonds in Africa. This lag has included the limited amount of publications up for conjecture for these minerals (tin, tungsten, tantalum, etc.) and how this increase of demand may drive conflict. Furthermore, there is a similarly lagging body of knowledge on whether the presence of blood minerals has helped fuel or increase previously occurring ethnic discord to the point of conflict. This section will devote further time to investigating how resources, specifically tantalum (which itself is derived from raw coltan) serve as an ethnic-conflict amplifier and motivator. Tantalum itself has many useful properties, and is used in the circuitry of technology ranging from cellphones to airplanes. It is widely believed that central Africa holds the majority of the world’s deposits of coltan. To this end, the case example of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and its ethnically related resource-conflicts will be examined. This leads us to our hypothesis.

Hypothesis: The presence of known deposits of coltan/tantalum will exacerbate previously existing ethnic tensions to the point of violent conflict in much the same way as blood diamonds have had in other states.

Further, we postulate that these resources become more desired as a strategic objective in conflict due to the ever-increasing use of technology utilizing tantalum. As cellphones, computers, tablets, etc. become more mainstream, demand for the scarce sources of the necessary material for circuitry will cause the value of blood minerals to increase. This will in turn drive the already simmering ethnic conflicts. This is a classic case of the so-called “resource curse.” As a basis of understanding the situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, it is important to first have an understanding of this concept.

4. The Resource Curse

Essentially, this boils down to the presence of globally scarce, valuable, and easily tradeable resources and their contribution to instability and autocratic government in the countries which possess them. This seems somewhat counter-intuitive, as it could be assumed that a country which is rich in resources would stand to benefit from them as a whole. Sadly, this is not always the case. And it is worse in countries which possess newer, weaker state institutions as well as a propensity for corruption based along tribal and ethnic lines. A nice summary of the resource curse was made by Abiodun Alao and Funmi Olonisakin when they observed:

Natural resources serve as both a cause and a prolongation of armed conflict...the availability of natural resources introduces other complexities, particularly when a conflict has assumed a violent dimension...Experience has shown that the potential for armed conflict in societies that are endowed with natural resources is great when group demands are not managed effectively and access to these resources is denied through a process of fair...distribution...Thus, when armed conflict erupts under these circumstances, the ready availability of...mineral resources serves other purposes—fueling...conflict areas. (34)²⁰

As one can see, there is some truth to the maxim of “more money, more problems.” These issues, however, arise oftentimes from the ineffectiveness of the national government in performing its duties in an equitable and fair way in the distribution of resource derived wealth across all segments of the population. Sometimes the government is merely a hollow shell, in which case the machinery of the state is often more or less non-functional in the nationwide sense (such as Somalia).

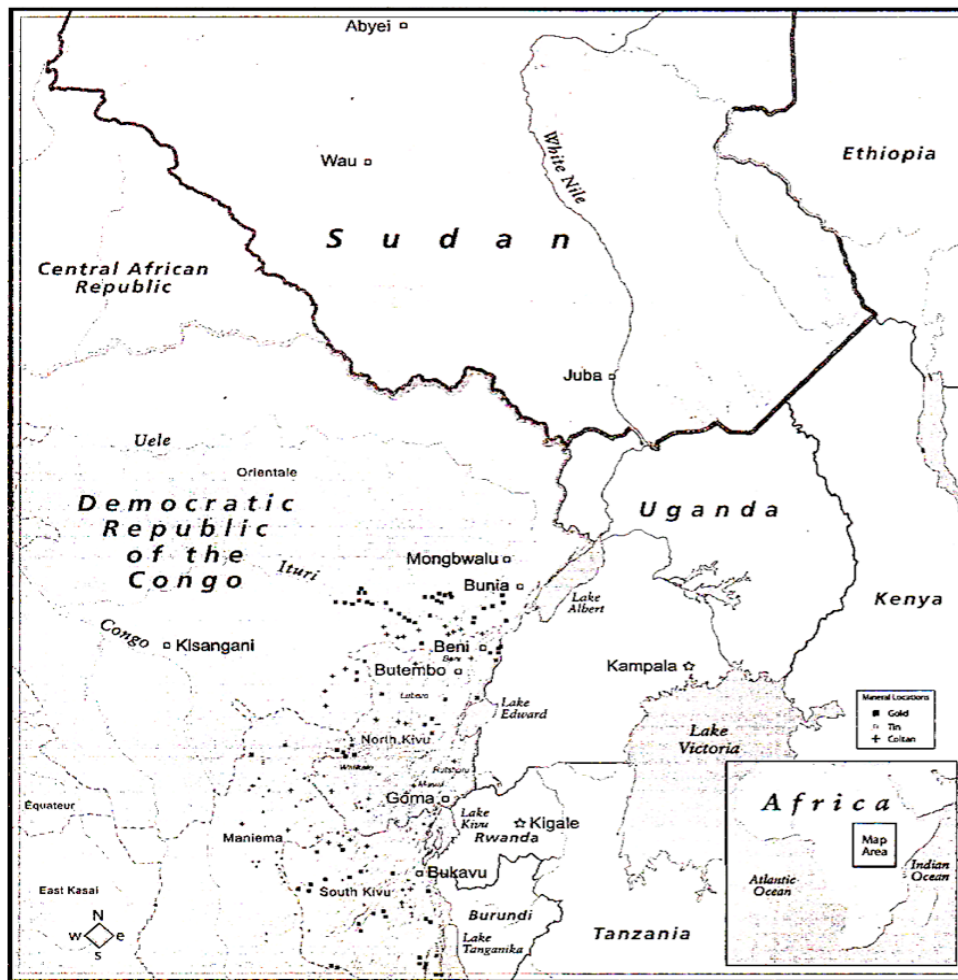
¹⁹ Abiodun Alao, *Natural Resources and Conflict in Africa, The Tragedy of Endowment* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2007), 4.

²⁰ Abiodun Alao and Funmi Olonisakin, “Economic Fragility and Political Fluidity: Explaining Natural Resources and Conflicts,” *International Peacekeeping* 7, no. 4 (2000): 34.

Other times, the wealth of African nations is used to pad the pockets of the ruling segments of society and their ethnic and tribal circles. Still other times, the presence of resources which are relatively easily transformed into cash attracts the attention of outsiders of a less than trustworthy nature.

Alao explains how the resource curse can lead to the rise of actors in African nations with their own strict interests in mind when he noted that in conflict areas of the continent "...[mineral] resources has assumed the negative reputation it has because the structures of governance have not taken into consideration how the ease of the disposability of these resources and their high profit margins could attract the attention of...armed groups, international business interests, political elites, criminal gangs...and multinational corporations, to encourage and sustain conflicts" (112-113).²¹ So, the resource curse is not simply the fault of the presence of valuable resources, but the unfair administration of them, the lack of strength of national institutions, and the presence of preexisting ethnic tensions exacerbated by political corruption and nepotism.

Figure 1: Mineral Deposits placed on International Alert in the Democratic Republic of Congo



Locations of mineral deposits based on International Alert, "Gisements miniers" in *Etude sur le rôle de l'exploitation des ressources naturelles dans l'alimentation et la perpétuation des crises de l'est de la RDC* (London: International Alert, October 2009), 90. For more information, see *Crossed Crocodiles*, "Trading Congo Contraband," February 21, 2010, <http://crossedcrocodiles.wordpress.com/2010/02/21/trading-congo-contraband-maps-3t-minerals-coltan-gold/>.

²¹ Abiodun Alao, *Natural Resources and Conflict in Africa, The Tragedy of Endowment* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2007), 112-113.

Further, base economic greed has driven insurgents to behave as rational actors competing for resources as opposed to focusing on strategic victory over their rivals. In fact, often times opposing sides of conflicts will trade and cooperate with each other to maximize financial gains. Winning in the conventional sense in many cases has become secondary (if of note at all). This runs against the grain of how some view civil wars. They can seem to be chaotic, senseless, and a needlessly brutal experience. But in the case of the resource curse, often there is a cold logic involved for those pulling the strings of conflict. David Keen observed:

Traditional interpretations describe civil wars as simple confrontations between two sides, as explosions of mindless violence, or as disrupting...benevolent development processes within countries...These approaches do not fully take into account the rational economic calculations that drive many civil conflicts...to understand violence in civil wars, we need to understand the economic dimensions underpinning it. Economic activities arising from war fall into...gaining access to land, water, and mineral resources...these short-term benefits suggest that there is more to civil wars than simply winning...²²

The vast profits which can be made from countries subject to the resource curse can chain these nations to a seemingly endless cycle of violence, conflict, and exploitation where it is often the civilians who suffer the most. According to William Reno, “Moreover, weak state administrations are unable to manage...cultural traits and ethnic...efforts,” while at the same time “...rational interests motivate the country’s war leaders...They fight...to control resources...war has been as much a battle over commerce...as it has been a war for territory or control of the government” (211).²³

5. Methodology

Due to the difficulties in obtaining reliable quantitative information regarding tantalum and blood minerals across multiple conflict zones in Africa, we decided that the best way to conduct the analysis of our hypothesis is through qualitative methods. To this end, we elected to use for our case study the Democratic Republic of the Congo. We selected this case as it had all the necessary prerequisites for our hypothesis, which include ample natural resources (especially coltan/tantalum) and a multiplicity of different ethnic conflicts which preexisted the discovery of said resources. Furthermore, the DRC and its various rival ethnic groups have access to the global-market, from which illicit wealth stemming from the sale of conflict minerals flows. In order for us to conduct our analysis, we drew our information from a broad variety of quantitative and qualitative sources on the manner. This ranged from books written by authors with first-hand accounts of the DRC, to academic publications on conflicts in general, to journal articles on African security, as well as trade publications from the tantalum industry itself. Many of these sources were specially selected as they in turn drew from much broader reviews of multiple case studies plus industry investigations and reports. These sources were included to balance out any weaknesses engendered from the somewhat limited analysis brought on by the sole qualitative case study of the DRC.

6. The Case of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Of the many, locations of violent friction in Africa, the conflicts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (now referred to as the DRC) stand out partially due to the complex kaleidoscope of different ethnic groups as well as the plentiful presence of many valuable natural resources. Alao states that “...the DRC is endowed with large reserves of solid mineral resources, including copper ore, tin concentrates, cola, zinc concentrates, cobalt, uranium, industrial diamond carats, gem diamonds, silver, gold, tantalum, and niobium” (115).²⁴ Again, tantalum is the particular blood mineral with which this article is largely concerned with. Due to the amount of different ethnic groups with all their cultural differences and various grievances against each other, the DRC makes an excellent case study on the process from which previously existing ethnic tensions mushroom into violent conflict when valuable resources are discovered in contested land, or when previously existing sources of resources are up for grabs because of weak national institutions and societal disintegration.

²² David Keen, *The Economic Functions of Violence in Civil Wars* (Hampshire: Routledge, 2005), <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/59742/>.

²³ William Reno, “The Business of War in Liberia,” *Current History* 95, (2009): 211.

²⁴ Abiodun Alao, *Natural Resources and Conflict in Africa, The Tragedy of Endowment* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2007), 115.

Alao and Olonisakin wrote that “Of all the post-Cold War civil conflicts in Africa, none reflects the complexities of the connection between natural resources and conflict like the civil war in the [DRC]...The war...resulted in multi-dimensional conflicts involving more than five Congolese factions and up to seven countries within the region...The natural resources at stake...are mainly solid minerals, especially...tantalum” (31).²⁵ The DRC makes for a strong contender in Africa for showcasing the process by which previously existing tensions explode into violent conflict when blood minerals come into play. All the necessary steps are there; a bewildering amount of ethnic variety, the presence of previous grievances between any number of them, the discovery and exploitation of vast natural resources in an arbitrarily created post-colonial nation-state, and the resulting cycle of violence and civil war (and all the societal instability that comes with it).

Metz wrote that of all the violent discourse in Africa associated with ethnically-based resource conflicts, “The most dangerous...of all has occurred in the...DRC...In many ways, the country—if ‘country’ is not too strong a term—is a distillation of all the pathologies that hinder development, stability and progress in Africa...It is more an amalgam of weakly related regions...keeping a country that is exceptionally rich in natural resources among the poorest on Earth” (11).²⁶ These weakly related regions are often split down ethnic lines. This invariably leads to conflict between ethnicities, with rival ethnically-based militias being the result, further destabilizing the state. Peter Eichstaedt wrote that “Underlying the internecine violence in...[the] Congo has been a dizzying array of militias spawned by ancient ethnic animosities” (9).²⁷ These ethnic groups, and their corresponding militias, can range greatly in size and scope of influence, as well as geographic areas of operation. For example, according to Eichstaedt:

Eastern Congo is a patchwork generally controlled by any of four key groups. The most feared is the ethnic Hutu militia known as the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda...Another is the former Tutsi militia, the National Congress for the Defense of the People...The third is the Mai-Mai, composed largely of homegrown militias with a fondness for amulets, witchcraft, and spirits. The final group is the... Congolese national army... (4)²⁸

Fielding the ethnic militias and the Congolese army naturally isn’t a costless enterprise, including financially. These groups need resources in order to carry out their trading, feuds, and conflicts. As such they turn to the ample, easily financially liquefiable resources resting in the ground around them. Alao notes that blood minerals such as tantalum “...have offered some of the greatest attractions to warlords in times of conflict, arguably because of the ease with which they can be sold or bartered to procure weapons” (125).²⁹ This has direct repercussions on the civilian population of the nation, regardless of their ethnicity, who rely on working in the mines in the DRC so as to eke out a living digging up tantalum and other minerals. Eichstaedt wrote that in the DRC, “Mining in the midst of war means working with militias...This requires that miners share minerals and the proceeds with armed groups” (147).³⁰

This is the point in the process where ethnic rivalries, now embodied in an array of militias, mix with the proximity to and discovery of tantalum deposits. The wealth that is derived from these deposits then goes to fuel the war efforts of the various ethnic militias, allowing them to procure more advanced weaponry on a larger scale, thus driving up the level of violence. This in turn can lead to the conflict spiral model coming into play between ethnic groups and their corresponding militias in the DRC, as groups engage in an endless cycle of tit-for-tat offensives and counter-offensives. Alao offers up four interrelated factors which can be linked to the lengthening of ethnic-based conflicts involving the exploitation of tantalum and coltan by noting “These are: through their use as a source of revenue used for arms procurement; through their encouragement of intransigence to peace moves; through their en-

²⁵ Abiodun Alao and Funmi Olonisakin, “Economic Fragility and Political Fluidity: Explaining Natural Resources and Conflicts,” *International Peacekeeping* 7, no. 4 (2000): 31.

²⁶ Steven Metz, “A Strategic Approach to African Security: Challenges and Prospects,” *African Security Review* 9, no. 3 (2010): 11.

²⁷ Peter Eichstaedt, *Consuming the Congo: War and Conflict Minerals in the World’s Deadliest Place*. (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2011), 9.

²⁸ Peter Eichstaedt, *Consuming the Congo: War and Conflict Minerals in the World’s Deadliest Place*. (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2011), 4.

²⁹ Abiodun Alao, *Natural Resources and Conflict in Africa, The Tragedy of Endowment* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2007), 125.

³⁰ Peter Eichstaedt, *Consuming the Congo: War and Conflict Minerals in the World’s Deadliest Place*. (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2011), 147.

couragement of greed...and through their attraction for external interests” (121).³¹ The last factor listed, the attraction for external interests, can be and often is on the part of multinational corporations seeking to maximize profits by the aggressive procurement of scarce resources, regardless of where these resources come from and under what set of national and societal circumstances. This is no different in the DRC, and there are a number of external private interests who wish to make a lot of money from tantalum deposits in the country, due to the high demand for its use in smart-devices and other consumer technologies on the world market. This in turn could exacerbate previously existing ethnic tensions between groups possessing the ability to mine and sell tantalum, as well as the martial and war-making means to enforce their preponderance. Ted Robert Gurr summarizes the market’s potential effects on ethnic conflict by noting that “...substantial and persisting increases in the scarcity of widely-sought resources in contemporary societies tend to create greater material inequalities...among societies, intensify internal...conflict, and a shift from open toward more closed and authoritarian political institutions” (51).³² It is these closed and authoritarian political institutions that often inculcate ethnically based nepotism and corruption. The profit margins are perhaps too tempting for the ruling elites to resist, in this manner of understanding. Thus, the DRC and other countries in Africa in that sense are a party to their own exploitation and the cyclical fueling of ethnic conflict with the proceeds derived from blood minerals such as tantalum. Patrick Chabal explains that “...there are huge mineral and natural resources in Africa which are traded—legally or illegally—by those who hold power...an increasing number of politicians are heavily involved in illicit financial and commercial transactions...Africa is thus not simply the victim of globalization...Its elite are active participants in the...underside of the globalized economy...” (111-112).³³ And this economy’s demand for tantalum is only increasing as time goes by. According to a Global Tantalum Report for the years 2017-2021:

The global tantalum market is anticipated to grow at a steady rate...of more than 3% during the forecast period. The increasing penetration of smartphones is triggering the demand for capacitors, which will drive the growth prospects for the global tantalum market for the next four years. According to the industry research report, the growing telecommunication sector will drive the growth prospects of the tantalum market because a majority of demand for low voltage capacitors comes from the telecommunications sector. Moreover, one of the major factors responsible for the growing telecom sector is the increasing demand for smartphones in the developing economies.³⁴

The irony in this is that the growing demand in the developing economies of the world for tantalum include the very same poor and underdeveloped countries, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, from which tantalum is mined.

7. Findings

The findings regarding our hypothesis were mixed. It would appear that the presence of tantalum and other conflict minerals does indeed help fuel preexisting ethnic conflicts. However, it doesn’t appear that burgeoning demand worldwide for tantalum is affecting the cycle of violence in the DRC in a meaningful way. Contrary to belief, the DRC is not home to a disproportionate amount of the world’s supply of tantalum. It actually would appear to only possess about 10% of the global supply of tantalum.³⁵ In fact, it would appear that there are larger deposits of tantalum in South America. But the relatively small amount of tantalum in the DRC is enough to create fuel for ongoing ethnic conflicts within the country. According to Eichstaedt:

While the amount of minerals may be small, it does not diminish the problem in eastern Congo or its decade of death. Rather, it enlarges the question: how could so many die as a result of the mining there? The answer

³¹ Abiodun Alao, *Natural Resources and Conflict in Africa, The Tragedy of Endowment* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2007), 121.

³² Ted Robert Gurr, “On the Political Consequences of Scarcity and Economic Decline,” *International Studies Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (1985): 51.

³³ Patrick Chabal, “Africa in the Age of Globalization,” *African Security Review* 10, no. 2 (2010): 111-112.

³⁴ “Global Tantalum Market 2017-2021,” *Technavio.com*, last modified January, 2017, <https://www.technavio.com/report/global-metals-and-minerals-global-tantalum-market-2017-2021>.

³⁵ Peter Eichstaedt, *Consuming the Congo: War and Conflict Minerals in the World’s Deadliest Place*. (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2011), 213.

points to other, deeper issues such as ethnic animosities that have been present for much longer than the recent mining activities. Increasingly, one must consider that mining profits may only have exacerbated a longstanding problem, not created it. Curtailing or eliminating the [coltan] mining probably won't make the problem go away. (213-214)³⁶

The problem now is that the genie is out of the bottle with tantalum as it is indeed with all conflict minerals, and the desire to reap profits has now become interwoven with other motivations for ethnic-based conflicts and insurrections. Herbst reports that "An initial review of the case study literature of close to three dozen rebellions in Africa suggests that there are very few pure cases where only one type of incentive to rebel is present...For instance, there were very few revolutions that were ever ideologically driven and that did not have a clear economic aspect" (277).³⁷ Malaquias notes that in the DRC "...wars are sustained by...ethnicity, religion, personal ambition and greed" (317).³⁸ All that being said, rising global demand for coltan/tantalum has not yet shown signs of increasing either the level of profits or of violence in ethnic conflicts in the DRC. Part of this is due to increasing awareness and concern on the part of some countries and lawmakers. According to a report by the Tantalum-Niobium International Study Center:

The most visible...concerns has been on funding of conflict through natural resource extraction, in particular the mining of...tantalum...in the Democratic Republic of Congo...The resultant U.S. conflict minerals legislation and SEC implementation rules caused companies to...determine if the metals in their products have contributed to the funding of this conflict...The co-operation of the companies closer to the sourcing of the minerals, i.e. smelters and refiners, is key in developing and validating a conflict-free supply chain, and at the same time, not creating a de-facto embargo of minerals from central Africa. (11)³⁹

Such development and validation of a conflict-free supply chain is not unlike methods adopted by the Kimberley Process with its regard to conflict diamonds. The Tantalum-Niobium International Study Center goes on to note that "Since a greater percentage of tantalum minerals originate in central Africa...the risk of sourcing minerals that may provide funding for armed conflict would appear to be high...However, the good news...is that the tantalum industry has the greatest percentage of smelters and processors validated as conflict-free..." (15).⁴⁰

In addition to all this, because of the discovery of tantalum in South America, countries with histories of ethnic conflict like the DRC are not as desirable of locations to acquire tantalum for commercial purposes. According to a Global Tantalum Report for the years 2017-2021, "Brazil is expected to become one of the largest exporters of tantalum worldwide because no conflict minerals have been found to be mined from this region so far."⁴¹

The increased concern and legislation regarding conflict minerals and tantalum, cooperation on the part of the industry on the verification of conflict-free supply chains, and the presence of better suited countries ready to export conflict-free tantalum has all contributed to keeping the global market's increasing demand for the mineral from increasing the level of violence or enlarging the profits gained by rival groups in the DRC's internecine ethnic conflicts.

³⁶ Peter Eichstaedt, *Consuming the Congo: War and Conflict Minerals in the World's Deadliest Place*. (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2011), 214-215.

³⁷ Jeffrey Herbst, "Economic Incentives, Natural Resources and Conflict in Africa," *Journal of African Economies* 9, no. 3 (2000): 277.

³⁸ Assis Malaquias, "Diamonds are a Guerrilla's Best Friend: The impact of Illicit Wealth on Insurgency Strategy," *Third World Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (2010): 317.

³⁹ Tantalum-Niobium International Study Center, "A Downstream Customer's View on Conflict-Free Minerals" last modified April, 2017. Retrieved from: https://www.tanb.org/images/T_I_C_Bulletin_no_169_%28April_2017%29.pdf, 11.

⁴⁰ Tantalum-Niobium International Study Center, "A Downstream Customer's View on Conflict-Free Minerals" last modified April, 2017. https://www.tanb.org/images/T_I_C_Bulletin_no_169_%28April_2017%29.pdf, 15.

⁴¹ "Global Tantalum Market 2017-2021," *Technavio.com*, last modified January, 2017, <https://www.technavio.com/report/global-metals-and-minerals-global-tantalum-market-2017-2021>.

8. Conclusion

In this article, we have sought to analyze whether the discovery and/or presence of deposits of tantalum exacerbated previously existing ethnic tensions to the point of violent conflict. Furthermore, we postulated that global demand for the scarce sources of tantalum will drive up the level of violence and the potential rewards for rival ethnic groups in the DRC. This, we hypothesized, will in turn drive the already simmering ethnic conflicts. To this end, we drew from a body of resources ranging from academic articles on a variety of related subjects such as African security, resource scarcity, and post-colonialism, as well as industry trade publications, overviews of regional case studies on ethnic conflicts, as well as academic literature on the nature of conflict and violence.

We conclude that alternative sources of conflict-free tantalum, legislation to stem the supply of blood minerals, and industry efforts to maintain a conflict-free supply chain seem to have kept the increasing global demand for tantalum from having an increasing impact on the level of ethnic violence in the DRC. However, the mere presence of tantalum in the DRC (despite the country only having about 10% of the world's supply) mixed with the preexisting ethnic tensions in the country does appear to steer these tensions towards the point of violent conflict. This is in part due to conflict over access to tantalum deposits, as well as due to the increased sophistication and amount of armaments which ethnic militias purchase using the proceeds of illicit minerals like coltan and tantalum sales in order to fund their violent, internecine agendas.

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