



Slow violence, extraction and human rights defence in Tanzania: Notes from the field



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ABSTRACT

This article explores the different manifestations of violence in the gold-producing region of Tanzania, drawing on findings from empirical research. In doing so, it illustrates how the gold mining sector in Tanzania, despite being associated with contestation and ongoing violence, has continued to produce at a high level. The article calls for a broadening of the definition of “violence” within resource-rich regions in order to account for significant environmental and non-physical forms of violence that occur over broad temporal scales, or what is referred to as “slow violence”. This would allow for a closer examination of the range of effects on communities and the environment at sites of extraction, including the impacts on human rights defenders, the focus of this analysis. The aim is to extend understanding of violence beyond extreme acts and rather to account for a more extensive range of manifestations across resource-rich regions of Tanzania.

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Introduction and background

This article examines manifestations of violence in the gold-producing region of Tanzania, drawing on findings from recent fieldwork. In doing so, it illustrates how the gold mining sector in Tanzania, despite being associated with contestation and ongoing violence, has continued to produce at a high level. Through varying roles across the sector, especially in the area of mine security, the state and multinational corporations are seen as collaboratively engaged in the suppression of rights and extreme acts of violence, including death. This ‘marriage’ between the corporation and the state is based on a particular level of acceptable violence being necessary for continued extraction of minerals, in this case gold. This phenomenon is by no means new as violence and extraction have been acknowledged for centuries.

The discussion that follows, however, calls for a more holistic assessment of this violence—specifically, a broadening of its definition in the context of extraction in resource-rich regions. Of particular importance is the need to account for environmental and non-physical forms of violence that occur over broad temporal scales, or an extension of what Nixon (2011) refers to as “slow violence”. After exploring these ideas in greater detail, the paper draws on findings from fieldwork in Tanzania, namely the

commentary and testimonies from Tanzanian informants affected by large scale extractive processes or extractivism head on. These testimonials underscore the importance of developing an extended definition of violence in order to incorporate manifestations which move past our daily prejudices of its meaning—that is, the view that it is exclusively about exceptional events such as, for example, explosions and gun crime. This broadening is done not to discount the potential for these extreme manifestations to take shape in resource regions – indeed, data and testimonies confirm that the possibility of this violence occurring remains – but rather to draw attention to the many forms of violence that take shape in resource-rich regions, with the hope of drawing attention to the temporal effects of such manifestations.

This paper draws on personal experiences and research conducted with a human rights network focused on extractivism across two countries: Canada and Tanzania. Here, the term “extractivism” is used broadly, incorporating the range of practices both upstream and downstream. The paper draws on the works of Nixon (2011), Peluso and Watts (2001) and others to frame the case study of mining in Noth Mara, Tanzania. More than 20 interviews were conducted in Dar es Salaam, Musoma, and Tarime with Tanzanian human rights defenders. The interviews were conducted as part of the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project (EHAHRDP), the aim of which was to analyze the state of human rights monitoring of the extractive industries in

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Uganda and Tanzania.¹ The human rights defenders interviewed were made aware of the author's dual positionality, as both a researcher and academic, and were more than willing to share their testimonies, and details of their work, struggles and experiences upon receipt of this information. It is acknowledged that the focus here is limited to human rights defenders, journalists, and NGO employees who account for a small percentage of the stakeholders involved in Tanzanian extractivism. However, the work of these informants and their experiences and testimonies should not be overlooked nor overstated, as they provide valuable insight into the varying forms of violence enacted at mine sites in Tanzania, and the challenges faced by those working to monitor the extractive industries.

Interviews ranged in length, from 30 to 90 min, though all informants were provided the space to both withhold sensitive information and/or withdraw from the interview with no negative consequences. No informant chose to do so, however, because of promises of their anonymity being preserved. These interviews were triangulated with analysis of primary and secondary documents such as news articles (both domestic and international), NGO reports, corporate documents, and scholarly publications. Triangulation was not possible in all instances, particularly with issues concerning the security of human rights defenders, as some testimonies have never been documented and/or recorded before. This is an area of particular concern in resource-rich regions, where access to reporting of human rights abuses and safety mechanisms are limited and fear of reprisals is often high. The intention of this research design was to gain a more coherent understanding of the situation and challenges facing human rights defenders working to monitor the extractive industries in Tanzania, with particular emphasis on their overall security, access to information, and rights to freedom of association and assembly.

Violence in resource-rich regions

Before examining the testimonies of informants and the dynamics of gold mining in Tanzania, we must first grapple with the cog of this article: violence in resource-rich regions. There is a host of reports and articles which explore violence in the context of natural resource extraction. These papers cover a wide range of topics, including effects on women, the causal links to civil war, and direct links to authoritarian regimes engaged in violence.² Much work has centered on understanding the dynamics of resource conflicts and the causal aspects of natural resources at the heart of civil wars and other forms of violent conflict. This article, however, calls for a broadening of the definition of violence in resource-rich regions, which would enable more effective articulation of how it “operates” and affects those it is directed against—in this case, the human rights defender. Violence, as will be explained, is much more than merely extreme acts, such as war.

In general terms, violence has come to represent immediate and overt forms, actions which are, as Nixon (2011) argues, “immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility” (p. 2). This sensational visibility is all around us: in popular culture and the mainstream media, for example. It is also identifiable in the resource-rich regions of the world where violence is identified as extreme, but where its lasting effects are difficult to monitor and often avoided altogether. Public abstractions of violence have come to be constructed around the “calculated mobilization of popular geographical [and environmental] prejudices for a public audience” (Gregory and Pred, 2007, p. 3). This discourse and practice is played out in the resource-rich region

of Tanzania through a security apparatus in place to ensure exploitation while adhering to principles set to defend against perceived “threats” seen as a challenge to further extraction, including subjects (i.e., human rights defender) fighting for their political rights, such as freedom of association and assembly.

Of course, violence is not a new topic of study or theorization. Galtung's (1969) seminal work and coining of the term “structural violence” is the centerpiece of this body of literature. It is he who called for a shift away from such a narrow understanding of violence as merely personal: “according to which violence is somatic incapacitation, or deprivation of health, alone (with killing as the extreme form), at the hands of an actor who intends this to be the consequence” (p. 168). For Galtung (1969), violence, comes to be defined as what causes the difference between the “potential” and the “actual”, the key being the major structures that enable this violence to take shape and therefore which constitute violence themselves. Understanding violence in its structural form, therefore, helps with identifying the links to present structures that the “sensational visibility” of violent acts often conceals. For example, despite often having causal links to more overt forms of violence, instances of structural violence induced by adjustment policies, corporate mega-mergers, and ever-growing income inequality are often hidden from view. Only the more recognizable, overt forms of violence, such as gun crime and civil conflict, are identified in this way (Nixon, 2011). In other words, structural violence requires consideration of the power relations of inequality: if members of a particular group, identified according to a specific quality (religion, ethnicity, caste, geographic location, etc.) remain unable to achieve their full potential, then structural violence is likely present (Beswick and Jackson, 2011).

Importantly, an analysis of violence must also include both its non-physical characteristics and its relation to nature, especially in resource-rich regions. In their edited volume, *Violent Environments*, Peluso and Watts (2001) deliberately approach nature and violence broadly in an attempt to move away from an environment which is “overemphasized as to dilute the specific and situated dialectics of environment, social relations, and violence” (p. 26) as particular theories, such as resource scarcity and resource wars, which focus solely on the environment and overlook other causal factors, so often do. For the authors, violence comes to incorporate practices and/or interactions that cause direct harm to humans. These effects, the authors contend, must be understood physically, symbolically, culturally and emotionally. This reasoning is perhaps best reviewed at length:

Such a definition encompasses modern war and its concomitant scientific and military activities, sporadic unorganized violence, and the reproduction of memories, rhetorics, and experiences of physical and symbolic violence. We view violence itself and its deployment within the environment or over resources as constitutive of individual, community, and institutional identities, including (perhaps especially) those connected with national states. Thus, state and other institutional forms of coercion, the deployment of terror, and other forms of direct violence against human bodies are all complex social practices that have to be understood in terms of both actual physical harm and the ways and contexts in which such harm is discussed, represented, circulated, coded, and deployed. (Peluso and Watts, 2001, p. 26–27)

Terror and fear underpin these non-physical features of violence. Conceptualized as more structural forms of violence, they are no doubt incorporated in, and often incite, the more obvious forms of physical and extreme violence commonly recognized throughout the everyday experience and reported daily by the media (Nixon, 2011). In this light, accounts of numerous human

¹ See: East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project (2012).

² For example see: (Fairhead, 2001; Kamphuis, 2011–2012; Le Billon, 2001; Ross, 2006, 2004).

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