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Conflict (im)mobiles : biographies of mobility along the Ubangi River in Central Africa

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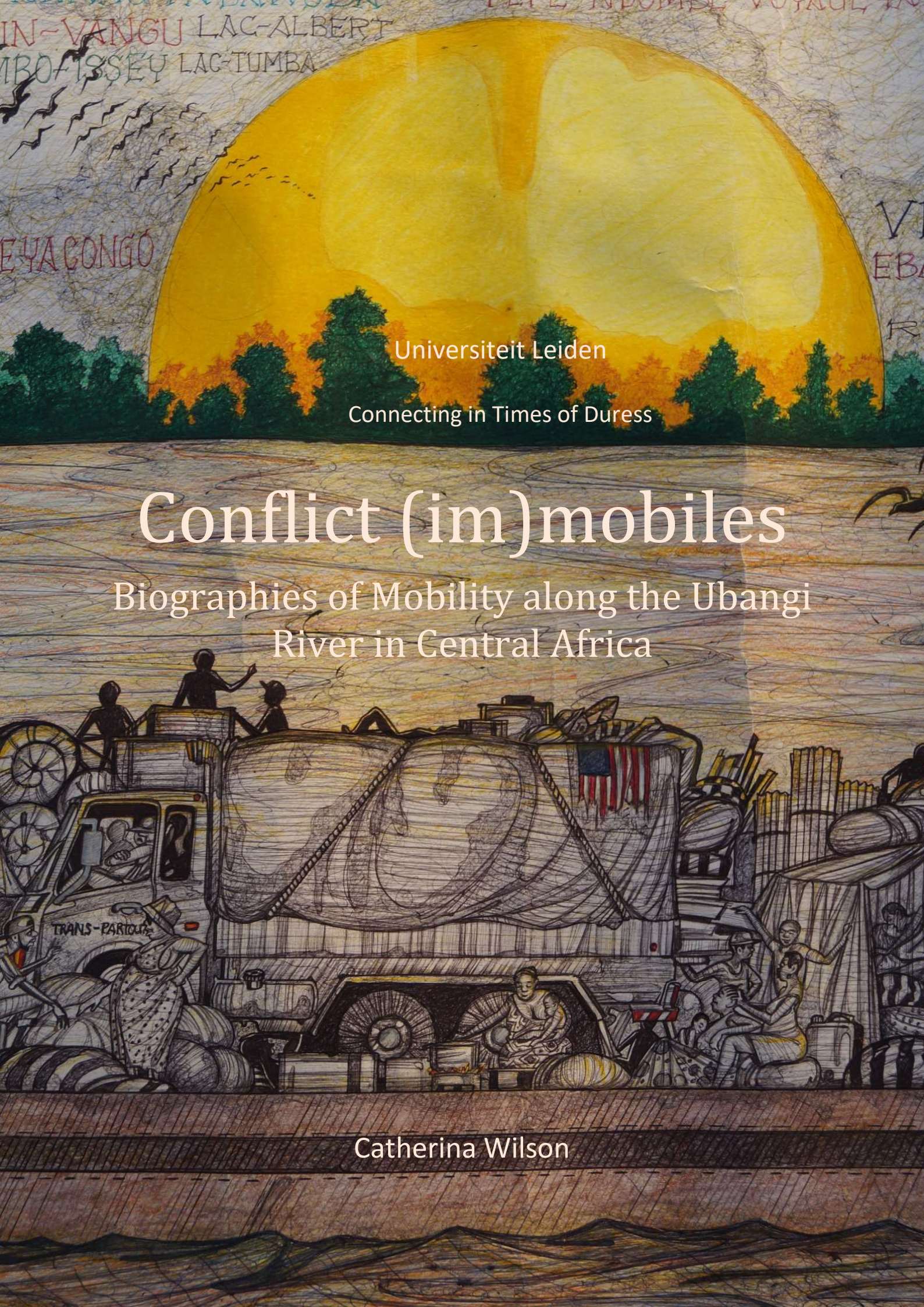

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Connecting in Times of Duress

Conflict (im)mobiles

Biographies of Mobility along the Ubangi River in Central Africa

Catherina Wilson

Conflict (im)mobiles

Biographies of mobility along the Ubangi River in Central Africa

Proefschrift

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Front: Detail from *Une ville flottante* (Sapin Makengele, 2017)

Back: *Gbalikouma* or *La débrouille* (Didier Kassaï, 2017)

Maman Clémentime, mpo na maki ya moto opesaki ngai mbala ya liboso tokutanaki.
Papa Henry Azunda, ndenge oyambaki biso maboko polele na Libenge.
Pour Juliette et ta force de vivre.
Sapin, mpo na kolakisa ngai nzela.

--

To Maman Clémentine, who gave me two lukewarm eggs the first time we met.
To Papa Henry Azunda, who received us with open arms in Libenge.
To Juliette and your strength to live.
To Sapin, who led the way

… and to all the conflict mobiles flowing around the world.

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Glossary

Arrondissement	City district; administrative unit of the city (legacy of French colonial rule). The Congolese (DRC) use 'commune' (legacy of Belgian colonial rule) instead.
Baleinières	Lit. whaleboats. Locally crafted wooden boats that travel long distances on the rivers in the Congo Basin.
Banguissois	Inhabitants of Bangui
Banyamoulengue	Jean-Pierre Bemba's ALC rebel troops in CAR
Bozizie	Derrogatory term that refers to François Bozizé's presidential rule in CAR (2003–2013)
Capoeira	Afrobrazilian self-defence sport (or dance) with historical links to slavery. During a '*roda'* (circle of capoeira), two *capoeiristas* (those who play capoeira) face one another in the circle while the others stand around watching and clapping. Besides the physical training, this self-defence group sport enhances the *capoeiristas'* sense of self-discipline, respect, solidarity, loyality to the group, and self-control. According to the Kinois *capoeiristas*, it also teaches them how to deal with adversity.
Cash Grant	Monthly money allowance supplied to the refugees living in camps by the WFP. It was introduced in the second half of 2014 and replaced the monthly food distribution, allowing the refugees to choose and diversify their daily menu.
Centro	Nickname for people from CAR
Chef de quartier	Administrative unit
Churnalism	Term coined by BBC journalist Wakeem Zakir. A form of journalism that relies on recycling press releases and agency copy and which involves little or no independent reporting or attempt at verification. Churnalism is also the result of increasing pressures of time and cost demands for journalists.

Cité	In contrast to the *ville,* the city centre, the *cité* is composed of the popular residential neighbourhoods where most of the Kinois live. The *ville – cité* distinction is a residue from the racist policies of the colonial period. At the time the *ville* was inhabited by the Belgian *colons*, while the *cité* was allocated to the Africans.
Commune	City district; administrative unit of the city (legacy of Belgian colonial rule). The CAR, Congolese (Brazzaville), and Chadians use *arrondissement* instead (legacy of French colonial rule).
Congolité	'Congolese-ness', or being Congolese. This term emerged during the 2006 DRC elections period and encapsulated at the time an exclusionary definition of national authenticity. The meaning of *congolité* has now expanded to incorporate the affirmation of autochthonic origins and the expression of Congolese collective experience.
Débrouille	The art of fending for oneself; juggling livelihoods and getting by.
Dongolais	Inhabitants of Dongo
Eid-El-Fitr	Celebration at the end of the Muslim fasting period of Ramadan
ERUKIN	Équipe d'encadrement des réfugiés urbains de Kinshasa. A Congolese NGO that works with urban refugees in Kinshasa and which had a partnership with the UNHCR at the time of research.
Évolués	Western-educated Congolese in Belgian Congo
Glissement	Manoeuvre to prolong the presidential term beyond the second mandate
Kambili	Heated palm oil replacing gasoline
Kinois	Inhabitants of Kinshasa
Kuluna	Urban youth gangs operating in Kinshasa. *Kuluna* are feared for their violence.

Lingala	One of the four national languages of DR Congo. It is widely spoken in the west of the country and is the vernacular of Kinshasa.
Mindele	Plural of *mundele*
Mundele	Lingala term used to designate white people (and non-African foreigners more broadly)
Operation Likofi	Police operation targeting gangs in Kinshasa
Operation Mbata ya Bakolo	Police operation targeting undocumented foreigners in Brazzaville (mainly Congolese from DR Congo) in 2014
Operation Sangaris	French military operation in CAR (December 2013 – October 2016)
Parlement Debout	An informal parliament in Kinshasa constituted of people who, after work or during free time, discuss politics on Kinshasa's street corners
Pirogue	Dug-out wooden canoe used to navigate on the rivers and lakes in Central Africa
PK5	Muslim neighbourhood in Bangui, also known as 5 kilo. Famous for housing the largest market of Bangui.
Pondu	Cassava leaves. A national dish in different Central African countries. *Pondu* (in Lingala) is a Congolese dish that consists of pounded cassava leaves cooked in palm oil. It is eaten on a daily basis. Even if prepared differently (often with peanut butter), the cassava leaves are also on the daily menu in CAR, where they are named *ngundja* in Sango. Other names include *sombe* (Swahili) and *saka-saka* (Kikongo).
Poto	Lingala colloquialism for Europe and the West in general
Sango	Official language in CAR (together with French)
Sape	Acronym for société des ambianceurs et personnes élégantes. The *sape* is a cultural movement in both Congos, composed of *sapeurs* or Congolese dandies. By dressing up (there are different styles ranging from classic and elegant to extravagant) and buying expensive

	clothing, the *sapeurs* defy societal rules and transform failure into apparent victory. *Sape* was turned into a verb, *saper*, which means to be conscious about one's clothes and to dress well.
Seleka	Rebel coalition in CAR that toppled Bozizé in a coup d'état on March 2013
Talimbi	Water spirits and sorcerers in the CAR imaginary
Wewa	Motorbike used as a motor-taxi in Kinshasa. *Wewa* means 'you' in the Luba language. It is believed that when the diamond-digging business declined in the Kasai, where the Luba people originate, many moved to Kinshasa in search of work and opportunities. They ended up driving motorbikes. Potential clients would hail them: 'You!' or '*Wewa*!' This pronoun became a metonym.
Zairianization	Confiscation of enterprises owned by foreigners for the benefit of Congolese nationals under Mobutu
Zaraguinas	'*Coupeurs de route*' (lit. road cutters), or road bandits

Acronyms

AEF	Afrique équatoriale française
AFDL	Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo-Zaïre
AGR	(or IGA) Activités génératrices de revenus
ALC	Armée de Libération du Congo
APRD	Armée Populaire pour la Restauration de la Démocratie
AT	Administrateur du Territoire
BINUCA	Bureau Intégré de l'organisation des Nations Unies en centrafrique
BONUCA	Bureau d'appui des Nations Unies pour la consolidation de la paix en République Centrafricaine
CAR	Central African Republic
CEMAC	Communauté économique et monétaire de l'Afrique centrale
CNR	Commission Nationale pour les Réfugiés
CNS	Conférence Nationale Souveraine
COCORA	Coalition Citoyenne d'Opposition aux Rebelles Armés
CPJP	Convention des Patriotes pour la Justice et la Paix
CTD	Connecting in Times of Duress
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration
DRC	(or DR Congo) Democratic Republic of the Congo
ECHO	European Community Humanitarian Office
EUFOR	EUFOR RCA European Union Military Operation in the Central African Republic
ERUKIN	Équipe d'encadrement des réfugiés urbains de Kinshasa
FAC	Forces Armées Congolaises (under Laurent-Désiré Kabila)
FACA	Forces Armées Centrafricaines
FAR	Forces Armées Rwandaises
FARDC	Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo
FATEB	Faculté de Théologie Évangélique de Bangui
FAZ	Forces Armées Zaïroises
FC	Franc Congolais

FCFA	Franc de la Communauté Financière en Afrique
FDPC	Front Démocratique du Peuple Centrafricain
FOMAC	Force Multinationale de l'Afrique Centrale
FOMUC	Force Multinationale en Centrafrique
ICC	International Criminal Court
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IGA	(or AGR) Income-Generating Activities
ISP	Institut Supérieur Pédagogique
M23	Mouvement du 23 mars
MESAN	Mouvement pour l'évolution sociale de l'Afrique noire
MINURCA	Mission des Nations Unies en République Centrafricaine
MINUSCA	Mission multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation en République centrafricaine
MISAB	Mission Interafricaine de Surveillance des Accords de Bangui
MISCA	Mission Internationale de Soutien à la Centrafrique Sous Conduite Africaine
MLC	Mouvement pour la Libération du Congo
MLPC	Mouvement pour la Libération du Peuple Centrafricain
MONUC	United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (up until June 2010)
MONUSCO	United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (From July 2010 onwards)
MWRG	Matsutake Worlds Research Group
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
ONATRA	Office National des Transports publicly owned Congolese company which operates railways, ports, and river transport.
PAM	(or WFP) Programme Alimentaire Mondiale
RC	Republic of Congo (colloquially known as Congo-Brazzaville)
RFI	Radio France Internationale
RPF	Rwandan Patriotic Front
RVA	Regie des voies aériennes
TVC	Titre de Voyage Conventionnel, or the refugee travel document

UDPS	Union pour la Démocratie et le Progrès Social
UFDR	Union des Forces Démocratiques pour le Rassemblement
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
WFP	(or PAM) World Food Programme

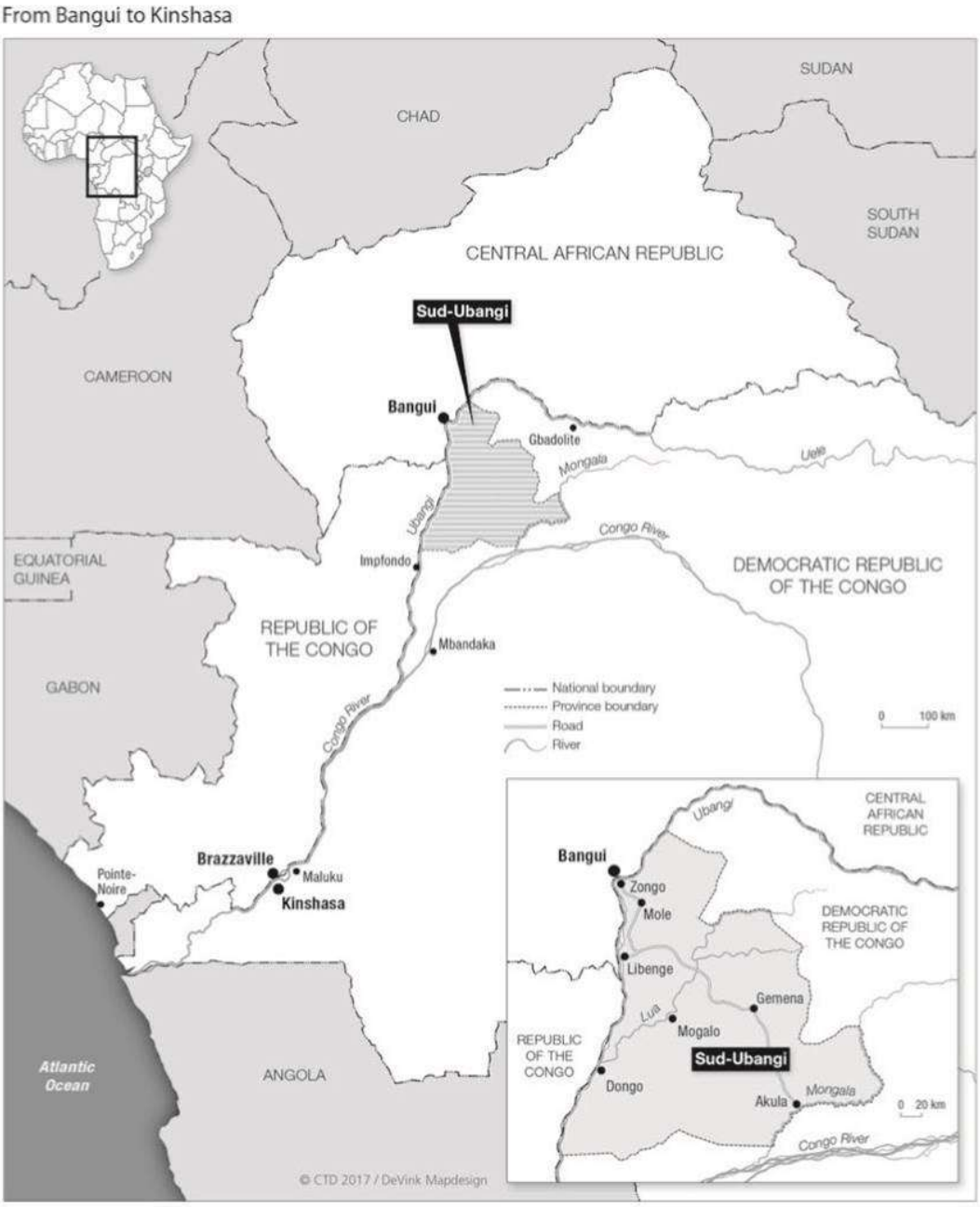

Figure 1 Map area of research: 'From Bangui to Kinshasa'
Map produced in collaboration with the cartographer Nel De Vink (2017)

Figure 2 The Central African Republic[1]

[1] © Nations Online Project (accessed 1 June 2019)

Figure 3 The Democratic Republic of the Congo[2]

[2] © Nations Online Project (accessed 1 June 2019)

Chapter I. Introduction

1) On rivers and moving people

Figure 4 Panorama of the Ubangi River
separating Bangui in CAR (right), from Zongo in DR Congo (left)

The above photograph (Figure 4) was taken during an early morning hike with Émile on top of the hills of Zongo on 25 August 2013. In the middle of the photograph, the Ubangi River[3] flows between Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic (CAR), which lies on the right riverbank, and Zongo, a town in the Sud-Ubangi province in the north-western corner of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo). The monochromatic palette of soft colours and the wide-eye lens perspective produce a sense of peacefulness—but deep waters are troubled waters. At the time the photograph was taken, Bangui had recently undergone its fourth successful coup d'état since independence, and the country was ruled by a short-lived rebel coalition which failed to bring stability. In fact, five days before this photograph was taken, there had been shootings which had been heard on both riverbanks. In 2013, the Ubangi River, which forms the border between CAR and DR Congo, separated a country plunged into a crisis that would grow in unprecedented proportions from a country which had witnessed war in the past but where peace had come to reign, at least partly, at the time of research.

Figure 5 Still taken from a short video of crossing the Ubangi River on a pirogue[4]
from Zongo (DR Congo) to Bangui (CAR), with view on Bangui's Gbazoubangui hill (15 June 2014)

[3] There are different ways to spell the name of the river; for the purpose of this thesis, I have chosen the English spelling instead of the French one (Oubangui).

[4] Dug-out wooden canoe used to navigate on the rivers and lakes in Central Africa

Taken a year later, the photograph in Figure 5 offers a different perspective of the same river. In addition to being a border between two sovereign countries, the river equally formed a vital mobile bridge, a contact zone.[5] Instead of separating the two shores, the Ubangi brought them together. Even during times of crisis, the crossing from one riverbank to the other, from one country to the other, continued. Even during times of crisis, the Ubangi River continued to be decorated with dozens of paddling pirogues, crossing with goods and people or floating in the middle while fishing or digging out sand to be used in construction, or—as rumour had it—illegally trading cigarettes and marihuana on the rocky river islands after dusk.

It is this very river that the CAR refugee-students, whom I would meet in Kinshasa, crossed when fleeing conflict in their country. For some of them, it was the first crossing; for others it was the second, and they had been refugees more than a decade before; and for yet others (especially the Congolese among them), crossing was part of their routine. Meeting the first CAR refugee-student in May 2014 in Kinshasa, Max, a gentle and inquisitive young man—more than 1,000 km south of the Bangui–Zongo crossing and almost a year after the photograph in Figure 4 was taken—felt like finding the golden needle in a haystack. In a city of over 10 million inhabitants, our paths crossed serendipitously. Soon after we met, Max introduced me to his friends, through whom I would meet many more CAR refugee-students. Thanks to him, and others, I decided to extend the research field from Bangui to Kinshasa. It is these students' journeys, life stories, means of fending for themselves, dreams and frustrations that stand at the core of this thesis. By extension, I came to understand that not only for these students, but for many people in Central Africa, mobility stands at the core of their existence, especially from a historical perspective. I found myself navigating a mobile field in which escaping conflict and calamity was just one out of the many reasons to move and in which mobility meant far more than physically moving from point A to point B.

The goal of this thesis is twofold, and the two aspects are interrelated: On the one hand, it deals with the history of Central Africa through a mobility lens, and by doing so it attempts to defy static and fixed (national) borders. On the other hand, by viewing the mobile lives of young refugees through this mobile historical lens, it investigates how their trajectories give form to the mobility paradigm. Combining these two aspects results in the character of the conflict mobile, and sometimes conflict *im*mobile, whose movements and mobility—and lack hereof—are induced by conflict. The refugee-

[5] Acknowledgements to Stéphanie Rupp for her presentation on metaphorical bridges (Libreville, 27 November 2018), to Sophie Feyder and Sara De Wit for introducing to me the concept of the contact zone, and to Lionel Ikogou for convincing me to use the photograph in Figure 5.

student, on which a great part of this thesis is based, forms only one avatar of the conflict mobile, however, and in this thesis I will argue that—in addition to the refugees—there are more avatars of the conflict mobile.

2) Mobility and refugee-ness

The life paths of the individuals discussed in this thesis meander like that of a river between countries. They do not stop at borders but cross them instead, and they often do so on repeated occasions. Together, these paths build the mobile and fluid identity of the region. From a theoretical point of view, this study situates itself first and foremost in the fields of migration, transnationalism, refugee studies and, especially, mobility. In the context of the African continent, migration studies still have a tendency to focus on South–North migration, where African migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers leave their home countries to travel towards the global North. Even though scholars have argued that there cannot be a single explanation for migration, the migratory journeys to the North are, nevertheless, often understood in terms of the so-called push and pull factors that influence potential migrants to undertake audacious journeys, in search for a better future (in economic terms).

However, the push and pull factors cannot solely account for this complex phenomenon. Even if migrating to the Northern hemisphere might feed the aspirations of some of the individuals I describe in this thesis, it is certainly not the case for all. Their physical and social migration takes place, in fact, mostly within the African continent.[6] Not all people who move are desperately looking for more prosperous economic horizons, nor is migration determined only by misery and danger. Personal motivations and ambitions also drive the individual to undertake audacious journeys (Bredeloup 2008; Lucht 2012). Also, within Africa many people move because they want to discover (themselves) and travel (De Bruijn, van Dijk and Foeken 2001; Klute and Hahn 2007). Following this thread, I try to underline throughout this thesis that different people migrate for different reasons and that every path is unique. I do so by way of focusing on individuals in Central Africa, a region that has often been described as being at the margins of the world (Marchal 2009).

Just like other people across the globe, Central Africans travel and migrate—and have travelled and migrated in the past—for different reasons: to merchandise goods across borders, to visit family and

[6] There are more refugees in Africa than in the global North. It must be added that there are numerous individuals from the North who migrate southwards, albeit temporarily, in order to build up a career—for instance, in the humanitarian agency world.

loved ones, to look for opportunities elsewhere, to study abroad, to escape conflict and calamity, and so on. Mobility touches upon the core of their existence. Movement is thus not an anomaly, nor is sedentarism the norm (Malkki 1992, 31). In Central Africa's 'mobile margins', mobility seems to be the norm rather than the exception (De Bruijn, van Dijk and Foeken 2001; De Bruijn, Brinkman and Nyamnjoh 2013).

Building on migration studies, the study of transnationalism focuses on the multiple relationships migrants construct in the host country as well as the links they maintain with their country of origin. These relationships cross geographical, cultural, and political boundaries and result in the establishment of diasporic communities. Because of these relationships, the migrants are positioned in two places at the same time; their lives are interconnected and dynamic rather than 'rooted' in one place (Schapendonk 2011, 6); hence the importance of networks. This also applies for the CAR community of refugees who find themselves caught between Bangui and Kinshasa. But, while transnationalism scholars have successfully debunked the static notion of migration, they do not go beyond this bipolar reading of migration—that is, country of origin versus country of destination (Schapendonk 2011, 6). Moreover, as the term transnationalism suggests, it limits itself to borders as defined by nation-states and thus falls under the methodological nationalist fallacy, as pointed out by Glick Schiller and Salazar. Methodological nationalism is an ideological orientation that approaches the study of social and historical processes as if they were contained within the borders of individual nation-states (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013).

The multi-sited field I present in this thesis would not be complete if I were to limit myself to only two sites—that is, if I were to follow an A → B logic, whereby A stands for the place of origin and B the destination. In migration literature, the limited scope of this reading has been criticized too. In fact, migration (including refuge) is a combination of a varied and complex range of movements with in-between stops, pauses, and at times even reverse mobility (Schapendonk 2011; Schapendonk and Steel 2014; Schapendonk et al. 2018). In this transboundary reading, the present study covers an area that, despite its overlaps, is not often discussed as a single area and which, nowadays, falls politically and administratively under more than two countries: Democratic Republic of Congo (Congo-Kinshasa), Central African Republic, and (to a lesser extent) Republic of Congo (Congo-Brazzaville), Chad, and Cameroon. Rather than a dual approach across national borders, in this thesis I propose a transboundary approach, one that does not limit itself to national borders but incorporates more than two countries. This thesis invites the reader to un-border—that is, to engage in an exercise in thinking beyond borders.

Because African migration is often discussed in terms of forced displacement resulting from war or from various types of natural calamities, this thesis also positions itself within refugee studies. In fact, the most notable avatar of the above-mentioned conflict mobile manifests itself in the conflict-displaced refugee. Article 1 of the 1951 Refugee Convention defines the refugee as follows (UNHCR 2010):

> […] the term 'refugee' shall apply to any person who: […] owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.

In itself this definition of the refugee is broad and includes a variety of people who feel persecuted owing to their race, religion, nationality, or membership of a particular social group or political persuasion. There are, however, a couple of issues to point out. The first is the omission of persecution or threat due to economic (as well as ecological) reasons, meaning that fleeing poverty does not make one an 'official' refugee—even though poverty can be the consequence of political or social exclusion.[7] The second issue relates to the meaning of 'well-founded'; who has the competence to decide whether a fear is well-founded or not? And, consequently, who decides when a well-founded fear should come to an end or not? Certainly not the refugee-to-be.[8] In many countries in Africa, protracted displacement—one that lasts longer than five years (Milner 2014)—seems to have become the rule rather than the exception (Jacobsen 2005; Loescher and Milner 2005; Grayson 2017; Behrends 2018; Ikanda 2018; Jansen 2018). In the context of the CAR refugees in DR Congo, the most deeply felt threats are linked to religion and membership of a social or political persuasion.

Nevertheless, this almost seventy-year-old definition still stands. As a consequence, over time, the refugee has become an almost generic, ideal-typical figure, a generalized type of person with features that can render her or him recognizable (Malkki 1995, 8–9). Even though the diversity of refugees has been acknowledged (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al. 2014, 5–6), the plural identities that one refugee can 'juggle' (Malkki 1995, 163) continue to be overshadowed in studies on forced mobility.

[7] The differentiation between 'real' refugees and cunning economic migrants, so often heard in the Northern hemisphere, is based on this omission.

[8] One should also note that this definition, which is still of use today, does not extend to Internally Displaced People, who are formally similar to refugees except for the fact that they did not cross a border.

Refugees studies have been criticized for viewing refugees as vulnerable (the refugee-victim) or otherwise over-emphasizing the refugee's agency (the refugee-strategist) (Fresia 2007; Clark-Kazak 2011), a distinction that holds for Bakewell's encamped and also the self-settled refugee (Bakewell 2014). There is a discrepancy, for instance, between the stories of the CAR urban refugees, who create opportunities, fend for themselves, and fight to change the established political order, on the one hand, and the rigid definitions into which they are supposed to fit, as 'refugees', on the other. Therefore, in this thesis, I respond to Fresia's invitation to question, deconstruct, and expand this dualistic (and reductive) view of the refugee. In fact, in this thesis I go beyond looking at refugees as merely refugees. I do use the term for practical purposes, but I expand it in order to include conflict (im)mobiles, individuals whose mobility is induced by or linked to conflict. The urban refugee is only one, out of many, avatars of the conflict (im)mobile.[9]

Even though I plead guilty to underlining the refugees' agency and resilience (just as do Jacobsen 2005; Dryden-Peterson 2006; Clark-Kazak 2011, 2014), I do try to nuance this agency. In an attempt to go beyond the agency debate (Emirbayer and Mische 1998), I will first emphasize moments of decision or *vital conjunctures* which tell us something about the social becoming and personal growth of these individuals (Johnson-Hanks 2002). Second, I nuance agency by offering full and detailed descriptions of the conflict mobiles' trajectories, which I have followed over recent years across national borders. Finally, the longitudinal approach and the collection of oral histories, or biographical narratives, allow me to add a historical layer to the conflict mobiles, be they a refugee, a (transnational) migrant, or a humanitarian agent.

One of the things that struck me most when first arriving in the north-western corner of the DR Congo was that, despite the bad roads and other obstacles, people are very mobile. Before going to the area, I naively limited movement to the fleeing of Central African refugees from CAR into DR Congo. Reality is more complex, more layered and multilateral, and movement follows the same pattern; it is neither singular, unilineal, nor merely physical—but complex and plural in a variety of ways (Adey 2009, 18). For one thing, crisis and conflict are not the only reasons that force people to move; there are many others: family ties, commerce, looking for opportunities, studies. In other words, moving is the result of a complex spider web of motives. In addition to describing mobility within Africa, this thesis moves along the lines of the paradigm shift that began to take place in the

[9] Urban refugees are 'urban' in two ways, first they are urban because they fled from a city (Bangui) and are thus used to an urban life style. Secondly, they are urban refugees in the sense that they chose a city (Kinshasa) as their location of refuge.

early 1990s, when the analysis of the fixed and delimited 'place' made room for an analysis of the more fluid and porous 'space' (Gupta and Ferguson 1992a). This paradigm shift from place to space was reinforced less than a decade later by the mobilities turn, where the focus continued to change towards a study of people on the move (Sheller and Urry 2006; Urry 2007). In the mobility turn, moreover, movement imbued with meaning became mobility (Cresswell 2006; Adey 2009). In order to study these mobilities, fluidity, and borderlands, the methodology followed suit (Hannerz 2003; Büscher and Urry 2009a; Büscher, Urry and Witchger 2010) In order to understand movement, as we will see in Chapter II, the researcher also has to 'move'.

Physical mobility is linked to the promise of social and existential mobility (Hage 2009; Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). Yet mobility is not equally distributed. Glick Schiller and Salazar define the 'regulatory and surveillance administrations that affect individual mobility' in terms of *regimes of mobility* (2013, 189). These regimes of mobility are highly politicized; and while the movements of some individuals are normalized and even stimulated, the movements of others are easily criminalized and interrupted (Schiller and Salazar 2013, 189). In Central Africa, for instance, the movement of international staff of humanitarian agencies seems to be stimulated; meanwhile, the movement of refugees is extremely regulated, truncated, and even fixated.[10] Not all conflict mobiles move in the same manner, nor with the same velocity—hence the parenthesis in the thesis title—and there are also conflict *im*mobiles. Many African states, including DR Congo, apply a policy of encampment that requires refugees to live in a designated area set aside for the exclusive use of refugees (Bakewell 2014, 129).[11] The present work considers the war in CAR, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), and the Kinois[12] lifeworld as regimes of mobility. All three define, sometimes propel, but more often hamper the movement of the refugee-students.

[10] In this thesis, I use the term 'fixate' as an alternative to 'establish'. The term was coined by Catherine Coquéry-Vidrovitch and is common among Francophone historians dealing with colonial Africa. While establishing supposes there was nothing before the colonial period—as if colonial explorers (read intruders) brought places into being out of nothing—fixating is rather the immobilization of something that did exist before. Even though I am not dealing with the colonial period in this paragraph, I allude to the immobility that this term contains. Hence, the movement of refugees is made immobile in a logic that resembles that of the fixation of borders and colonial posts during the last decades of the nineteenth century.

[11] Even if this policy is also applied in DR Congo, it must be noted that in comparison with Congo-Brazzaville or Tanzania, for instance, there is more room for deviation.

[12] Kinois is a term for the inhabitants of Kinshasa.

Regimes of mobility enforce immobility. The relationship between mobility and immobility resonates with Ferguson's interpretation of globalization, where immobility coincides with the 'ugly' side of globalization translated into the exclusion from desired (global) standards of socio-economic development (Ferguson 2006). By being modern, Ferguson understands having access to the lifestyle people hold up for themselves, in terms of education, housing, commodities, and health care; and I would also add that, in terms of mobility, being modern entails choosing one's directions and destinations, means of transport, and *velocity* of movement (Schapendonk 2011, 15). Just as mimicry is a way to assert rights to a wider, affluent, world society, so being mobile is a claim to membership in modernity in this unequal global society.

The empirical section of this thesis focuses on refugees' journeys. Herein, a journey does not coincide necessarily with the in-between phase of migration, between origin and destination, but should rather be read as a trajectory in Schapendonk's sense—that is, consisting of various movements that reach multiple points and go in several directions (Schapendonk 2011, 8). These refugee journeys will be placed against a historical background of journeys undertaken by other conflict mobiles since the 1970s (see Chapter IV). The student journeys to Kinshasa are only a newer wave of individual trajectories in this Central African region.

In all cases, these journeys, or multiple trajectories , are not merely physical and they do not end—just as my following of the trajectories of the people I met seems to continue. Physical journeys are imbued with meaning. In line with other scholars (e.g. MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000; Bredeloup 2008; Newell 2012; Innes 2016), I consider these plural trajectories to be not only geographical but also fundamentally social, existential, and transformative in nature. Mobility is a phenomenon that is emotionally, relationally, and socially situated (Nyamnjoh 2013).

3) Duress

To better understand mobility (including violence-induced displacement) in Central Africa, as well as the variety of reasons people move, one needs to look at the context of violence and its socio-political implications. Rather than limiting myself to the analysis of the causes of the current violent eruption in Central Africa, and its deep historical roots (which I deal with in Chapter II and especially in Chapter IV), I am more interested in understanding what violence does with people in Central Africa, how it colours their decisions and their paths and ultimately shapes their lives. Hence, the first important issue to underline is that, like mobility, violence seems to be a 'normal condition of life' (De Bruijn and Both 2018), rather than an exception. This normality seems to be reiterated by Johnny Bissakonou, a CAR journalist and blogger who fled the country in late 2013. He claims that despite his

young age (he fled before turning thirty), he had repeatedly witnessed different forms of political violence in CAR: half a dozen mutinies, three lost school years, four coups d'état—and also the way people close to him were being murdered by man's foolishness (Bissakonou 2015).

In CAR, as elsewhere, peacetime and wartime do not stand against one another as two opposing extremes but form rather a violence continuum (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004; Richards 2005). This continuum is also expressed in Vigh's *crisis as context*, in which crisis is not placed in context but in which crisis *is* the context (Vigh 2008, 5). Pre-war and war share the same social substratum and need to be placed in the broader social, cultural, political, and economic context. As Vigh emphasizes, wars do not start with the first shot or end with the last (Vigh 2008, 9). In her analysis of the Chadian context, Marielle Debos also questions the limits between war and peace and underlines the diffuse nature of violence (Debos 2016, 5). She introduces the term *interwar*: the spaces and times, between periods of war, affected by violence, even if fighting is suspended and there is no direct or open and visible violence (Debos 2016, 8).

Likewise, and in reference to the 2013 CAR crisis, Lombard and Batianga-Kinzi suggest that attention to wartime violence should not focus solely on armed groups as structures of violent mobilization but must also address the general practices of violence existing in CAR society. Outbreaks of physical violence form an extension of the widely participatory violent vigilantism that exists before and after war (Lombard and Batianga-Kinzi 2015). DR Congo has also been described as a country characterized by 'violent peace' (Larmer, Laudati and Clark 2013; De Goede 2015b; Berwouts 2017). De Goede, for instance, argues that the Congolese hardly use the word 'peace' when referring to the period since the peace agreement was signed in 2002. On the contrary, they feel that peace is illegitimate, exclusive to the elite circles in Kinshasa—or simply a farce (De Goede 2015b, 597). This argument resonates with the analyses by people I encountered during field work, such as Papa Madjelo in Gemena (in Northwest DR Congo), a well-informed and engaged man in his fifties, who claimed: 'Fighting started in 1996. Until today there is still war; it hasn't finished yet … We are not at peace. Where is the peace? Our country is not complete.'[13]

In order to better understand the meaning of violence, in terms of what it does to people in Central Africa, I dissect violence's context-bounded and interconnected layers. In other words, I suggest not to look at violence as a monolithic entity, but rather analyse its different layers through the metaphor of the *palimpsest* (Wilson Janssens 2018b) as contextualized in the CAR and DR Congolese

[13] Interview with Papa Madjelo, Gemena, July 2018

longue durée perspective.[14] A palimpsest is a manuscript on which later writing has been superimposed on effaced earlier writing, but which still bears visible traces of its earlier writings. By means of the palimpsest, I describe how layer upon layer of violence add up to duress. Consequently, I pay attention to the internalization of these layers, which are expressed in individual duress (De Bruijn and Both 2018).

Outbreaks of physical violence, as well as the social and everyday violence that precede and follow them, find their origins in other layers of historically deep-rooted structural, social, and everyday violence. In my interpretation thereof, I combine Bouju and De Bruijn's 'social violence' (Bouju and De Bruijn 2008), Shepherd-Huges's 'everyday violence' (Scheper-Hughes 1993), and Farmer's 'structural violence' (Farmer 2004a; 2004b). Social violence relates to any intentional action that can subdue another against his or her will, thereby inflicting, on the one who undergoes the violence, any form of physical injury or experience of psychological distress (Bouju and De Bruijn 2008, 5). Everyday violence, on the other hand, is inflicted on the world's marginalized; it is banal and unexceptional—'terror as usual' (Taussig in Scheper-Hughes 1993, 220)—and results in loss of dignity, nullification, the subjugation of opportunities, waiting, and the 'experience of having one's time wasted' (Lucht 2012, 72). It touches upon power hierarchies and feelings of worthlessness, the acceptance that some lives are of more worth than others. Everyday violence stems from a deep-rooted and long-lived history of structural violence, which is shaped by historical and economic processes (Farmer 2004a, 315). Structural violence is not spoken about, but it is tangible, durable, and a determinant of 'the way in which resources—food, medicine, even affection—are allocated and experienced' (Farmer 2004a, 315). Structural violence, moreover, comes close to Bourdieu's symbolic violence, in the sense that it is unrecognized because it is omnipresent (Bourdieu in Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004, 21), and it permeates even the smallest details in an individual's life and turns the lives of those who are forced to undergo it upside down.

In Central Africa, structural violence results in a dearth of economic and social opportunities for youth and older people alike, social uncertainty, and also in the feeling of living under wholly unaccountable government (Lombard and Batianga-Kinzi 2015, 56). Both CAR and DR Congo suffer from lack of infrastructure, not only in terms of roads but also in terms of health care, security, education, and employment (especially in the interior of the country). Nevertheless, the unfulfilled expectations Central Africans nurture turn the state into a painful presence (Lombard 2012a, 240).

[14] This 'plurality of violence' has also been discussed, albeit differently, by Tim Glawion and Lotje de Vries (Glawion and Vries 2018).

While it fails to provide for even the most basic needs, the state hunts the citizens it is supposed to protect. The state is present through the absence of its welfare. Kinshasa, likewise, is an extremely violent city. Violence here not only refers to physical and criminal violence, both present in the city, but is pervasive, omnipresent, and penetrates all the details of daily life. In this sense, Kinshasa has turned into a jungle where the law of the fittest and strongest rules, and where those who inhabit it see themselves forced to 'survive by adapting to the predatory rule of the street' (De Boeck and Plissart 2004, 89).

The refugee-students described in this thesis grew up in a context of open and structural violence, which, depending on their different social and family situations, they experienced differently. Bangui formed for many of them, to different degrees, a social moratorium, as Vigh would have it, characterized by generalized stagnation, state decline, massive marginalization, abject poverty, and impairment of social being (Vigh 2006b, 45). These hardships only grew worse with the onset of the new cycle of open violence in 2013 and forced many to flee. Yet, the refugees-to-be could not foresee the violence to which they would be exposed in DR Congo, and Kinshasa, which ended up adding another violent layer upon the already existing palimpsest. Like Bangui, Kinshasa also came to be characterized by a social moratorium. Here again students felt socially impaired;[15] in fact, they were confronted by a double moratorium, from which escape in merely spatial terms seemed impossible.

In addition to the layers of open and structural violence, the refugee-students had to deal with a third layer of violence, an institutional layer that superimposed itself on the chronic crisis in CAR and the Kinois urban jungle and which relates to their categorization as refugees and their relationship with humanitarian agencies (as discussed in chapters V, VI, and VII). Institutional violence resulted in frustration and sentiments of being stuck. In combination with the high expectations the refugee-students—and migrants in general—nurture of migration, the frustration felt at the doorstep of the institutions resulted oftentimes in despair. This internal feeling cannot be separated from the other layers of violence—and all together they inform duress. Duress, in its turn, colours how individuals look at their lives, and most importantly it colours their processes of decision-making and thus agency. Someone who spent two years in a refugee camp during his early childhood will, for

[15] Following Vigh's use of 'impairment of social being', socially impaired means being at a disadvantage or weakened in terms of not being able to count on social relationships. This is especially true of the CAR refugee-students in Kinshasa. Being foreign to the city, they do not know anyone; they do not have the social capital of contacts who can lend them a hand when they are in need.

instance, respond differently to refuge than someone who has never set foot in a refugee camp before. Resourceful individuals are able to find the cracks in the wood of the restrictive institutional categorizations in order to open up spaces and create opportunities (Behrends 2018). While limiting on the one hand, on the other hand (im)mobility (including forced displacement) and duress can also instigate social becoming.

4) Social becoming and vital conjunctures

Next to mobility and violence, this thesis makes use of the notion of social navigation, as introduced by Vigh (2006a, 2006b), and hence contributes to the study of coping strategies of youth in urban Africa (see for instance, Honwana and De Boeck 2005; Simone 2005; Christiansen et al. 2006; Langevang 2008; Esson 2013). Building on social mobility, social navigation requires a continuous assessment of the immediate dangers and possibilities as well as an ability to envision the unfolding of the social terrain, in order to plot and actualize one's movement from the present into the imagined future (Vigh 2006b, 52). Since during navigation not only the actor but also the environment moves and changes—for instance, due to migration—there is 'motion within motion' (Vigh 2009b). Unstable environments, shifting contexts, and shifting institutions characterize the space in which this navigation takes place. The conflict mobiles do not move in vacuums but in (political) spaces that are governed by different regimes of mobility; however, there is room to manoeuvre, to act tactically by employing 'clever tricks' and 'calculated actions' (de Certeau 1988, xix and 37 respectively) . Also, during crisis and uncertainty, opportunities can be created (Iwilade 2013b; S. Turner 2015).

As individuals do not live their lives along one single path or a predefined set of stages, the number of possibilities available to youth varies greatly not only from place to place and region to region (Vigh 2006b, 37), but also from person to person. It is here that I wish to shift the attention from social navigation, in general, to the socially structured zones of possibility that emerge around specific periods of potential transformation—otherwise known as *vital conjunctures* (Johnson-Hanks 2002, 871). Vital conjunctures are characterized by uncertainty, but also by potential and transformation (Johnson-Hanks 2002, 871). In this thesis, vital conjunctures are, moreover, informed by (potential) mobility and duress.

Determining where exactly the 'nexus of potential social futures' (Johnson-Hanks 2002, 871) is found, poses a considerable challenge. Is war a vital conjuncture? Perhaps migration? Or is migration rather the outcome of a conjuncture, an outcome that will lead to further outcomes? Drawing on Vigh and Johnson-Hanks, Thilde Langevang suggests extending vital conjunctures from moments to periods or

sequences of moments. One should not look for a singular conjuncture, but rather for processes of becoming that are fluid and continuous (Langevang 2008). Confronted by crisis, the CAR refugees, for instance, saw themselves confronted by more than one decision: Should they stay in or leave Bangui? Should they go to a refugee camp or look for other self-settlement opportunities elsewhere? Informed by their background and their personalities, each individual made different decisions. Herein, past experiences play an important role in shaping 'new' decisions.

Figure 6 CAR twins
Left: Twins during handball match RCA – Gabon (Kinshasa, 10 August 2014) – Right: (R) Twins in Mpila (Brazzaville, 19 November 2014)

The trajectories of two CAR twins (see Figure 6) I met in 2014, first in Kinshasa and a couple of months later in Brazzaville, are illustrative of the extent to which vital conjunctures and the paths that flow out of these conjunctures are individual, diverging at times, converging at others. The twins have practised sports since childhood and tried to join different clubs, the one in handball, the other in soccer. When the crisis developed in Bangui in early 2013, their paths took different directions. One of the twins was living and training as a handball player in N'Djaména. The other lived in Bangui and, after the Seleka coup, fled southwards to Kinshasa, where he ended up joining one of the local soccer teams. The twins met for the first time after many months in August 2014 in Kinshasa. At that time the one in Kinshasa was a refugee, while the other, who had spent time in Chad, was a member of the official CAR team and played in handball competitions. On his way back to CAR, the handball player decided to abandon his trip in Brazzaville and did not return to Bangui. Meanwhile, the soccer player, tired of Kinshasa, decided to cross the river and look for work in Brazzaville. After being separated for several months, their paths had converged again and I met both in November 2014 in Brazzaville, where they were living together. This thesis is filled with such converging and diverging decision-making moments and periods.

5) Historiography and the biographic method

Without stories we cannot know how migrants experience the world. (Khosravi 2018)

This study is located not only at the intersection of mobility, duress, and the resulting decision-making processes; it also touches upon historiographical practices and methodological choices. Mobility, for instance, has been described mostly in spatial and social terms, yet in Central Africa, mobility is deeply historical. My addition to the mobility turn is partly situated within this historicity. One way of looking at mobility from a historical perspective is by looking at the physicality of the different types of paths: the earthen roads and waterways. Roads and waterways are part of a landscape, they have histories, and they have futures too. Also, in Central Africa, some roads are the descendants of age-old footpaths (Vansina 1990; Giles-Vernick 1996; Freed 2010), while others are the predecessors of future highways (see Figure 10 in Chapter II). Roads expand and contract with the cycles of history. The avenues lined with majestic mango trees (planted during colonial times) in rural DR Congo, as well as the carcasses of old boats and barges along the Congo and Ubangi River shores, are examples of this history. With time, trees and carcasses have become archives to which stories are attached, inviting the researcher to read the landscape (Gewald and Schrikker 2017).

If we were to imagine people as paths (Zipf in Adey 2009, 7–8), their stories, too, can be read as archives. This thesis builds on oral history—more precisely, the individual (parts of) stories people have shared with me over the past six years. The overall approach is subjective rather than objective and deals with micro-histories rather than with macro-historical events (Szijarto 2002; Brewer 2010). Not only the empirical chapters in Part Two are based on these biographies; Chapter IV is equally composed by juxtaposing fragments of conflict mobiles' biographies. There exists an extensive literature about personal narratives, life stories, biographical research, and their value for historical and anthropological research. In the last decade, the historical biography seems to have returned, especially in the descriptions of the shifting fortunes of ordinary people (Perry and Lewis 2010; Renders, Haan and Harmsma 2016). Also, in Central Africa, 'biographies-in-context' have gained in importance (Clark-Kazak 2011; De Bruijn et al. 2017; De Bruijn 2018; Trefon and Kabuyaya 2018)

Among all the terms, I feel most comfortable with the 'life story', as defined by Maynes et al.: 'a retrospective first-person account of the evolution of an individual life over time and in social context' (2012, 4). I do, however, use the different terms (stories, histories, biographies, and narratives) interchangeably; and even if my purpose is not to point out the nuances among the terms, there are some issues that require elucidation. Thus, argue Maynes et al. (2012, 3), 'individual life stories provide unique insights into the connections between individual life trajectories and

collective forces and institutions beyond the individual.' It is not so much the 'distinction' between the levels of macro- and micro-analysis that are the focus, but the link, 'the interconnectedness of the individual and the social', that provides a basis for new understandings (Maynes et al. 2012, 3–4). These interconnectednesses open up, in other words, new avenues to learn about details that pass otherwise unnoticed; and through these details, we are forced to formulate new questions. Banner refers to a 'reciprocal interaction', or a 'dialogic connection' wherein 'the individual not only reflects the context but also influences it'. Therefore, studying the life story of an individual is akin to studying the history of a city, a region, or a state—a way to understand broad social and cultural phenomena (Banner 2009, 582).

This dialogue not only links the individual (micro) to the social (macro); it additionally connects different temporalities to one another: the (remembered) past, the (lived) present, and the (hoped-for) future. It also connects the time in which the life story is set to the time in which it is told. Unlike Rosenthal (2004), I will not stress the difference between life stories and life histories, because from an intersubjective and situated point of view, it is impossible to separate the analysis from the story. Akin to Fabian's memory work (Fabian 2003), the narrator and the researcher are invested in a common goal, that of 'doing' life story research together (Cole and Knowles 2001, 70). Biographical narratives are intersubjective and contextually situated and include a process of reflection on the part of the narrator (Willemse 2014). A recorded account can never be replicable.

In this thesis I use using different parts of different narratives in order to sketch a historical background to the life stories in the empirical chapters, and even in the empirical chapters I cannot claim to be using a total biography. Even if we, as researchers, may ask for 'whole' stories, the whole is never total and we should content ourselves with 'only parts of' the story (Willemse 2014). Perhaps in the omissions lies a challenge for the researcher to dare to be imaginative and creative in her narrative strategies (Chakrabarty 1998, 5), or even an inspiration for her to venture on a path of 'life writing', a genre that seeks to combine literature and academic writing in order to describe the lives of individuals (Veldhuizen and Weelden 2016) . I do not pretend here to replace fact by fiction, but hope to explore other, more artistic, ways of writing and accommodating knowledge.

In this thesis, I share the accounts of resilience of a handful of refugee-students: the difficulties they encountered along the way and the hopes they cherish for the future. Even though writing is a lonely endeavour, insofar as possible I have attempted to work together with the refugee-students. In doing so, they have become more than just informants from whom to extract knowledge. They are rather co-creators—if not of academic output, at least of knowledge production. This is perhaps what is

meant by collecting 'good' data—that is, data that goes beyond the 'public transcript' and takes account of what is not vocalized as well as of what is actually said (Thomson, Ansoms, and Murison 2013, 6). In my opinion, however, 'good' data goes well beyond the subtle and the not-vocalized. Good data should acknowledge the indispensable role of the informant in the research *and* in the production of knowledge.

6) Research questions and chapters

This thesis is divided into three parts. **Part One: A research field in movement** is made up of three chapters (II, III, and IV). These chapters together present the field of study in terms of its multiple geographical locations (Chapter II), its methods and methodological approach (chapters II and III), and its history (Chapter IV). The presentation of the field is followed by Part Two, which is composed of three empirical chapters (V, VI, and VII) dealing mainly, yet not exclusively, with the CAR refugee-students in Kinshasa. Part Two is closed off by a fourth, and shorter, chapter (VIII) that should be read as an empirical conclusion. Part Three comprises Chapter IX, a concluding chapter that encompasses the overall discussion of the thesis and combines Part One and Part Two.

In Part One I try to answer the following question:

How can we, and why should we, understand the region of study through a mobility lens?

In Central Africa, mobility stands centre stage and has shaped the region. Hence, in each chapter, I challenge sedentary and static understandings of the field and invite the reader to look at the field through a mobile lens. I urge the reader to look beyond borders and to un-border. I do so, for instance, by questioning established and 'hard' borders, such as the boundaries between national states, as well as by offering alternative borders. My purpose here is not necessarily to debunk, but rather to complement and to complexify static perspectives. For this purpose, **Chapter II. Conceptualizing a transboundary and multi-sited field** serves first and foremost as a visual introduction to this multi-sitedness. It deals with the multiple geographical field locations throughout Central Africa in its most literal sense. By the use of maps and other images, this chapter invites the reader to look beyond national borders. Chapter II, however, does not limit itself to the geography of the field; it also includes historical, digital, and (mass and social) media perspectives. As the period of fieldwork evolved in parallel to the CAR crisis that erupted in 2013, I have chosen to deal with this recent crisis not in the historical chapter but as part of this chapter—and also because it literally shaped my fieldwork-related practical decisions: where and when to do fieldwork?

Even though I begin introducing some of the employed methods in Chapter II, **Chapter III. Nomadic minds and moving methods** really constitutes the methodological chapter of this thesis. More than an enumeration and description of methods, and building on Chapter II, Chapter III deals with methodology. While 'methods' should be read as the actual building blocks of data collection, how this was physically carried out through interviews, snowballing samples, observations, and the like, 'methodology' refers rather to a philosophical approach towards doing research, as well as the ways in which the chosen approach colours how the researcher 'stands' in the field and relates to other people. Even beyond the field, methodology can illustrate the approach towards academia as a whole. As in the previous chapter, mobility stands at the core of the methodology; and the chapter begins, accordingly, with a description of travelling (i.e. physical moving). Slowly but surely physical mobility makes room for more ethereal types of mobility. Thus, in line with Adey, more than physical movements, 'moving methods' encapsulates being emotionally touched by something (Adey 2009). I was moved by the people I met during fieldwork, I was moved by their stories, and I was moved by the unequal power structures that inevitably underlay our relationships (Jourdan 2013). This emotional reading of mobility opened up alternative ways of thinking about more inclusive research, as well as pursuits of 'moving' in the same direction with others and creating with others.

Chapter IV. A history of mobility in a transborder region presents the history of the region from a mobility-inspired perspective. It deals with the history of Central Africa, mainly between Bangui and Kinshasa, from pre-colonial times up to 2011. The year 2011 was not only the year prior to the last CAR crisis, but it was also the year in which normative—and successful for some, yet not uncontested—elections were held in both CAR and DR Congo. These elections resulted in a supplementary mandate for the two incumbent presidents, respectively François Bozizé in CAR and Joseph Kabila in DR Congo. Looking at the region through a mobility lens, I explore how mobility shaped the region: from the establishment of forest communities during the Bantu expansion, to the different slave-raiding incursions in pre-colonial times, the colonial suppression , the decade of independence marked by crisis, the following decades of dictatorship and military rule, up until the age of so-called liberalization and democratization, which gave rise to different forms of rebellion. In this chapter, arbitrarily established borders are transgressed over and over again by conflict mobiles, so much so that their meaning needs to be questioned—perhaps not so much politically speaking, but certainly on a cultural and individual basis. Chapter IV follows and is constructed around a subjective chronology, one that is based on life stories; hence, I will not begin with pre-colonial history, which will be discussed 'unchronologically' at the end of the chapter instead. In the late nineteenth century, during the race to colonize as much land as possible, the bordering of Africa was

at its peak. My main argument is that even if these, often arbitrary, borders deeply impacted the region, they never managed to completely divide it.

In **Part Two: The CAR refugee-students in Kinshasa**, I bring forward the empirical heart of this thesis. As its name suggests, this part is based on the life stories of CAR refugee-students (their family members, relatives, friends, neighbours) I met, serendipitously, in Kinshasa and whom I followed, later on, to Bangui and Brazzaville. I have chosen the term refugee-students not to reduce their identities, but to accentuate their (im)mobility status, on the one hand, while on the other making an attempt to demarcate the group of youth with whom I worked. Not all were students in the strict sense of the word, however; some were still finishing high school, while others had studied some time before. Nevertheless, the group of youth with whom I worked were urban and educated, and because they moved, due to conflict, across an international border, the adjective 'refugee' describes them best—and, more importantly, they self-identity with this label. The refugee-student is a particular avatar of the conflict (im)mobile.

Part Two is made up of four empirical chapters: three full chapters (V, VI, VII), followed by a shorter 'empirical' concluding chapter (VIII). In a way, all the chapters deal with movement, or the lack thereof. Movement is understood on different levels: physical, symbolic, and existential. The chapters form sister chapters, as they constitute different sides of the same coin. Even though they can be read on their own, that is horizontally, I encourage the reader to read them vertically, wherein each chapter digs deeper and adds a layer of analysis to the previous ones. These chapters focus on the individual lives of these refugee-students by looking, first, at their trajectories from Bangui to Kinshasa (and for some, beyond Kinshasa); second, at their social becoming and entrance into adulthood; third, at the ways in which they find a place within their newly built community; and fourth, by doing so, at how they defy established social norms and explore the limits of their personalities. By following the lives of these students, I can better grasp the layeredness and complexities of both 'stuckedness'[16] and opportunities. The students fled Bangui not only on account of war—although conflict doubtlessly ignited their initial flight, and had there not been a conflict, they would not have left in the first place. Just as the crisis had done, fleeing also turned into an opportunity (Iwilade 2013b), but not one that stemmed from a deliberate choice.

Part Two attempts to answer the following question:

[16] Throughout this thesis, 'stuckedness' (a term coined by Ghassan Hage) refers to a sense of existential immobility, the feeling that one is going nowhere (Hage 2009).

How do youth find a place in their own communities and beyond—that is, in a world characterized by conflict and mobility?

Taken together, the different chapters examine different layers of the CAR refugee-students' journeys, in the most encompassing sense (journey into becoming and being). On every occasion, I dig deeper; and I do so by adding a layer of individual mobility in each chapter. The mobile focus of each chapter is different. **Chapter V. On moving and being stuck** deals with the physical journey—or rather, the plural geographical trajectories along which the refugee-students travelled. In a way, the point of departure is clear for all: Bangui. The point of arrival, on the other hand, is multiple and different for every individual; and, as time evolves, the destination keeps on changing. In addition to moving, Chapter V takes into consideration the lack of movement, the pauses during journeys, the detours, and the various moments of immobility and of being stuck.

While Chapter V is about physical (im)mobility, **Chapter VI. Quest of becoming: The refugee-student and the school of life** touches upon the quest of becoming—in other words, on the envisaged horizon, to which the journey leads: access to education. In this chapter, education is understood in its broadest sense: in terms of schooling (going to school) but also in terms of upbringing (education outside school, both within the family and the wider society). In a first instance, this chapter goes back in time to Bangui; but it is not to the Bangui the refugee-students left in 2013, but to the Bangui of their childhood in the last decade of the twentieth century. By digging deeper into their pasts, I hope to contextualize, or at least nuance, the decisions they would later take as young adults. Schooling and upbringing, however, are not limited to the CAR students' youth in CAR but also transposed to their growing up in their newly adopted home, the hostile city of Kinshasa and its particular required coping strategies. Kinshasa is transformed into a site of education in terms of survival, a school of life.

Beyond self-growth and tactics of personal survival, in **Chapter VII. Engagement and everyday politics**, the quest of becoming spreads beyond the self to the wider community of CAR refugees. Even if this chapter draws, again, on multiple experiences of the different refugee-students, the story of Euloge—and most importantly, his political engagement and growth and hence social and political mobility—will form its core. A couple of examples, in which he deals with the problems of members of the CAR refugee community in Kinshasa, illustrate how this engagement is rooted. This engagement is not new, however, but the continuation of Euloge's engagement as a student leader in his university years in Bangui prior to the 2013 crisis. It is here where continuity, rather than rupture, in migration must be understood. **Chapter VIII. Freedom, revolution, and creativity**, the last

chapter of Part Two, deals with continuity, not so much in terms of political engagement but certainly in terms of personal and spiritual growth. As I followed the refugees after the period of fieldwork concluded, I have been able to witness, albeit from afar, how some of these youngsters have changed. Chapter VIII, therefore, ends on a slightly transcendental note.

Finally, in **Part Three: Discussion and concluding remarks**, I bring together Part One and Part Two in order to better define the conflict (im)mobile. In this final part, I will incorporate a group that has been discussed throughout the thesis, without necessarily being its focus: the humanitarian agents. Just like the refugee, the humanitarian agent is an avatar of the conflict (im)mobile. Even if the nature of protractedness and stuckedness of the (forced) displacement of the humanitarian agent cannot be equated to that of the refugee, these agents are equally displaced as a consequence of conflict. Considering the different avatars of the conflict mobile leads us to reflect upon the nature of conflict-inflicted displacement: is it really that exceptional? Why is it treated as such? As a final point to this introduction, I want to underline that this thesis should not be read as an ethnography of Kinshasa, nor as an ethnography of Bangui, nor as an ethnography of a rural area in north-west Congo, nor as an ethnography of the connection between Bangui and Kinshasa. This thesis is an ethnography of mobility and of those who move within and beyond a Central African region.

Part One

A research field in movement

Chapter II. Conceptualizing a transboundary and multi-sited field

1) Introduction

At the time I was preparing for fieldwork in CAR, rebel forces were marching towards Bangui. On 24 March 2013 the Seleka rebel coalition staged a successful coup d'état and took control of Bangui. To many, this crisis came as a surprise; to those who had studied the country, it was the logical continuation of a year-long deteriorating political context (Lombard 2013b). In the context of a growing discontent towards the rule of the incumbent president, François Bozizé, this coup could have been predicted. It is always easy to reconstruct such an event in retrospective (How many potential coups dissolve on their way to the surface and transform themselves into more mounting pressure?). But it was difficult to imagine that the conflict would spiral down the way it did and that, in 2019, almost six years after the coup, the fighting would still not have subsided.

Because of the conflict, carrying out long-term research in Bangui was out of question from a security perspective. It was also unjustifiable from a practical and especially ethical perspective, as researching people in open conflict situations can bring them (more than the researcher) into danger. I thus decided to look for the Banguissois outside Bangui, those who had left the country and crossed the border into DR Congo, where I had previously carried out research as an undergraduate. The fieldwork which I had envisaged in the delimited setting of Bangui gave way to an explorative interpretation of what would constitute a transnational area of research. During the preliminary fieldwork period, from June to September 2013, I approached Bangui gradually, carefully, by land, instead of directly flying to Bangui. I was herein guided by the stories of potential informants, which would be reconstructed into personal hypotheses. At the time, many people had recently crossed the border and found themselves as refugees in the neighbouring country. The starting point of this research was situated in Kinshasa, over 1,000 km southwards—not because I was looking for CAR citizens in the Congolese capital, but because it was the departure point to north-western Congo. Gemena, one of the largest towns in the region, counts about 1 million inhabitants, so people say, and it lies on a savannesque plateau surrounded by fertile land on which coffee, cotton, cassava, palm oil, ground nuts, and other products were cultivated on a large scale in the past.

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce a somewhat unusual field—unusual because of its multi-sitedness and alternative ways of making connections. Even if this study confirms, and often makes use of, the existence of national borders and nation-states, it simultaneously views those borders, the river, not only as a limit between countries, but rather as a contact zone—confirming that

borders connect as much as they separate (Chakrabarty 1998, 13). Looking for the Banguissois beyond Bangui, I was forced to un-border not only my field of research, but also the way of looking at the region, and thus move away from conventionally defined national borders.

Inspired, on the one hand, by Malkki (1992) and Glick Schiller and Salazar (2013), in their move away from methodological nationalism, and, on the other hand, by Retaillé and Walther, who through their article 'L'actualité Sahélo-Saharienne au Mali' invite scholars to focus on the *espace mobile*, or spaces that complement geographical and political conceptualizations of a region (Retaillé and Walther 2013)—I present the CAR–DRC border region as a transborder *espace mobile*. By juxtaposing maps and other visuals, I invite the reader to think beyond borders. This chapter is thus an exercise in bordering and un-bordering a particular area of study (Wilson 2018b).

This chapter is rather a combination of geographical descriptions (site by site, hence multi-sitedness), visual and creative elements, and media analysis placed against a background where chronology does play a role. In it I will introduce the multi-sited field which covers Bangui, the north-western corner of DR Congo (today's Sud-Ubangi Province),[17] and Kinshasa. In order to better grasp the field in which the CAR refugees move, I have had the chance to extend the field—even if impressionistically—to include Brazzaville, Douala, parts of eastern Cameroon, and N'Djaména in Chad.[18] As the recent CAR crisis unfolded during the time of research, I have chosen to treat the events from 2012 onwards in this chapter rather than in the historical one. I do so by weaving elements into the analysis of the conflict throughout the chapter. Inspired by the CAR cartoonist Didier Kassaï, I divide the recent (and still current) conflict into two phases (D. Kassaï 2015; 2018): the first one relates to the Seleka's coup and its immediate reverberation; and the second illustrates the arrival of the Balaka and its aftermath.

[17] Up until 2015, Sud-Ubangi was a district of the Équateur Province.

[18] My understanding of the field would have been rather shallow were it not for the exchanges with Adamou Amadou, Inge Butter, and Mirjam de Bruijn, who work in Cameroon, CAR, and Chad respectively.

2) Un-bordering

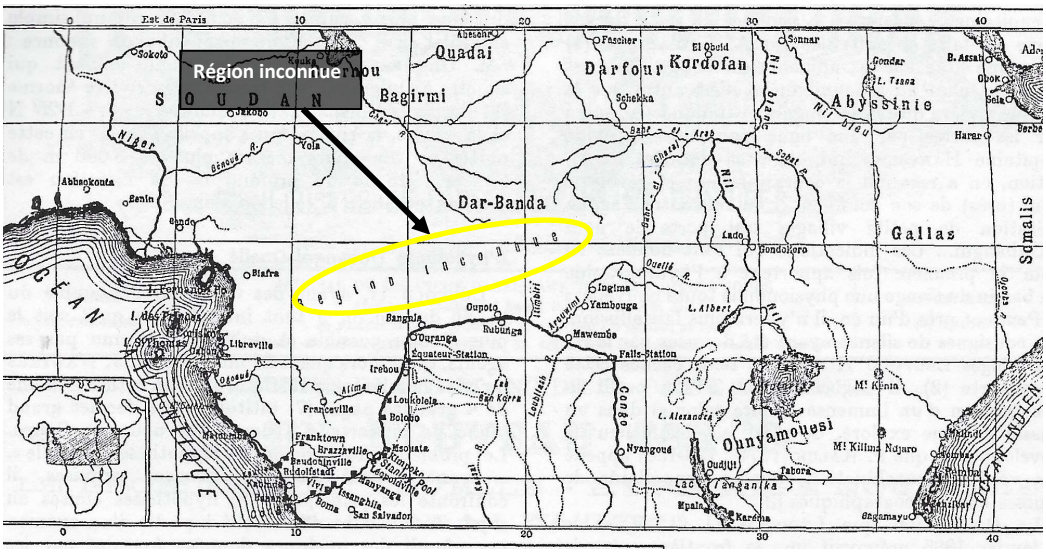

Figure 7 *Région inconnue* or Unknown region
Top: CAR is 'somewhere… HERE!' La Nouvelle Centrafrique 2013 – Bottom: *Croquis de l'Afrique centrale, dressé d'après les dernières découvertes* (Le Mouvement géographique n°1, 6 avril 1884 in: Boulvert 1985, 393). Notice white area with description '*région inconnue*' north of the Congo River, indicated by arrow.

Up until late 2012, CAR still formed a so-called blank spot in terms of research, relevant to study because there is so little known about it (De Bruijn 2012; Lombard 2016). This lack of knowledge resonates intriguingly with the late nineteenth century description of Central Africa's '*dernier grand blanc*' (Boulvert 1985, 390). At the time, just as today, the blank-spot discourse presented itself as an obvious argument to defend the need and relevance of bordering, but also of carrying out research on CAR. Even though I hope this thesis will contribute to filling a gap—CAR is an understudied country—I do not wish to do so by re-asserting the borders that already exist (between countries, between population groups, between disciplines); instead, I hope to contest them.

Figure 8 Colonial Africa in 1913[19]

In Central Africa, political borders are historically stubborn, in the sense that independent countries have inherited, in many cases, the artificially constructed colonial borders without interrogating them. Such is the case for the border between CAR and DR Congo, which is a continuation in the temporal sense of the border between Afrique Équatoriale Française (AEF) and Belgian Congo (how this colonial border was established will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter IV). Interestingly colonial borders were not static either–they moved. Compare, for instance, Figure 8 to Figure 9: During WWI, AEF lost ground against the German expansion of Cameroon or 'Neukamerun'. For a short period of time some parts of today's western CAR even fell under German rule. Between 1914 to 1916, the Germans had even access to the Ubangi and Congo Rivers, at the level of Zinga and Bonga respectively (Barral 2018).

[19] Wikicommons

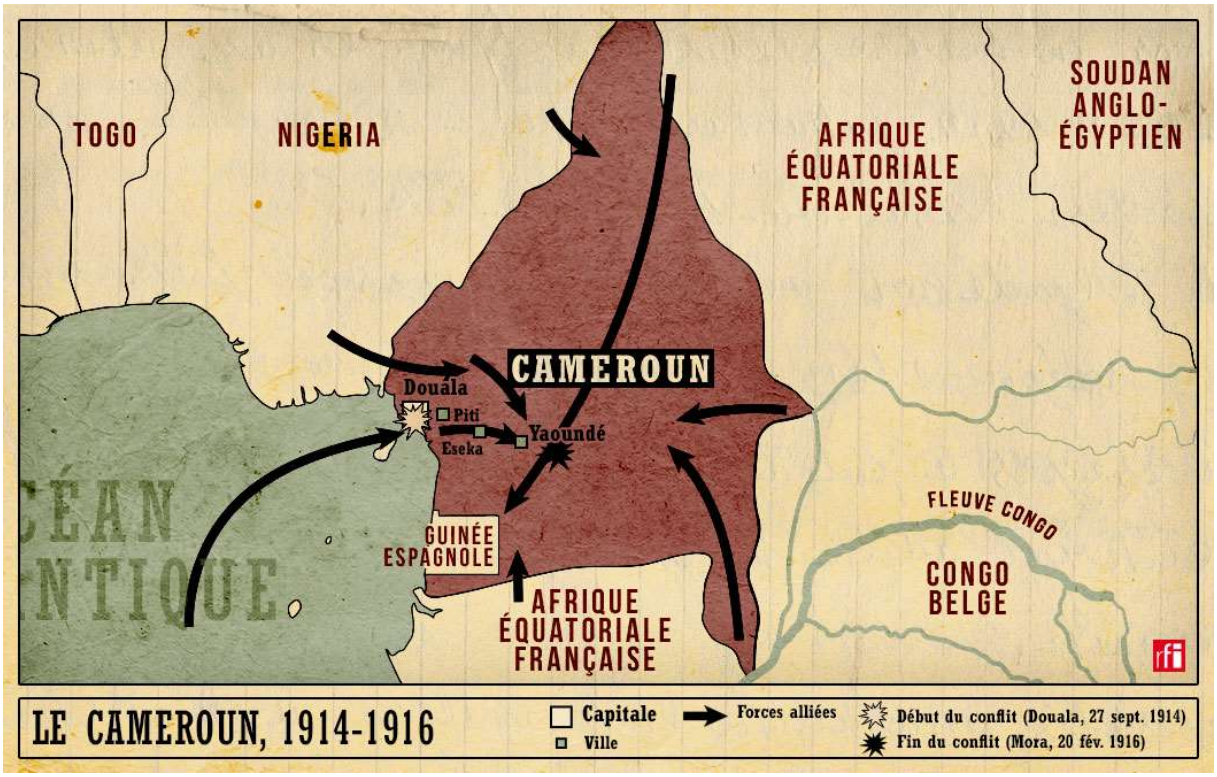

Figure 9 Cameroon 1914-1916[20]

Next to their political meaning, these colonial borders would have linguistic consequences regarding the official language use (i.e. French). While CAR adopted the French orthography and diction, DR Congo adopted the Belgian. This is perceptible during speech: CAR citizens say *soixante-dix* (70) and *quatre-vingts-dix* (90), whereas the Congolese use rather *septante* (70) and *nonante* (90); in writing, the former use *ou* instead of *u,* and *g* instead of *gu,* as in *Oubangui* (in CAR) versus *Ubangi* (in DR Congo), or *Ouélé* (in CAR) versus *Uele* (in DR Congo).

[20] Retrieved from RFI (webdoc) 'Grande Guerre, les batailles oubliées de l'Afrique' (Barral 2018).

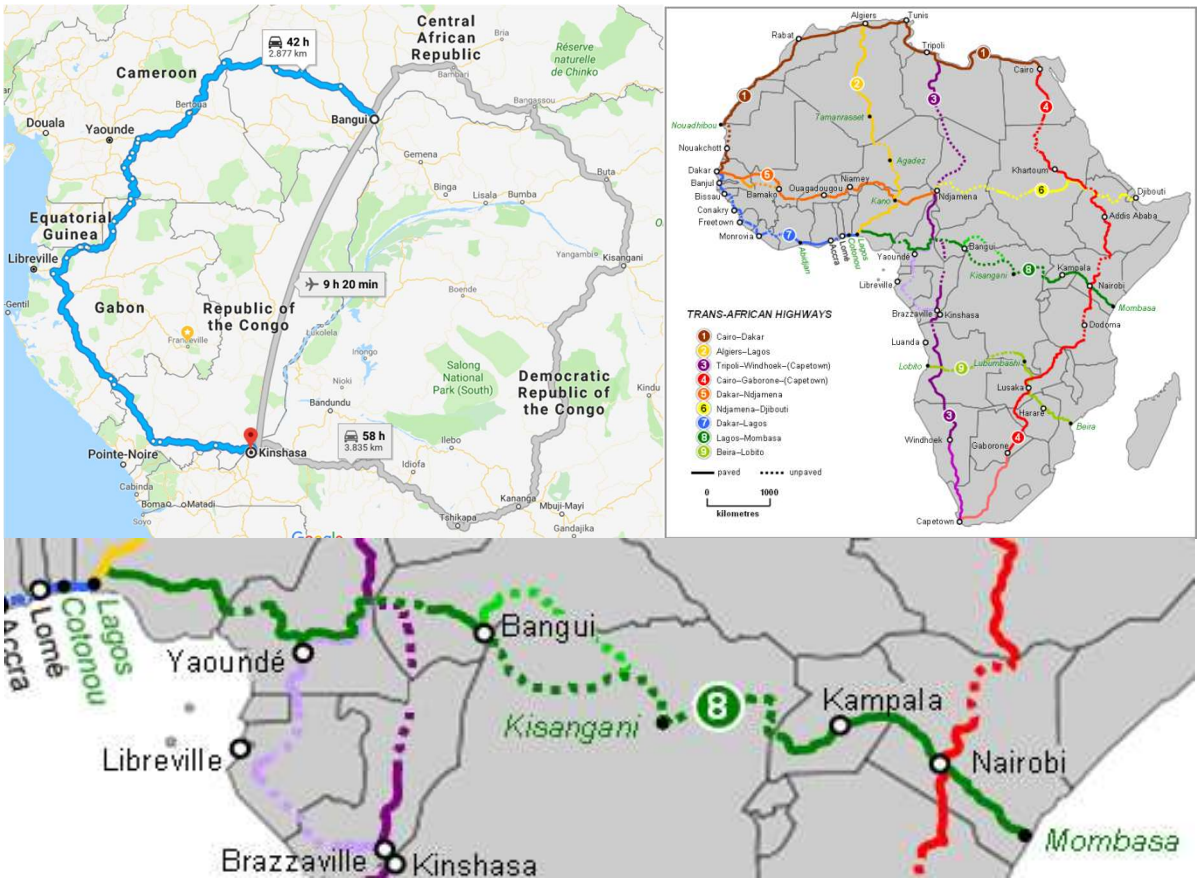

Figure 10 Roads and highways
Screenshot Google Maps, Recommended travel routes from Kinshasa to Bangui, last viewed 26 January 2019. Trans-African Highways with zoom-in on Highway #8.[21]

For some, the border between CAR and DR Congo is porous and forms a zone of contact. For others, this border seems to be non-transgressible. If one were to believe Google Maps, for instance, travelling between CAR and DR Congo, crossing its borders seems to be an impossible endeavour (see Figure 10). Google Maps, which seems to work very well in some parts of the world, is in Central Africa amusingly, or perhaps even ridiculously, absurd. If one is to ask for directions between Bangui and Kinshasa, the most obvious route—the fluvial one—is completely neglected; instead, routes of 2,877 km and 3,835 km, including ferries and multiple border crossings, are recommended. Even the travel route by plane, with multiple flights, several stops, and long layovers seems nonsensical. The disconnection born out of the colonial practice of bordering persists into the digital sphere. When juxtaposing Google Maps to the Trans-African Highway project,[22] the contrast is even starker. In this continent-wide road-building vision, the Trans-African Highway #8, which is supposed to connect

[21] Wikicommons: File:Map of Trans-African Highways.PNG

[22] Funded by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), the African Development Bank (ADB), and the African Union

Lagos to Mombassa, crosses precisely the area of study. It is interesting to note that the roads to be paved include the politically sensitive areas: Anglophone Cameroon, north-west CAR, and the whole of DRC from west to east.

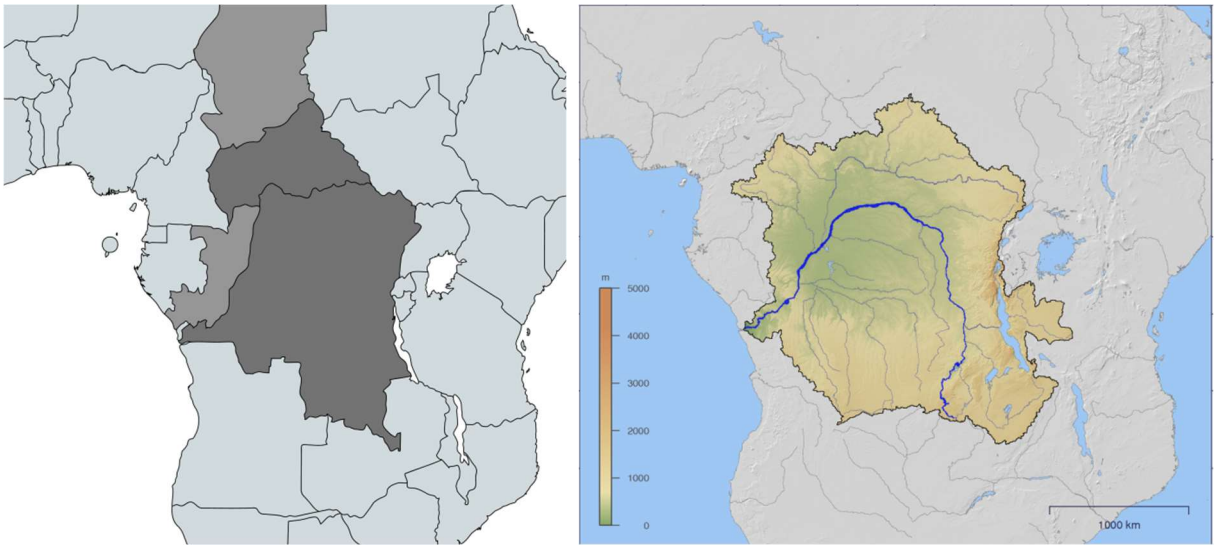

Figure 11 Congo Basin
(Left) Political borders of CAR, DR Congo, Congo-Brazzaville, and Chad by Mapchart.net. (Right) Limits of the Congo Basin.[23] The Congo Basin includes the DR Congo in its (almost) totality, in addition to parts of Congo-Brazzaville, Cameroon, CAR, Tanzania, Burundi, Zambia, and Angola.

Looked at it from the water, and remembering Figure 5, the area on both sides of the Ubangi River is not one of disconnection but an integrated unit connected by rivers, tributaries, and the life stories of individuals who move along, and especially across, these waters. Juxtaposing a map which indicates the political borders in Central Africa to one that represents the limits of the Congo River Basin is another step towards un-bordering.

[23] Wikicommons

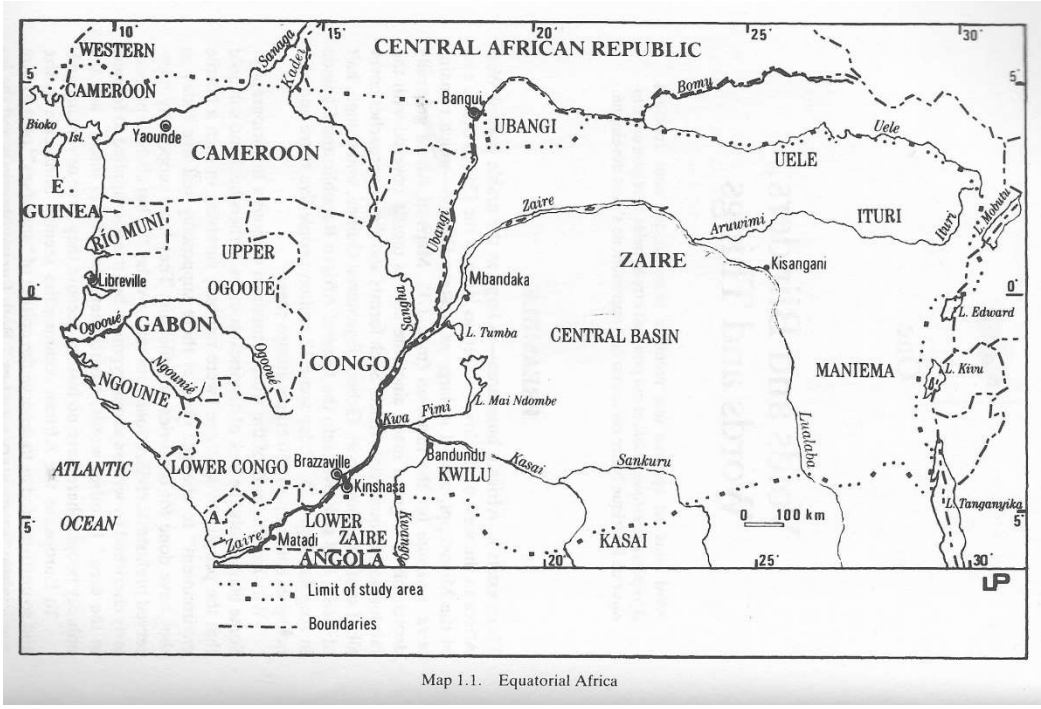

Figure 12 Equatorial Africa[24]

Following this logic of rivers, and especially forests, Vansina suggests a pre-colonial map (represented in Figure 12), in which Bangui would be cut off from today's CAR and integrated into the area covered by the rainforests of Equatorial Africa, connecting it to the south along the shores of the Ubangi and Congo rivers, and thus directly linked to Zongo, Libenge, Dongo, Kinshasa, and Brazzaville—but also to eastern Cameroon and Douala (Vansina 1990, 3–9).

If one were to look at the national vernaculars of the two countries, Sango in CAR and Lingala in Kinshasa and north-western Congo, from an historical point of view, one would have to agree with M'Bokolo, who states that:

> If we look at the longer reality, it is a reality of circulation, of mixing, of encounter. The languages we speak today are contact languages. Swahili, Lingala, even Kikongo [and I would add Sango to the list] as we speak today, they are contact languages and not localized languages. So we have to get out of this recent history to see the long distance we have travelled teaches us a lesson today. So before colonization, Congo was a space bustling with wealth and with people who did a lot of things.[25] (M'Bokolo 2013)

[24] (Vansina 1990, 4)

[25] *Si on regarde la réalité plus longue, c'est une réalité de circulation de brassage, de rencontre. Les langues que nous parlons aujourd'hui sont des langues de rencontre. Le Swahili, le Lingala, même le Kikongo [and I would add Sango to the list] tel qu'on le parle aujourd'hui, ce sont des langues de rencontre et pas des langues*

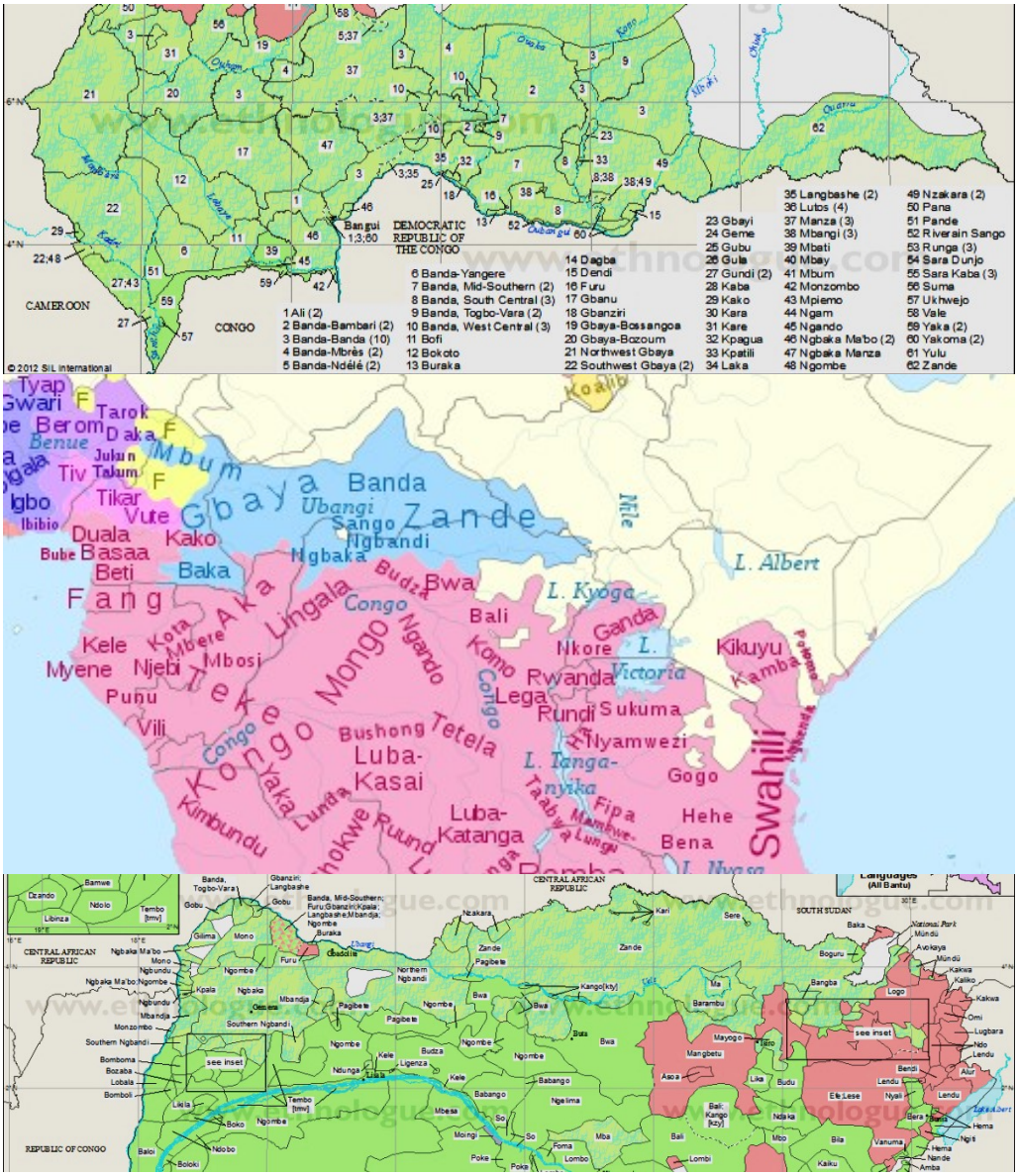

Figure 13 Language maps

Above: Central African Republic language map (SIL 2015a). Centre: Compilation of various maps by Commons Wikimedia.[26] Under: Northern DRC by (SIL 2015b).

Were one to zoom in on a more local level, northern DR Congo is dominated by Adamawa-Ubangi speakers –in contrast to Bantu speakers, as elsewhere in the country. The regional Ngbaka, Ngbandi,

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localisées. Donc il faut sortir de cette histoire récente pour voir le long chemin que nous avons parcouru donne des leçons pour aujourd'hui. Donc avant la colonisation, le Congo était un espace foissonnant de richesses, de gens, qui ont fait beaucoup de choses.

[26] File: Africa_map_blank.svg – User: StingDerivative work UserSUM1 - Language info compiled from various Ethnologue country maps, as also compiled in Muturzikin. — Created from FileAfrica_map_blank.svg. Based on design of FileMap_of_the_Niger-Congo_and_Khoisan_languages.svg., CC BY-SA 4.0, httpscommons.wikimedia.orgwindex.phpcurid=60792690

Sango, Yakoma, Zande, Banda, and Gbaya languages all fall under the Adamawa-Ubangi language family, while Lingala (and the regional Ngombe) are Bantu languages (see Figure 13). Following Vansina's map (Figure 12), the area north of the Uele River falls outside the equatorial forests. Language families seem to follow the same division, and the Uele separates Bantu speakers (on the left riverbank) from non-Bantu speakers (on the right riverbank). During the race to the source of the Ubangi River in the later 19th century, as we will see in Chapter IV, the Uele River, which confluences with the Mbomou River to form the Ubangi River, was contested from both sides, by the French and King Leopold's advisers. But the Belgian monarch was greedy and managed to establish the border along the Mbomou River. National and colonial interests do not run parallel to linguistic and topographic realities; they crisscross them.

3) Digi-scapes

Even if the transboundary perspective of the field is the most fundamental message I want to convey, multi-sitedness can no longer be defined exclusively in spatial terms but extends to the temporal and especially the digital spheres. Coleman suggests that social media and mobile phones have become integral parts of the social, a statement that also holds for this research (Coleman 2010). After the March 2013 Seleka coup, and especially after the Anti-Balaka self-defence groups made their appearance on stage, I began including the digital sphere as a site of research. Some of the crisis-induced changes I witnessed with my own eyes; others I followed from afar, both on cyberspace or by keeping in direct contact with friends, acquaintances, and informants. The sections on the local and international media and news making are the result of a collection, and my analysis thereof, of digital and grey literature (collected in peaks: December 2012 – March 2013; December 2013 – February 2014; October 2014). Initially, this 'literature' study was based the news on the big media outlets, especially the Francophone ones. RFI and Jeune Afrique proved useful. Their usefulness was not exhaustive, and thus I soon included other news sites, such as local newspapers, blogs, Twitter and Facebook accounts. Because digital ethnography seems to have no end to it—there is simply too much data!—during later field visits I opted to concentrate on the personal stories rather than on digital connections, without leaving the latter completely aside.

The connections I established at first digitally helped me to come into 'real' physical contact with different people in CAR, both in Bangui and in the Diaspora (both in Africa and in Europe). This proves that the digital does not occur out there in an ethereal cyberspace, but is linked and cannot exist without the physical or analogue contact (Coleman 2010; Miller 2016). The most memorable of all was the encounter with an individual I started following through Facebook in 2014 and whom I

ended up meeting in N'Djaména in 2017. Had I not followed him through Facebook, I would not have been able to come into contact with him, and we would never have met. Conversely, coming into contact in 'real life' does not happen automatically and requires more than just a digital connection. During my research period, from 2013 to 2016, the digital sphere kept on growing and changing, and also the ways in which people connect and disconnect.

4) The Seleka coup

> Only a few stars shone in the sky. That night, a blaze of violence erupted. (M.-L. Kassaï, in preparation)

Seleka's first coup attempt took place just after Christmas 2012. The newly formed rebel coalition (Seleka means alliance or marriage in Sango) amalgamated new and old rebel groups and was headed by politico-military entrepreneurs with 'fluid loyalties', to use Debos' term (2008), individuals who had been active in northern CAR since the mid-2000s.[27] Despite their disparate views, the Seleka shared one common goal: toppling Bozizé, whom they accused of disrespecting former peace agreements which pledged the release of political prisoners and the payment and reintegration of disarmed fighters. Even if the Seleka was not new in content, their structure (a coalition) and their common thrust were. It presented a real menace. Yet, in the initial stage, Bozizé failed to take the threat seriously. The January 2013 Libreville agreement (the first of eight attempted peace agreements) was signed without a willingness to compromise. After this futile attempt at power sharing, Bozizé returned to business as usual, ruling a government that was not in the service of its citizens but of itself. In a government characterized by patronage links and clientelism, all the important ministerial posts were held by Bozizé's relatives and acquaintances , who belonged mainly to the Gbaya ethnic group. Even for minor jobs in the state apparatus it was useful to have the right family name. This practice excluded, once again, the majority of the CAR population. As they

[27] The Seleka was composed of at least five different groups. The first three already existed before 2012, the last two were newly formed groups: (1) The Convention des patriotes pour la justice et la paix (CPJP), active since 2008 and whose political wing was led by Charles Massi, who disappeared (and was presumably killed by Bozizé) in 2010. (2) The Union des forces démocratiques pour le rassemblement (UFDR), active since 2006 and headed by Michel Djotodia, former CAR consul in Nyala (Sudan) and president after the coup. (3) The Front démocratique du peuple centrafricain (FDPC), active since 2008 and led by warlord Abdoulaye Miskine, a confidante of CAR's former president Patassé. (4) The Convention patriotique du salut du kodro (CPSK, kodro meaning country in Sango), established in June 2012 by Mohamed-Moussa Dhaffane, a former member of the CPJP and formerly employed by the CAR Red Cross. (5) The discrete and even clandestine Alliance pour la renaissance et la refondation (A2R).

witnessed no change in Bozizé's governance, the Seleka leaders, who claimed to represent the most marginalized citizens of all—those living on the margins of the margin—lost patience and rejected yet another un-implemented agreement and false promises. A couple of weeks after Libreville, the Seleka continued marching southwards towards Bangui.

The Bozizé regime was not only unpopular in CAR but also fell out of grace in Chad and France, initially two important supporters of the regime. It was, after all, Chad that had given force to Bozizé's rebellion to topple Patassé in 2003, and CAR has long been considered to be Chad's backyard—for several reasons. First of all, northern CAR is a strategic region in terms of geopolitics. In a perverse way, instability in northern CAR means stability in Chad. Being able to roam and steal within this buffer zone, as *zaraguinas* (road bandits) or as poaching and anti-poaching agents, kept potential Chadian rebels distracted from preparing an organized rebellion that could topple the incumbent regime in N'Djaména (see also Saïbou 2010; Lombard 2012). Second, there are important, yet unexploited, oilfields in northern CAR. Being part of the same petroleum reservoir as the eastern Chadian oilfields, it is in Déby's interest to keep the fields in CAR unexploited for as long as possible. Moreover, Chad being a dry country and dependent on an ever-shrinking Lake Chad, Déby has an eye on CAR's water resources. We should also not forget that commercial links exist between the two countries, and remittances and revenues used to be sent from CAR to Chad.[28] In addition to this, Bozizé had sent away his former presidential guard, composed mostly of Chadians, and replaced it with South Africans troops, a new actor in the region.[29]

France did not intervene in CAR directly after the coup (military interventions were now exerted indirectly through their Chadian partners) as it previously had done during the mutinies in the 1990s and would do again under Operation Sangaris, launched at the end of 2013. The old colonial ruler, nevertheless, continued to exert a sphere of influence over CAR's politics and natural and economic resources. Not only were the largest enterprises in CAR in French hands; it also enjoyed an almost monopolist position in the exploitation of CAR's soil. It was said that Bozizé had turned to the Chinese and Canadians, respectively, for the exploitation of oil fields in the north and uranium fields

[28] Acknowledgements to Inge Butter. This is one of the important themes in her PhD thesis.

[29] As the Seleka entered Bangui, Zuma was one of the only ones to grant Bozizé support. The South African troops had formed in fact the biggest obstacle for the Seleka. Thirteen South African troops lost their lives, which caused huge criticism back home: what were they doing in CAR and why were they supporting a defecting government? It was said there were lucrative bilateral deals between the two heads of state (Keating 2013; Allison 2014).

in the south of the country (Branco 2016; Thomas 2016). By swapping allies, Bozizé managed to anger both Chadian and French interests.

But just as Chad had supported Bozizé in 2003, it did the same for the Seleka in 2013—a support that was condoned by France (Makaila 2013). It was said colloquially that Bozizé, by creating an antecedent, had shown the Seleka the road towards Bangui—a path that lay open again in 2013. While Déby used the Seleka to get rid of Chadian rebels, some of whom went missing (Marchal 2013), Bozizé, in a last and cowardly attempt to save his falling regime, mobilized (read manipulate) the uneducated youth in Bangui. In the months before the coup, he distributed white weapons[30] enveloped in discourses of patriotism. These loyal 'young patriots', or urban militias also known as COCORA (Kpatindé 2013),[31] 'defended' the city by setting up roadblocks where they would interrogate people in Sango–those who were unable to respond were labelled as intruders and sent to the police. Nonetheless, the Seleka overthrew Bozizé in a successful coup d'état on 24 March 2013. Rumour had it that the fugitive president flew out of Bangui in a helicopter borrowed from Bemba and was said to be seen at the airport in Gemena, before re-appearing a couple of days later in Cameroon. Many of his family members did, however, flee to Kinshasa.

The Banguissois population celebrated the arrival of the Seleka with apprehension. Comparing the Seleka's coup in 2013 with Bozizé's coup ten years before in 2003, Le Firmin, one of the CAR refugee-students in Kinshasa, whom I will extensively present in the following chapters, explained:

> On the 23rd, we saw the Seleka enter Bangui. I was on campus. To begin with, they had entered peacefully; there were no bloodbaths. They entered; we were on campus; we applauded them, because we did not like the violations made by Bozizé's people. We thought of it [the entrance of the Seleka] as a liberation [from Bozizé]. (Interview Firmin, Kinshasa, 13 February 2015)[32]

The Seleka alliance was short-lived. Soon after they took power, it became clear that the coalition of rebels, having accomplished the goal that held them together—overthrowing Bozizé—would not survive. The first rupture took place when Miskine and his men left the coalition in April 2013 and fled to Cameroon (AFP 2013a)—in Bertoua I was shown the Hôtel de Paris where Miskine had

[30] From the French '*armes blanches*': non-firearm weapons, such as knives, swords, machetes, spears.

[31] Coalition Citoyenne d'Opposition aux Rebelles Armés ou Coalition citoyenne contre les rébellions armées

[32] *Le 23 on a vu Seleka entrer à Bangui. J'étais au campus. Pour un début, ils avaient pacifié leur entrée, il n'y avait pas de bains de sang, ils sont entrés, on était au campus, nous les avons applaudi, parce que certaines violations faites par les gens de Bozizé, on n'avait pas aimé. On pense que c'était une libération quelque part* [*de Bozizé*].

resided for several weeks. In June, Dhaffane, the new minister of water and forestry, was sacked due to financial embezzlement, racketeering, and recruitment of fighters (RFI 2013a). In addition to this dismembering, Djotodia did not have the means to pay his troops and thus did not exert real control over them. The initial euphoria after the Seleka's coup was soon replaced by widespread looting and general violence.

When I first arrived in Bangui in August 2013, the city had been recently pillaged. During walks with friends and informants, they would repeatedly point out the many shops that had been looted, insisting that Bangui did not used to be this empty. In local memory, images of Seleka rebels looting fridges, then heading northwards on the back of pick-ups and siphoning them into Chad and Sudan (Soudan 2013), were superimposed on those of the Banyamoulengue rebels, ten years earlier, siphoning looted goods on pirogues across the river into DR Congo (see Chapter IV). To the chagrin of many Banguissois, the abuses committed by the Seleka have not been sufficiently documented (Mudge 2013; Both et al. unpublished). Impunity ruled the day, and it took over five years and two changes in regime before citizens were able to finally start filing their complaints.[33] Trials have been slowly set up, but insufficiently so. Moreover, as is often the case, the chaos that accompanied the entrance of the Seleka served as an alibi to avenge old grievances. Insecurity had seeped down through every layer of the society, damaging the social tissue by installing mistrust among neighbours, colleagues, and acquaintances, and forcing many to leave and find refuge elsewhere.

5) The two riverbanks of the Ubangi

a) The Sud-Ubangi

Gemena

Were it not for its deficient, and almost non-existent, infrastructure, Gemena would be a booming town. But the reality is one of complete darkness after dusk; the town is not electrified and depends on petrol-run generators and young girls carrying heavy water drums on their heads; there is no tap water, and the roads are unpaved red earth. Like other villages, towns, and cities in DR Congo,

[33] A Special Criminal Court (SCC) or (CPS Court Pénale Spéciale) was established by law in 2015 and finally inaugurated in 2018. This hybrid tribunal (composed of national and international observers) has jurisdiction over grave human rights violations and serious violations of international humanitarian law committed since 2003

Gemena is 'enclaved' *(enclavée)* [34] or isolated, cut off, not so much in the sense of being land-locked[35] but of being locked away from opportunities, change, development—in other words, forgotten, a stagnant city. Papa Madjelo, who has lived in Gemena for several decades, cannot but regret the current state of affairs:

> There is no enterprise here, not one … we could go to the fields, cultivate, but who will buy the produce? Have you seen people buying groundnuts in the city market? Nothing! … Where will we end up? … There is no life here. I think you have walked around, you have remarked, '*Mondele* give me money, I'm hungry!' You have seen it with your own eyes. Don't think it is a lie; it is the truth! (Interview Papa Madjelo, Gemena July 2013)[36]

Despite its lack of infrastructure, as well as its dependency on roads (unlike many Congolese cities in the northern half of DR Congo, Gemena is not situated on the shores of a large river), a bustling energy is felt in the city. The Gemenois[37] are entrepreneurial, and they refer to their city in terms of a dynamic '*plaque tournante de l'Équateur*'. Motorbikes and locally adapted long-distance truck ateliers decorate the city centre, where all the paths converge. There are roads, lined by majestic mango trees, that date back to the colonial administration and which leave Gemena to the four points of the compass; these unpaved roads are sometimes too dusty, at other times too muddy, yet they are always travelled. There are two roads relevant to this thesis: the western axis in the direction of Libenge and Bangui; and the southern axis in the direction of Akula, a town situated on the Mongala river, an affluent of the Congo and in a way the harbour of Gemena.

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[34] The verb *enclaver* and all its inflections, *enclavement*, *désenclavement* is an idiom commonly used in DR Congo. During my Master's research in Kisangani (2009), I often visited an Internet café to consult my e-mails (there were no smartphones at the time). The Internet café was part of a local NGO that fought for Kisangani's '*désenclavement*'.

[35] DR Congo does have access to the ocean, even if its littoral is only 30 km long, as well as an important inland harbour city (Matadi) on the Congo River in the south-west extreme of the country. It is furthermore preparing to build a deep-sea harbour in Banana.

[36] *Mais toza na entreprise moko té, société ezali té, … Donc soit tokende elanga, okokata mpe bilanga wana, nani akosombela yo biloko yango? Omoni awa, bato bazosomba kuna nguba na ville? Rien! … Mpo tokosuka wapi? … Vie ezali té. Nakanisi obimi oza kotala, mondele pesa ngai mbongo nzala! Omoni yo moko. Kokanisa té que eza lokuta, c'est vrai.*

[37] Inhabitant of Gemena

Figure 14 Connectivity in Gemena
(from left to right): Local money transfer agency showing connections in Central Africa beyond DR Congo's border, Mocaf and Primus beer bottle stickers, wooden truck carrier for local transport (First two photographs taken in July 2013; photograph on the right taken in June 2014 by Mirjam de Bruijn)

Despite the challenges, Gemena is connected to both Kinshasa and Bangui. In this city one can drink both Mocaf and Primus beers.[38] The former is brewed in Bimbo, just outside Bangui, and transported by truck from Zongo to Gemena. The latter is brewed in Mbandaka and transported first by barge and *baleinière*[39] to Akula and then by truck to Gemena; fancier beer is flown in from Kinshasa, while caterpillars, an important source of proteins, are flown to Kinshasa during the rainy season. Gemena is equally the home city of the military-political leader Jean-Pierre Bemba, who owns a huge compound right in the centre of town—a large weapon depository, as the rumour goes. His image, and that of his party, the MLC, is visually prevalent in the city, as well as in the mouths of many Gemenois. The Bemba family is a rich family who own a lot of land. Jean-Pierre's father was an important and very rich businessman under Mobutu. He is buried today under an impressive mausoleum on the outskirts of Gemena in the middle of a once thriving coffee plantation.

Beyond the economic bonds that link Gemena to Bangui, there are the human connections too. Several former Congolese refugees who had left Congo either after Mobutu's fall in the late 1990s, or during the Bemba war in the early 2000s, found refuge in Bangui and were repatriated in 2007. Papa Madjelo was among them. He still kept his refugee papers, just in case, to keep all doors open. Maman Clémentine, a sassy old woman, had also been a refugee in CAR. As the official repatriation took place, she was among the thirty women, mainly widows and heads of family, to receive an iron-roofed mud house financed by UNHCR/ECHO and built by the GTZ[40] at the Lac Ndumba

[38] Mocaf is brewed in Bimbo, just outside Bangui, by Castel. Primus is one of the Congolese beers, made of rice and maize. Primus is brewed by Bralima, in the hands of Heineken (Beemen 2015).

[39] Whaleboats (*baleinières*) are locally crafted wooden boats. For an interesting description of these vessels and their peculiar name, see Lambertz (2018).

[40] Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit, a German development agency active in DR Congo, which merged into the GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für International Zusammenarbeit) in 2011.

neighbourhood, on the outskirts of Gemena. They cultivated the land around their compound and were, to a certain extent, self-subsistent. In fact, it was here I first heard people talking in Sango while sitting in the compound of Maman Clémentine's daughter.

Figure 15 Entrance Quartier Lac Ndumda.
(Left) Wooden board carries the flag of DR Congo, the logo of UNHCR and the flag of the European Union. It reads: 'Lac Ndumba Neighbourhood Construction of 30 houses Financed by: HCR/ECHO Works executed by GTZ' (Photograph taken July 2013). (Right) The wooden board has multiple functions (Photograph taken by Mirjam de Bruijn, June 2014).

One family in particular struck me for the pride they exhibited about Bangui. In general, Congolese are proud of their country and particularly of their music and their capital. This was not the case for Papa François, his children and lovely wife. As a theologian, Papa François had studied at the FATEB and lived on campus with his family. They had made Bangui their home, and while in Gemena the children dearly missed their adopted city. Originally from Sud-Ubangui, Papa François had decided to move to Gemena with his family in 2013 in order to wait for the conflict to subside. As was the case with many others, they had not imagined the crisis would be so protracted. Papa François had adopted CAR as his country; his capital was not Kinshasa, where he had never set foot in his life, but Bangui, which he knew like the back of his hand.

I left Gemena just after dawn on the back of a motorbike, the most effective means of transport at that time, in the direction of Libenge. In fact, it was Papa François who put me in contact with Vasco, the motorbike driver who drove me the first time. I was anxious about the trip; I knew that the road was long and many parts of it did not have mobile phone coverage. But as soon as we left the city, I felt mesmerized by the panorama and forgot my fears. Contrary to my expectations, the road was far from empty; people were constantly present, and we crossed vehicles travelling both directions every so often. Moreover, because the caterpillar season had just started, butterflies flapping their wings decorated the road. We arrived in Libenge in the afternoon, where I ended up staying for over

two weeks, before continuing on the road to Zongo. As Libenge will be discussed in more detail in the section hereunder, I will now turn to Zongo.

Zongo

Zongo lies on the 'Ubangi's elbow' just in front of CAR's capital. Even if it is not big, Zongo was declared a city in 1971 by Mobutu, who did his best to clothe it with a certain allure—building, for instance, a shopping centre that could stand up against the Central African capital on the other shore. Today the shopping centre is dilapidated, and its empty stores are rented out to Vodacom and World Food Program (WFP or PAM its French acronym), or empty. Zongo depends on Bangui, commercially, identity-wise and, to a certain extent, even administratively (many Zongolese have a CAR passport in order to facilitate their travelling, for to get a Congolese passport they would need to travel to Kinshasa, which is a long, tedious, and expensive trip; others enrol in secondary education across the border). Some even consider Zongo to be Bangui's *ante-chambre* or its ninth *arrondissement*. The Zongolais have a Bangui baguette for breakfast and go to sleep looking at the Bangui moving lights across the river.

Figure 16 Sunset on the Ubangi
First view on Bangui from Zongo, 31 July 2013

Moreover, many manufactured goods come from CAR, including petrol, beer, and clothing. Zongolais have family members on both sides of the river and are fluent in both languages, Lingala and Sango. The currency used in Zongo is not the Franc Congolais, nor the dollar, but the franc CFA. The city, moreover, enjoys mobile signals from both countries and most people have at least one CAR number (Telecel, MOOV, Orange) and one Congolese number (Vodacom or Airtel). Phone credit from both countries is readily available in almost every cabin in town (Figure 17). For all its connections, Zongo's identity is indistinguishably Congolese. Even though Sango is spoken by everyone, Lingala remains the vernacular, especially in the centre of town. Zongolais are also proud of their country's music, and the horizon for the local artists remains faraway Kinshasa instead of Bangui.[41] Yet Bangui also depends on Zongo, as many agricultural goods, such as palm oil, cassava, and charcoal, pass through this city before reaching CAR's capital.

Figure 17 Call box in Zongo
'La joie de l'éternel' selling credit for CAR and DR Congo

Dongo

Just like Gemena, Dongo is a dynamic city; and just like Zongo and Libenge, it lies on the shores of the Ubangi River. But unlike the latter two, Dongo does not share a border with CAR, but with Republic of Congo—hence Sango is little spoken. Dongo lies south of Libenge (DRC) and Betou (RC) and north

[41] For instance, one of the most promising young talents at the time, Lil'Nackson, moved to Kinshasa in order to study music at the Institut National des Arts (INA).

of Impfondo (RC). It is a water crossroads; just north of Dongo, the Lua joins the Ubangi, which is navigable only during the rainy season, more or less for six months.[42] During this period, Mogalo, a town on its shores, serves as a smaller port with *baleinières* leaving downriver to, among other locations, Dongo. The town and its surroundings are rugged, and its hills are covered by an alternation of scattered houses and dense bush. People would explain that, like its nature, the inhabitants of Dongo are equally rugged: they are industrious, hardworking, and do not like to sit still. Despite not having electricity, the market at the centre of town is open until night-time, very much the contrary to Libenge, which the Dongolais regard as being dormant.

A l'époque,[43] Dongo used to be connected by boat to Kinshasa—its ONATRA harbour is a relic of this period. Agricultural produce, palm oil, and maize would leave the town downriver. As elsewhere in the region, pillage and three consecutive wars left their mark not only on the infrastructure, but also on the economic and social structures. Nowadays, Dongo's economy relies only on petty commerce, especially with the other riverbank. Except for the irregularly, and often belatedly, paid civil servant salaries (police, school teachers, and the like), little money enters the local economy; and even if the market is open until late hours of the day, buyers have little purchasing power.

Figure 18 Still life water bottle, palm wine cup, and notebook.

[42] Roughly from the end of January to the end of July

[43] Colloquially a time when things used to be better. Depending on the context, it can refer either to the colonial times or to the first decade-and-a-half of the Mobutu era—or to both.

> We held a day long interview at Maman Dorothée's house. She took care of the palm wine (Dongo, 9 December 2014)

Maman Dorothée and Papa Popol, a couple in their forties with seven children (one of them passed away), deeply regret the current state of affairs. As a primary school teacher, Papa Popol is one of the irregularly paid civil servants, leaving Maman Dorothée to improvise in order to make ends meet. In fact, I met her in Zongo, as she was working as an theatre actress with an NGO that focused on inter-communitarian dialogue as well as on awareness-raising regarding issues of domestic violence. Dongo's economic situation temporarily improved, ironically, owing to the last war in 2009. After the Congolese government finally managed to defeat the Odjani troops—or, as some say, at the moment when the Odjani troops decided to retreat—entered the humanitarian caravan (see Chapter IV). The Red Cross organized a prospective humanitarian field, after which UNHCR and others followed. It gave youngsters access to temporary low-skilled jobs and also attracted people from other surrounding areas looking for jobs. I was once told by a young man who had temporarily worked in one of the NGOs that jobs are briskly created and you had better be there as it happens. The Dongo economy dollarized; some of the merchants, especially the petrol merchants and the bar owners, thrived, roads were temporarily rehabilitated, generators brought about electricity, light, music, and noise.

Besides acting, Maman Dorothée is a retailer of freshly tapped palm wine. During the conflict, both rebels and soldiers were among her clients; during the booming humanitarian presence, NGO workers became her clients. She does not mind cultivating the fields when the need arises. Despite his work and her industriousness, Papa Popol and Maman Dorothée lament the departure of private and state enterprises. The few present left, and today there is no one to buy their produce. Their words resonate with those of Papa Madjelo quoted above. Papa Popol and Maman Dorothée had hoped that through my visit they could send a message to make an appeal to their government (and not to the international community) to send them enterprises:

> If I bring out my produce from the field, I will go to an enterprise and they will buy my maize; then they will resell it to a factory in order to make their Primus.[44] But if there are no enterprises, what can we do with our maize? We will try to cook *ngbaku*[45] with it. The *ngbaku* will stay at home; we are sitting (waiting) and we will be the ones to drink it. Then we will fight, we will hurt one another, and there is no money to get treated at the dispensary … If there was an enterprise in Dongo, with 300 people earning a monthly salary, then there would be side business too. But

[44] Congolese beer, often made of rice and maize.

[45] Fermented maize beverage made artisanally, with a very high percentage of alcohol

> there is not even one enterprise; how can there be any other activities ? We are going through a very rough crisis. … If you make donuts worth 2000 FC or 1000 FC,[46] they will rot. It has become a problem of salt, of palm oil. People go to the fields; they do not come out any more. This world is too difficult, oh ! (Interview with Papa Popol and Maman Dorothée, Dongo, 9 December 2014)[47]

Even if the Odjani conflict had brought NGOs to Dongo, neither Papa Popol nor Maman Dorothée were interested in short-term solutions and investments. By the end of 2014, the humanitarian caravan had left Dongo to move to Libenge, the new humanitarian epicentre in the region. Papa Popol and Maman Dorothée then understood the disadvantages of the caravan and witnessed how the furnished roads started to erode (Chapter IX).

b) Libenge: The jewel in the jungle

There is one stop on the road from Gemena to Bangui that calls for a separate section. This stop is Libenge, a small town on the shores of the Ubangi River, not far from the tri-border point where CAR, DRC, and Congo-Brazzaville meet. The day I first arrived in Libenge, I wrote in my field notes:

> There are places you fall in love with even before arriving. … After we left the Boyabo crossroads, nature changes drastically; it becomes greener, more jungle-like. I guess it is because one nears the Ubangui River.

I was not the only one to fall in love with this small, laid-back town. Luca Jourdan, who spent half a year in 2001 in Libenge, at the time it was ruled by Bemba's MLC troops, and one of the few contemporary scholars who have written about this town, admits that:

> However, despite all these obstacles [occupied by rebels, no electricity, disconnectivity], this city retained a beauty that I could not find anywhere else in Congo. (Jourdan 2006, 181)[48]

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[46] At the time 1000FC is amounted to roughly $1

[47] *tango nakobimisa produit na ngai na elanga, nakokende na société wana, akosomba masango wana, mpo na kokende na usine kuna, mpo basala ba primus ba nini na bango. Bon société eza té, tozozwa masango na elanga, il faut komeka kolamba kaka ba ngbaku. Ngbaku wana efandi na ndako, biso moko tofandi, tomeli, tobundi, tozokisani ba pota, mbongo tokota dispensaire eza lisusu té … au moins que société, soki afandi na Dongo, bato bazokota… ata 300 personnes par mois bazozwa mbongo, chaque fin du mois, activité mpe ekokota. Société moko eza té, bongo activité moko ekozala na mboka ndenge nini? Crise kaka ya makasi eye kokota … Awa ata mikate ya 2000 to 1000 ezotula ! Eza likambo ya mungwa, ya mafuta. Batu bakoti bilanga, babimi lisusu té. Mokili yango makasi oh!*

[48] *Cependant, malgré tous ces obstacles, cette ville conservait une beauté que je n'ai pu retrouver nulle part ailleurs au Congo.*

Libenge forms a microcosm in different ways. The first one is, as described above, biological. Libenge's nature contrasts with that of its surroundings. While the latter could be described in terms of wooded savannah, Libenge's vegetation is denser, more humid, and covered with darker shades of green. The second way can be drawn along linguistic lines. While the linguistic landscape of the Sud-Ubangui is mainly dominated by two widely spoken languages, namely Ngbaka and Mono, as well as important pockets of Ngombe, the territory of Libenge counts no less than 18 languages, including pygmy languages (Figure 13). Third, one could equally consider Libenge a historical microcosm, with dilapidated buildings as symbols of its historical grandeur. Finally, and in a perhaps more metaphorical sense, Libenge contained, in my eyes, a human cosmos in Saint-Exupéry's reading. Strolling around Libenge is reminiscent of the Little Prince's trip to different planets and the encounters with its inhabitants. This was particularly striking when, at the time of research in 2013–2015, different *conflict mobiles* came together in the small town. It was this fourth layer that gave way to the fertile ground from which a magnificent rose would flourish.

I was welcomed in Libenge by a congregation of enterprising Italian and Congolese sisters, who ran a school, a community radio and, partly, the hospital. Having lived for decades in the area,[49] the sisters had witnessed the fall of Mobutu and the years of rebellion, and they had an interesting reading of the history of this region. For them, the conflict had not just happened; it was carefully constructed. One of them even claimed, for instance, that the refugee camp in Mole had been set up months before the Seleka's coup, reversing the causal relation from conflict–refugees–camp to camp–refugees–conflict. Prior to 2013, Libenge had lived through a period of disconnection. There was no mobile phone coverage, for example, and Libenge depended on CAR's mobile network across the river. I felt this closeness to the other riverbank (even if one could not see it, as there is a large island between Libenge and Mongoumba, the facing CAR town on the other riverbank) as soon as I switched on my mobile phone after the 8-hour and 175-km-long motorbike trip from Gemena. I had received two SMS from MOOV, one of CAR's mobile networks.[50]

> 'Welcome to Central African Republic, the Etisalat network through its subsidiary MOOV offers the best services across voice and mobile Internet. Please use [+] or [00] before the country code to call your home country. Have a pleasant stay!'

[49] In addition to Libenge, the congregation Figlie di San Giuseppe di Genoni are present in Bangui, Zongo, Gemena, and formerly also in Bili.

[50] MOOV mobile phone network is part of the Emirati-based telecommunications services provider Etisalat.

Having crossed a border without crossing the river, I clearly felt myself to be on the right track. But things were quickly changing in 2013, and in July 2013 Libenge was served by the Congolese Airtel mobile network.[51] The feeling of enclosure which the city was seemingly leaving behind stood in stark contrast to Libenge's eventful history, on the one hand , but also to the humanitarian caravan, on the other, that had recently started to install itself exponentially in the city. During colonial times, Libenge was a particularly well-developed town. It counted not only a cathedral and adjacent school, but also a bank, a former post office, a cotton factory, a hospital, large colonial residences, a roofed central market, and wide avenues lined with old mango trees that connected the region. This connectivity not only took place by land, but equally by water—Libenge had its own fluvial harbour and wood factory 10 km upstream at Batanga—and, especially, by air! The town was home to, according to its inhabitants, the first international airport in Central Africa.

Papa Henri Azunda and the once international airport

Papa Henri Azunda was the first person to introduce me to the history of Libenge's airport. The tangible carcasses and stories that live on of what was once an international airport—receiving, according to Papa Henri, Sabena flights directly from Brussels (!), but later also from other African cities such as Kano and Tripoli—are simply stupefying and include (Wilson 2014a): a 5 km landing strip, of which 3.1 km are usable today; a large hangar that housed six bedrooms with bathrooms for African workers (segregation); attached to the hangar, some rooms to keep merchandise and goods; next to the hangar, a house serving as a departure and arrival hall, with some offices and also a cement strip where luggage was weighed and checked; in front of the departure hall, a small restaurant; and finally, across the road from the airport, a handful of comfortable villas for the European settlers.

[51] There was one antenna at the time, which provided mobile connection but was not always reliable and did not cover the whole town. Access to social media was limited during my stay but improved after I left. Besides mobile coverage, electricity to load the phone batteries posed a challenge. This is of course not unique to Libenge but characteristic of many rural (and even urban) areas of Central Africa.

Figure 19 Papa Henri and Libenge Airport
(Left) Papa Henri (Right) Hangar of Libenge Airport (Mirjam de Bruijn June 2014)

At eighty years of age, Papa Henri continued to work as a fire engineer and ramp agent at the airport—even if there was no running water to extinguish any fire. Every morning he would leave his house, walk for 2 km and wait at the airport until midday for planes to land. In the 1950s, as a young man, he was trained as a pump attendant in Leopoldville with other young people from across the colony.[52] In 2013, Papa Henri was still working for the RVA, the airway authority in Congo. He counted more than sixty years of service but was reluctant to leave his job for various reasons. Firstly, Papa Henri preferred an unstable salary to a non-existent pension. Secondly, he had not yet transferred his *savoir faire* to the new generation, who did not seem interested. Thirdly, walking to the airport to receive planes turned into his *raison d'être*. Papa Henri simply epitomized the Little Prince's Lamplighter: an inhabitant with a meaningful occupation—meaningful because of its beauty and because he is doing something else besides thinking for himself.

Figure 20 Pape Henri and the Lamplighter
(Left) The Lamplighter (Saint-Exupéry 2007, 65) – (Right) Papa Henri on the landing lane (July 2013)

[52] Papa Henri is fluent in at least eight languages, among which Kikongo, which he learned during his stay in Leopoldville.

The Pan-African University

The airport was not Libenge's only jewel, nor the Lamplighter its only type of inhabitant. The more I walked around, the more people I met, the more Libenge kept surprising me. In addition to the colonial carcasses spread around town, there is an enormous construction that is, simultaneously, mind-blowing and deeply painful: the Pan-African University. In contrast to the airport, the Pan-African University is not a colonial *oeuvre*, but one of those white elephants built during the Mobutu era. According to Papa Gbato, who has been working as a watchman since the very beginning, the construction of the university started in the 1970s. As we will see, these were the golden years of Mobutu's reign; and by placing a university in Libenge, he was not only honouring the town where he attended primary school, but he must have envisioned Libenge's tri-border strategic location as ideal to attract students from the three countries.[53]

Figure 21 Pan-African University in Libenge
Collage of impressions (Photographs by author and Mirjam de Bruijn, taken during different visits, July 2013, June 2014, and January 2015)

The Pan-African University campus, which lies just on the southern outskirts of the town, on the road to Mawiya, included five buildings housing the administrative offices and several lecture halls; 11 student dormitories; a couple of dozen 4-room professor houses; an amphitheatre; and an electricity generator room, home to four large generators.

[53] Consider, for instance, that in CAR there is only one university, in Bangui.

The construction was slow and continued until the early 1990s. At this stage, the last materials were present, such as the window frames and the generators. But during Laurent-Désiré Kabila's rebellion and its aftermath, the university premises were pillaged and the Pan-African University project buried. Today the half-built architectural structures tell the story of a never-achieved grandeur. Since the change in power in the 1990s, there has been little investment in the Équateur Province, viewed as Mobutu's *chef lieu*, and thus the decline in this region was more notorious than elsewhere. Today, young people from the region do not have many options when it comes to higher education. During the time of research, the ISP Gemena had opened a subsidiary in Libenge and courses were taught to motivated students in empty classrooms deprived of electricity. This is not the story of Libenge, but of DR Congo, and perhaps Central Africa, where keeping people uneducated seems to have become a commonly practised policy.

The NGO-ization of town

Figure 22 The proliferation of NGOs in Libenge
Collage (Photographs taken in January 2015)

Compared with Zongo, and especially with Dongo, as described above, Libenge is a calm, and in the eyes of many, a laid-back town. Yet from 2013 onwards, as the crisis in CAR unfolded, the once calm and disconnected town became a crossroads of different people. As I first arrived in Libenge, I was confronted by a paradox: CAR refugees were entering DR Congo, while Congolese refugees still lived

across the border in refugee camps. In other words, while the refugee camp at Batalimo (in CAR) housed over 10,000 Congolese refugees who had fled Odjani in 2009 (see Chapter IV), Boyabu (in DR Congo) received dozens of CAR refugees, fleeing the Seleka, every day. When the Congolese refugees began to be repatriated about a year later, it was said that many presented themselves not as Congolese repatriates, but as CAR refugees in order to move to the newly built Boyabu refugee camp in DR Congo. By crossing the border, Congolese refugees became, as it were, CAR refugees. This proves that identity in terms of nationality is very fluid in this area; speaking Sango, as many Congolese do, was proof enough of *Centrafricanité*. While the mixing of the refugee population with the local population seems to be a commonly accepted practice—everybody knows about it—the practice of Congolese nationals presenting themselves as CAR refugees was condemned by the priest during the Sunday Mass and decried by many others on the streets.

The arrival of the refugees, 'double refugees', repatriates, and CAR citizens who refused to be identified as refugees but preferred staying as mobile merchants around the markets instead[54] was followed by a humanitarian caravan, which, having literally closed office in Dongo, moved to Libenge to open a new one. Libenge attracted not only people from the region, but also humanitarians, journalists, and researchers from further away (Congolese, African, and Western). This outside (sometimes foreign) presence did not go unnoticed by the locals, who felt frustratingly bypassed in terms of job opportunities. The higher up one would go on the hierarchical ladder, the further away the recruits would come from. In other words, the people of Libenge had access only to the small and less-well-paid jobs, such as security guards, cleaning staff and housemaids and, at times, drivers.

It is precisely within this travelling humanitarian bubble that I met another of the Little Prince's planet inhabitants. In December 2014 I met the head of the UNHCR office in Libenge, a busy *française* who after work would spend her evenings rearing and talking to a parrot, as if it was a child. During our only appointment, I hoped to present to her my research, which I thought would interest her. It was December, a busy period of the year, with deadlines and yearly reports pending in the air, and she was coming towards the end of her mission. Our appointment did not last longer than the four minutes she needed to smoke a cigarette—smoking inside the office was prohibited. As she finished the cigarette, so did the joviality of our conversation, and she excused herself and left.

[54] Such was the case of Jenny, who sold rice and groundnut porridge in the mornings on one of the market's corners. Jenny did not speak Lingala, and everyone knew her as the girl from CAR. Despite her young age, she decided, as she told me, to stay in Libenge instead of going to Boyabu. At the market she felt useful and did not depend on anyone but earned her own money through hard and decent work.

Like Saint-Exupéry's Businessman, this woman seemed to worry mostly about the correctness of numbers and figures. Not all humanitarians are like her. I met this woman once more, when she came to say goodbye to the Italian sisters at the convent. One of the sisters mischievously invited me so I could hear the woman speak about her parrot. I even saw the bird, which she was carrying on her shoulder and kissing from time to time. She had a dilemma: should she take the bird along with her or leave it in its natural habitat? Her companion told her not to worry and assured her he would take care of the parrot after her departure. A couple of days after the *française* left, the parrot had already disappeared.

Libenge went through a physical NGO-ization, a term that refers to the explosion of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that replace the state in many areas of public life (Giovannoni et al. 2004). While Giovannonni et al. describe the NGO-ization in Kinshasa as a strategy of survival, the NGO-ization of Libenge, in this thesis, refers rather to an intruding (perhaps even imposed) humanitarian caravan, which, in addition to bringing foreign people into the region, for good and bad, leaves its marks on roads and other provisional infrastructure. The most notable changes included the selective electrification of parts of the centre of town, accessible only to the humanitarian agencies, NGOs (and some of their staff residences), a couple of important houses, the convent, and the two bars. Neither the hospital, nor the ISP, for instance, would fully profit from this line. NGO signboards mushroomed, and a couple of latrines were installed around town. At the airport, two VIP latrines were donated by the US government, the UNHCR, and World Vision. A fresh coat of paint and wooden shutters were also added to the small departure hall.

Figure 23 Evolution of Libenge's airport
(From left to right): July 2013 naked structure. June 2014 wooden shutters are added. January 2015 coat of paint. The man in the pictures is Papa Henri Azunda (Photographs taken by author and Mirjam de Bruijn)

But *la bêtise humaine* was not confined to the humanitarian bubble. The Libenge crossroads attracted, in the aftermath of 2013, other conflict mobiles, such as the national army and police, who were given the task to secure the camps and the border. Here I met another Little Prince character: the Drunkard, embodied by FARDC soldiers and their notorious drinking habits. One of the corners of the Libenge market, the one in which palm wine was mixed and sold, became their territory,

especially on Fridays. Within the police force, I befriended a well-educated man in his thirties from a good family in Lubumbashi. He, like others, spent his time drinking—perhaps to forget, perhaps to deal with the fact that he had been sent to a corner of his country where he became stuck, with no salary or opportunity to return to the capital. These men—they are often men—in arms are not only perpetrators and harassers, they are also victims of their system, and like the refugees and humanitarians, they are another avatar of the conflict mobile: displaced, or rather stuck, because of war.

It is interesting to underline that Lingala was the language of, first, the Force Publique, during colonial times, and later the FAZ, under Mobutu. Even until today, and especially in the east of the country, Lingala is associated with force, orders, and rudeness, while Swahili is the language of politeness (Wilson 2015a).[55] Lingala is, of course, and especially in contrast to Swahili, the language of the Équateur Province. But after almost two decades of a regime led by people from 'the east' (Kabila), and hence Swahili speakers, the language balance seems to have partly shifted. During my field research in north-west Congo, I met several soldiers whose lingua franca was not Lingala but Swahili. Interestingly enough, it was not only the soldiers but also a majority of the Congolese humanitarian and NGO workers who originally came from the east. After two decades of war, insecurity, and instability, and the flood of humanitarian agencies that it entailed, people in eastern Congo have developed an expertise and have grown apt to share this expertise in other parts of their country, as well as in Africa (I met, for example, NGO workers from eastern Congo also in Bangui).

On the last planet in *The Little Prince* lives a character that combines the Vain Man and the King in one; in Libenge, he was embodied as the head of town, the AT. In a secluded corner of the country, the AT exerted power without really having power; and through his excessive personality, he became the joke of the town. Yet, there was a soft side to him, and those who knew him a little better understood he lived in loneliness (he mistrusted everyone and was thus hooked on whisky with honey—honey being the preferred antidote to poisoning).[56] Even if he tried to present himself as a man of authority, the AT was better at displaying his so-to-say artistic side. On a couple of occasions, I saw him dressed following the latest fashions as sported by the musicians in Kinshasa. He also did not shy away from using his 5-stringed (one was broken) guitar to impress his guests. Just like the

[55] Even though this is also changing, especially in Kinshasa, where people raise eyebrows when they hear the Bana Moura (presidential guard) speak in Swahili.

[56] Poisoning is a common practice in Central Africa. Even though it is difficult to prove, it is ever-present in popular discourse as an explanation for the sudden death of big men.

Vain Man, he felt the urge to be applauded, yet he ruled over people who did not respect him as the first authority of the area. Because the AT saw himself as an artist, he helped me out during my research. On the day Sapin and I were summoned to leave Libenge without the painting of Papa Henri, the AT was the one to help us out (the performance we carried out together with Sapin will be presented in Chapter III); (see also Makengele and Wilson, in preparation).

c) Bangui

Figure 24 Map of Bangui

Hybridity

Upon arrival in Zongo, I was received by the Capuchin fathers—predictably, with a cold bottle of beer. It was a surprise to see a bottle of Primus, instead of the more commonly found Mocaf or Castel beers, standing on the little wooden taboret. The bottle had come all the way from Mogalo by motorbike, and before that by river from Mbandaka. After this welcoming ceremony, we went for a walk to the riverside and sat on a little terrace by the water. The panorama was breathtaking. Enveloped by the crepuscule, we saw how the lights around the Gbazoubangui hill, on the other riverbank, were lit one by one. After a long trip, but with the hill so present in front of my eyes, arriving to Bangui felt gradual, yet sudden at the same time.

It is somehow strange that I start a sub-section about Bangui with an additional description of Zongo. Unlike many foreigners and expatriates, I approached Bangui for the first time from the south, by

pirogue instead of by plane.[57] The first time I crossed to Bangui, the city felt eerie. Reading about it in the media had undoubtedly coloured my opinion of it. As we drove around we saw people queuing at the bank in order to get their salaries paid and militaries dressed in different uniforms (some wearing red berets, others in kaki green turbans, and yet others in helmets) parading around the empty streets of the city.

While navigating to and in Bangui is indispensable for the Zongolais, many Banguissois have never set foot, nor even thought about setting foot, on the other riverbank. But even if the Banguissois seem to be ignorant about what happens directly across from them on the other shore, the Congolese presence in Bangui is felt and cannot be denied. First of all, there is the import-export of goods mentioned above. Moreover, the largest foreign community (51% of all foreigners) in the city is constituted by Congolese (Chauvin 2018), primarily people from the Équateur Province, who are often looked down upon. Many uneducated young Equatorians are attracted to Bangui, where they do petty trade and find petty jobs others do not want to do, such as charcoal vendors, ambulant vendors*, pousse-pousseurs* (cart-pushers), house maids, etc. Finally, there is another Congolese element ever-present in Bangui: the sounds of Congolese rumba.

The second time I crossed into Bangui, the experience was different. I would be staying a month at Espérance's with her and her family; she had kindly offered me a room to stay.[58] As I stepped into Espérance's compound, I partly left the Congolese atmosphere behind and stepped into another, new to me, Africa. Espérance, an elegant, intelligent, and hardworking lady in her early forties, was born in southern Chad and grew up alternately in southern Chad and N'Djaména. She shared her house with at least six relatives: her two young daughters, two young girls who were going to secondary school, and two male cousins who were studying at university. Espérance, as I would later learn, encouraged and assisted in paying the fees of all of them. French, Sango, and Ngambay were spoken in her house, which was decorated with artisanal artefacts from Chad; the Chadian news would be aired every so often on TV. Just across the street from us, two Seleka watchmen guarded the neighbouring compound; they spoke only Arabic and would knock at our doors for a can of coffee every morning. The relationship was both cordial and tense. Even if the Chadian community were

[57] Most expats arrive to Bangui on the bi-weekly Air France flight from Paris.

[58] I met Espérance through Inge Butter, a colleague in the Netherlands carrying out research on the economic connectivity of the Chadian Misriye. During her research, following the Misriye who had moved southwards, Inge spent over a month in Bangui prior to the 2013 conflict. In Bangui our two field sites intersected, yet we approached the city from a different geographical and social perspective (Wilson 2017).

fewer in number, in comparison with the Congolese, the former's presence in the city was conspicuous, also politically. It is colloquially said that CAR is Chad's backyard, and people jokingly explain that the important political decisions about CAR are taken in N'Djaména rather than in Bangui. As we will see hereunder and in Chapter IV, one cannot say this is entirely untrue.

As the days went by, the initial eeriness was enveloped in a multicultural atmosphere and, I would even claim, a feeling of cosmopolitanism. The secluded capital of the land-locked country, *Bêafrika* in Sango, literally the heart of Africa, was, just like any other big city in the world, a crossroads of different cultures, a melting pot of people speaking different languages and praying to different gods. The blending was visible on the streets and permeated households—for example, in Congolese ambulant manicurists making henna drawings on the feet of the Muslim ladies preparing for the Eid-El-Fitr, in mixed marriages in ethnic, religious, and national terms.

Despite the tense atmosphere and the people's apprehensiveness—and rightly so, since the Seleka had been engaging in a series of pillagings and exactions—the city had not reached the level of insecurity, division, and psychosis it would later reach. I will never forget the day we went to a popular dancing bar during Eid-El-Fitr: the image of a woman, whose feet were covered with henna patterns, swaying her hips on the dance floor to a song of Mbilia Bel (a female Congolese singer who was at the peak of her success during the 1980s and, as the rumour goes, had an affair with Bokassa). Even if branded by some as one of the world's peripheries (Marchal 2009), Bangui was simultaneously a centre of mixing, reaching beyond its own borders. Along these lines, Espérance explains the Centrafricain identity in terms of 'hybridity':

> Ask the question to the four Centrafricains who work with us. Let's see if they tell you they are 100 per cent Centrafricains. Let them tell us! The one comes from Cameroon, the father of the second one is from Chad, the mother of the third is from Zaire … There is no identity, we are a bit hybrid. (Interview, Bangui, 15 August 2016)[59]

She is certainly not the only one to speak in this way. Many Centrafricains are very aware of the fact that division and unison are two sides of a same coin. This hybridity seems to be a recurrent trope in popular art and literature. Even inside households, people from different ethnic groups, religions,

[59] *Pose seulement la question aux quatre Centrafricains qui sont ici avec nous. S'ils te disent qu'ils sont 100% centrafricains, [en exclamant] qu'ils nous disent !' L'un vient du côté du Cameroun, l'autre son papa est venu du côté du Tchad, sa maman est venu du côté du Zaïre. … Mais il faut savoir, l'identité y est pas, on est un peu hybride.*

and social classes live side by side. It is only when these divisions are politicized that they have the power to separate:

> There are Muslim and Christian parents on all sides, and the real religious war begins in our respective homes. People hide behind these community identities to push our people to engage in large-scale genocide. It is a pity that this works so well in the Central African Republic. (M.-L. Kassaï, in preparation)[60]

Mobility

Oh, blissful ignorance! As different members of the CTD research team visited Bangui in late 2012[61] and I myself did half a year later in mid-2013, CAR was almost unheard of in the Dutch media (and universities). At the time, we did not need to follow strict security protocols in order to do research in Bangui. This would later change. The situation had not yet deteriorated as such, and August 2013 Bangui felt completely different from the Bangui we would visit in June 2014, August 2016, and May 2018. The city kept on changing. As I crossed to Bangui in August 2013, even if the city had recently gone through a shock, it gave the impression that it was timidly recovering. Circulation was at some times restricted, while at others it ran normally; and even though many people had already fled, there were no IDP camps as such yet (the airport, for instance, had not been occupied). In August 2013, the bustling, and later infamous, market at PK5 district was still operational and the surrounding neighbourhoods accessible. At the time, it was rather Boy-Rabe (Figure 24) which was off-limits. This neighbourhood in the fourth *arrondissement* was known to be inhabited by those close to Bozizé and was supposedly crammed with hidden weapons.

In August 2013, I was quite mobile in the city. During day-time, I would take the taxi to different places, including PK5. Going out at night-time was not strictly excluded; there was no formal curfew, but one had to be vigilant. The carelessness of the old days was long gone, I was told, but not completely buried either. I particularly enjoyed the extended walks with Émile, a Congolese refugee in Bangui, whom I had met in Zongo. Émile had lived both in Kinshasa and Bangui during his childhood; he saw himself as both a Congolese and a CAR citizen, and he knew how to play out this double identity very well. Émile showed me his city on foot: the centre of town, Lakouanga, the university campus with sport facilities (including the basketball hall where Bokassa had declared

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[60] *'On a de tous les côtés, des parents musulmans ou chrétiens, et la vraie guerre de religion devait commencer dans nos foyers respectifs. Il en n'est pas le cas, les gens se cachent derrière ces identités communautaires pour pousser notre peuple au grand genocide.'*

[61] See the report published online (De Bruijn et al. 2012). Accessed 11 March 2019.

himself emperor and the remaining metal carcasses of his infamous golden, diamond-covered throne), and the neighbourhoods of Ben Zvi, Miskine, and Combattants (see Figure 24). In addition, he taught me to read the traffic, *la circulation*, as an index of security in the city. As long as taxis would drive up and down the city's axes, particularly when stopping every so often to pick up or drop off passengers, the security level was viable and thus people could go out to their daily occupations. But on days when there would be no or a small number of taxis, one needed to be cautious. The city, like a human body, is alive and healthy only if blood cells (cars and taxis) are pumped and circulate in all its arteries and veins (roads). Mobility, in this context, was a barometer of security.

I do not want to claim that everything was well in the city, but despite the events in March 2013, hope and disquiet alternated with one another. The Banguissois learned how to deal with this dualism: walking on eggshells yet calmly trying to go about their daily activities. As we have seen in Chapter I, duress implies something normal, routine. It is where conflict and routine intersect. The following excerpt from a blog I wrote at the time captures this duality. On a quiet day, Émile invited me over to meet his family, as we were strolling along an empty Avenue de Martyrs:

> … from afar we saw an escort of 4x4 land cruisers approaching, speeding with exaggeration. 'That must be the president,' Émile told me. The row of cars shot along at a speed that must have surpassed 100 km/hour. Driving at that speed in the centre of town, on a dusty road full of potholes, is irresponsible, to say the least. The first three or four blinded land cruisers were followed by a dozen open pick-ups loaded with Seleka soldiers. Heavily armed. … Émile and I just stared and continued our walk. … A last green pick-up followed the rest, also speeding excessively. I was told that president-elect Djotodia had visited Brazzaville and was on his way back from the airport to the presidential palace. My friend had seen the green pick-up earlier on and commented on the speed, saying that if they weren't more careful they would cause an accident. Three seconds later, the pick-up crashed into something. Being the last to drive on the avenue, it had to manoeuvre through the cloud of dust the others had raised; it did not have its lights on, the visibility was minimal, and thus they drove into another car. The sound of the shock was loud and people started running. Panic. As he suggested continuing our walk, gently but firmly, Émile explained that the *événements* had prompted the population into a state of psychosis. In their psychosis, as he called it repeatedly, people are afraid to help the *elements* (of the Seleka). The air was very dusty—night was falling—and then—gun shots—into the air—a summons to disperse the crowd. Some people started to walk away briskly; others started to run. A young man in front of us dropped to the ground. Émile continued walking calmly and hugged me: '*On y va; tu as peur?*' [Let's go, you're scared?] He smiled and we crossed the avenue; I feared another crazy car would zip by. Suicidal. I thought about the accident: had they driven into

> a taxi with passengers? No, it was among themselves it was said. People had been informed to empty the road from 17 h onwards. An accident[62] between two Seleka vans. It is their fault. They drive like crazy and many don't even know how to drive in the first place, let alone how to respect traffic rules. (A day later I was to learn that they drove into a car of three young Central African doctors; there were fatalities on both sides.) … As we turned into a side street, people gathered in small groups. Those who had witnessed what happened would tell what they had seen to others, on the street corners, each one telling his or her version of the events. There was movement; taxis would stop by to hear the news. … We continued our way, went for dinner at my friend's house. I met his family, his wife, three girls, and elderly parents. After we finished, he dropped me at my place, all on foot. People were on the streets, selling, drinking. Life as usual. (Wilson 2013)

Half a week later, the night before Djotodia was officially inaugurated as president, armed confrontations were heard in Boy-Rabe during the night. Rumours had it that the Seleka had entered the neighbourhood, emptying it of its goods and its people (RFI 2013b). On the following day, we followed Djotodia's inauguration speech on the radio while sitting under the big mango tree in Espérance's compound. He spoke in a mixture of French and Sango, as if to prove he was no outsider but a real Centrafricain. Tension rose gradually in the days that followed. Three days later, on Tuesday evening, the confrontation resumed, heavier this time. It had rained in the afternoon, yet the rain had not postponed the events as it postpones countless other things; it was as if this time the rain added to the imminence of fighting, to the atmosphere of urgency. People hurried back home. Taxis refused to stop and take passengers. The circulation changed. The reactions of those around me in the compound were mixed, yet in general they stayed calm and composed. Limited as one was in movement, the phone became, in a way, a vessel to potential mobility. Friends would update one another on where the shooting was taking place, which roads were passable and which not. Not knowing what to do, I swept my room and then sat on the ground writing while listening to Ali Farka Touré on my headphones. As the shooting calmed down, I went to sleep around 2 a.m.

I had prepared to leave the next day to Zongo. Even if it was planned beforehand, I felt as if I was escaping Bangui. Was I? At breakfast, Espérance laughed when I told her I had slept well. 'So, you did

[62] These types of accidents are, unfortunately, not exceptional. Sylvestre, for instance, remembers similar scenarios during the presidencies of Bozizé and Patassé. In a mystical reading, these accidents are interpreted by the population as the sacrifice (need for blood) by a leader in order to preserve power. Similar readings are made in DR Congo; think for instance of the 1996 Air Africa crash at the Ndolo airport in Kinshasa, which was attributed to Mobutu. See also the section on churnalism and cannibalism in this chapter.

not hear anything?', she had asked me. I shook my head. She then replied: 'It is better to not hear anything.' It is in these cases that the contrast in terms of options becomes painful. As a foreign researcher, my mobility was incomparable, and unjustly so, with that of all of the people I had met. I had the papers and the means. I could cross; I could have travelled to Kinshasa if necessary. We went on foot to the Port Beach. Émile pointed out to me that the traffic in the city was particularly light on that day. After filling the formalities at the Port Beach (an international border, after all), we embarked on a motorless canoe to cross the river. Hearing the sound of water, touching its gentle waves, calmed me down. On the Congolese side of the river, rumours had inflated the number of dead bodies. I was asked about the two heavy shots fired around 6 a.m.; people had heard them while sitting in early Mass. I could not respond; it seems I simply slept through them.

As I returned to Bangui a week after the events, a precarious calm enveloped the city. Taxis and cars had started to circulate again. But the inhabitants of Boeing[63] were angry at the 'abuses committed by the Seleka' and took their anger at the government and the FOMAC[64] onto the tarmac of the international airport in order to be heard—and also beyond the borders (RJDH RCA 2013). The occupation of the airport's runaway was not a without reason. The flight of Air France programmed for the following Thursday was cancelled. By staying over 24 hours in the airport, the Banguissois were making a desperate call to the outside world. On the Facebook wall of a young and engaged CAR journalist, a social media user commented:

> I think the only solution is to stay on the tarmac to be heard. That way the videos will go around the world [to show] that the population is suffering.[65] (29 August 2013)

After December 2013, this airport became the most photographed, talked about, and puzzling IDP camp of the country. Because of the presence of the French army, and later the EUFOR, the M'Poko international airport grew to be a destination of refuge, as many of the neighbourhoods around it were considered to be too risky.[66] The discrepancy between the different regimes of mobility at the airport is perplexing. In the IDP camp, the Banguissois are stuck in their own city in deplorable

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[63] Another neighbourhood in Bangui, just behind the airport

[64] The African Union's Multinational Force, which comprises soldiers from Gabon, Chad, Congo-Brazzaville, DR Congo, and Cameroon

[65] *Je pense que la seule solution est de rester sur le tarmac pour être entendu. Comme ça les vidéos feront le tour du monde que la population souffre.*

[66] People fled to it looking for security. Ironically, child abuse cases by troops of different (European and African) peacekeeping forces have been reported, including in the M'Poko camp.

conditions, eking out a living amidst the carcasses of old Antonovs. Meanwhile, the M'Poko airport is the entry and exit point for all expats, diplomats, peacekeeping forces, humanitarians, and others. It is CAR's only intercontinental connection, the only direct opening to the Western world. The airport became during the crisis a painful paradox. While the IDPs living in it did not have access to these promising, yet limiting, connections embodied by the landing and rising planes, international citizens, be they humanitarians, diplomats, military, researchers, or journalists, would land, carrying in their bags comfortable contracts with security bonuses which, in a perverse way, depended on the very presence of the IDPs, without whom they would not have this job. The IDPs literally became the audience to this show; they are the ones standing along the runaway for the spectacle of it, almost applauding when a plane lands or takes off. I have referred to this airport in a blog as the *vluchthaven*, a place to and from which people simultaneously, yet selectively, flee and fly .

When I went back to Bangui in 2016 and 2018, every time landing on the runaway of the M'Poko airport, my own circulation in the city was consequently, and notably, restricted. Even if it is mostly related to more strict security protocols at home, it is also indicative of the circulation for the Banguissois themselves, as well as of the restricting international discourse about the conflict. Especially the PK5 district neighbourhood, and the *troisième arrondissement* in which it is situated, became strictly off-limits to foreigners, but also to the majority of the Banguissois. It seemed that the more humanitarians would come into the country, the less mobile one became in the city. Expats ended up being locked into their compounds, but connected to the world.[67] Nonetheless, as the saying goes, if a door closes, a window opens. While it had not been possible to visit Boy-Rabe in 2013, I did visit it in 2016. Moreover, through the contacts I had made in Kinshasa, I ventured into the other parts of the city, which I had not visited nor envisaged visiting before. This was the case for Ouango or the *septième arrondissement*, whence came many of the refugees I met in Kinshasa.

Despite the positive changes, in terms of democratic elections and signed peace agreements, duress in Bangui seemed to worsen with every visit. Cosmetic changes aside, a durable solution turned into a mirage. The Banguissois had no choice, perhaps, other than to embrace their fate with resignation and try to make the best of it, time and time again. Curiously, this situation did not stop CAR citizens

[67] Especially during the visit in May 2018, youngsters had set up night barricades around the city in response to insecurity. In April 2018 an attempt to find the rebel leader Force, who was said to reside in 5 Kilo failed miserably and resulted in more than 20 casualties. This action reignited antagonisms in the city. Muslims protested, carrying the corpses to the centre of town. Three weeks later, the Fatima church was once again attacked, with more casualties and reprisals against mosques.

from returning to their country in the hope of finding a job in the humanitarian bubble, while others managed to establish businesses, sometimes thriving, like the dancing bar friends opened in Boy-Rabe, probably because people do need a place to drink, to dance, and especially to forget—even if it is for just one moment. The picture is never complete.

6) The Anti-Balaka and the media

a) The rise of an acephalous group

In the hope that the cycle that seems to repeat itself every ten years in CAR, coup–presidency–rebellion–coup, had been completed and the worst had been left behind, the Banguissois tried to turn the page and start a new chapter under the new Seleka regime in 2013. But as an imminent wind of normalcy blew over the capital, the interior of the country began to rumble in September 2013, a couple of weeks after Djotodia's inauguration speech—not even six months after the March coup. The apparent calm turned into the deceptive eye of the storm. From September to November 2013, Bossangoa, Bouca, Bozoum, and Bouar, among others, in the north-west, and also Bangassou in the south-east (see Figure 2) witnessed horrible scenes. As a response to the plundering and the violence committed by the Seleka rebels, local militias emerged which came to be known as the Anti-Balaka (*balaka* means machete in Sango, the machete used to cut crops), but with no overarching structure and no common leader (AFP 2013b). As the Seleka were said to kill, rob, and rape the Christian population, so the Anti-Balaka, claiming to defend and avenge the Christian community, started killing, robbing, and raping the Muslim population. In a context of dire unemployment and the lack of infrastructure and opportunities, the volatile youth was easily mobilized. Neighbours who had previously lived peacefully together were suddenly turned into enemies. The Mbororo nomads, in particular, who were not strictly connected to the Seleka but shared the same religion with the majority of the Seleka, became double victims—first to the Seleka and later to the Anti-Balaka (Amadou 2018a; de Vries 2018). From this point on, the conflict would be defined, especially by the international media, in insidious religious terms, something it was certainly not at its origin.

Before long, the violence arrived in Bangui. In the meantime, Djotodia had disbanded the Seleka without formally including them into the army. In mid-November, a magistrate who had allegedly collected enough proof to file a case at the ICC was mercilessly murdered by men on motorbikes (Zamane 2013). The anger of the Banguissois was too much to contain; protests followed, after which more retaliations, turning the conflict into a spiralling cycle of violence. It became soon clear that the president was unable to contain this critical situation. New waves of violence announced themselves on the horizon. The Anti-Balaka, who stood very close to the actions previously committed by the

urban militias such as the COCORA, seized Bangui. As my fieldwork location had geographically moved, from Bangui to Kinshasa, I did not experience the atmosphere of Bangui under the Anti-Balaka at firsthand, but rather through the stories of friends in Bangui, whom I often phoned and chatted with, as well as through the eyes of the refugee-students in Kinshasa, who witnessed the conflict from a geographical, yet not sentimental distance. It is from the refugee-students that I learned that the Anti-Balaka attack of 5 December 2013 was allegedly partly planned from outside. It was said that among the CAR refugees in DR Congo there were Anti-Balaka leaders (a contradiction of the image of the refugee-victim)[68] and that the money allocated to them as refugees had been used for the coordination of the Anti-Balaka. One refugee in Kinshasa explained:

> CW: *Are there 400 Centros in Kinshasa?*
>
> There are children; there are women. Some went to Cameroon, others went directly to the site; on the site they decided to go back to Bangui. Today, they are the ones who are part of the Anti-Balaka.
>
> CW: *Did those who went home receive something?*
>
> $1,500, those who were taken care of by the government; they were given $1,500, $1,000, $800. But those who sleep in Lingwala, in the communal house, are given $100; they are asked to come every Friday to UNHCR for the flight to the site.
>
> CW: *So among those taken care of, there was Edouard Ngaï ...*
>
> It was Ngaïkoussé who had come here—who had come here, to Zongo, Gemena, Kinshasa.
>
> CW: *As a refugee?*
>
> Yes, he had come as a refugee. He was just across [the river] in Zongo. A mission left Kinshasa to pick him up in Zongo. He was brought back here; then he went back.
>
> CW: *Was he paid $1,500?*
>
> Yes, yes, yes.
>
> CW: *Is he back in Zongo?*
>
> Yes, yes, yes. They are now the Anti-Balaka; they are the ones who coordinate the Anti-Balaka.

[68] The image of the refugee-perpetrator is not new; think of the Hutu *génocidaires* (those who participated in genocide) in eastern Congo.

CW: *They went back in November. Were they the ones who caused the attack on 5 December?*

They're the ones who provoked it.

Just like the Seleka, the Anti-Balaka had nothing new. In the past, groups of farmers had organized themselves in order to protect themselves from road cutters and other bandits. If one were to draw the line even further into the past, one could argue that the Anti-Balaka groups were a modern avatar of the Kongo-Wara uprisings in the late 1920s, standing up against what was considered foreign domination (Ceriana Mayneri 2014a; Hardin and Zana 2014). Just as in colonial times, the population motivated *les fils du pays* (this is how people initially referred to the Anti-Balaka) to come up against a foreign incursion (of the Seleka) that was 'taking over' the country (Both et al. unpublished). The dangerous layer of xenophobia was added to the previously religiously defined conflict (Wilson 2014b). The already damaged social fabric of what had seemed to me a cosmopolitan city seemed irreparable.

b) Playing the G-card

During most of 2013, the violence in CAR went by relatively unnoticed. But in early November 2013, France and the UN made an alarming official statement regarding the risk of genocide in the country.[69] The world media soon followed and added to the fire by spreading terms such as 'verge of genocide' (D. Smith 2013), 'situation prégénocidaire' (RFI 2013c). By the third week of November, front-page newspaper headlines, also in the Netherlands, expressed themselves abundantly in G-terms. A couple of days later, the idiom was appropriated in CAR's media and social media too.

Figure 25 Genocide headlines
(Left) Headline in the Dutch newspaper *Trouw* on 20 November 2013 (Nourhussen 2013). (Right) 'Non au genocide programme des Centrafricains'. Picture by Chris Can on Twitter @Alexcapron 22 Nov 2013

It took three weeks to reach everyone's ears but, for a moment, CAR—the Cinderella of Central Africa, stage to the 'most forgotten conflict' on earth—was placed in the spotlight, also in the

[69] http://mobile.reuters.com/article/idUSBRE9A00Y120131101?irpc=932 [Accessed 24 November 2013]

Benelux (Vercruysse 2013; UN Humanity House 2015). In those weeks, expressing one's opinions about CAR without using the term 'genocide' became a challenge. But was CAR really on the verge of genocide? And, if not, what was the purpose of labelling it so? In line with Lombard and de Waal, I argue that playing the 'genocide card' (Lombard 2013b; De Waal 2013) was, in the first instance, a strategy to attract the international community's attention to the unfolding crisis in CAR but also a way to promote the need for a special UN mission to CAR—and especially to justify the French Sangaris operation, which was launched in the first week of December 2013.

The 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide defines genocide as 'the deliberate and systematic destruction, in whole or in part, of an ethnical, racial, religious or national group' (UN General Assembly 1948). Genocide implies the annihilation of group A by group B; and the annihilation is not only physical, but the symbols of the subjected people need to disappear as well. In CAR, the genocide discourse created two clear-cut camps where previously there had been none. The consequence is that the conflict was depoliticized and reduced to an inter-communitarian conflict between Muslims (the Seleka) and Christians (the Anti-Balaka). In the large majority of interviews and conversations that I conducted in 2014 and 2015, CAR citizens and experts, inside and outside CAR, underlined that this was an erroneous way to look at the conflict. The cause of the conflict was not religious but political. If one is to look into the recent history of the country, one can read that religion has not been the only discourse to create division among the people. In the 1990s, for instance, as we will see in Chapter IV, the division underlined inter-ethnic differences (north versus south). While useful and important, playing the genocide card is not a strategy without risk, as it does not necessarily shed light on the root causes of the conflict (which are often political more than ethnic or religious); rather, it obscures them.

c) Black December

In early December 2013, all hell broke loose. Albeit the French were sending their military convoys to Bangui, the Anti-Balaka seemed to be a step ahead. On 5 December, a bloodbath overtook the city, targeting not only the Seleka, but also the CAR Muslim community as a whole. The result was disastrous: between 80 and 105 people lost their lives (RFI 2013d). I remember that day particularly well. It was a particularly dark and stormy day in the Netherlands (where I live), as if announcing disaster far away. At the moment the Anti-Balaka made its entrance, Émile and I were chatting through Skype. Many things fell into place; however, nobody could have predicted the gruesomeness with which the events would evolve.

The entrance of the Anti-Balaka into Bangui came to be an important turning point in the conflict. To begin with, it sparked a second wave of refugees—that is, an exodus of the Muslim community—primarily into neighbouring Cameroon and Chad (the first wave had been mainly into Cameroon and DR Congo). In Bangui and the interior of the country, churches, mosques, and the international Mpoko airport were turned into IDP camps, and many members of the Muslim community found themselves prisoners of an increasingly isolated PK5 district (Kilembe 2015).

The situation deteriorated. Sangaris was accused of partiality, disarming only the Seleka troops. On the other hand, within the MISCA, some troops, such as the Chadian first and the Burundian later, were also accused of choosing sides in the conflict. When president Déby called upon Djotodia to demission in early January 2014, literally flying him over to N'Djaména to do so, popular anger rose. Chad was accused of interference in CAR's internal affairs and, by extension, both the Muslim and Chadian communities in CAR became targets, even more so than before. After the Chadian troops left the MISCA in January 2014, airlifts to fly Chadian citizens to N'Djaména were organized in order to repatriate so-called Chadian nationals. In a context of escalating violence, many saw themselves forced to leave the country they had so dearly adopted, where many were even born.

Espérance and her family were among those who took these flights—in fact, in a perhaps desperate yet decisive move, she had sent her daughters first, alone; the oldest was not even 12 years old. The fact that Espérance is a practising Christian and deeply attached to their lives in Bangui did not help their Chadian appearance. Even if Espérance herself was reluctant to leave CAR and had decided to stay, and did so throughout almost all of the darkest episodes of the recent crisis, by 2014 the reprisals against all Chadian nationals, including the Christian Chadians from the south, became lethal, even for her. Espérance would later tell us how she disguised herself as an old homeless woman in order to leave her compound unnoticed. When she arrived at the airport in N'Djaména, her family barely recognized her: the sleepless nights and loss of weight had made a different person of her. After a couple of months, she returned to Bangui; however, how could she not? Bangui had become her home and her life, and she was eager to go back to work. The apparent calming down in the city was only a shallow mirage; in reality, as I was told by many, people learned to live in an embodied state of permanent psychosis.

d) Cannibalism and churnalism

Early in January 2014, the BBC journalist Paul Wood witnessed an alleged 'act of cannibalism' and interviewed its perpetuator, who claimed to act out of anger because 'Muslims' had killed his pregnant wife, his sister-in-law, and her new baby (Wood 2014). Soon the short video of this

interview went viral and was complemented by other images on social media—images whose veracity was difficult to prove. Indeed, cannibalistic practices are recurrent in both CAR and DR Congo. The most notorious (highly mediatized) example is perhaps the accusation against the cannibalistic emperor Bokassa. In the early 2000s, Jean-Pierre Bemba, the MLC's leader, was equally accused of cannibalism against the pygmy population in eastern Congo's Ituri region. Pottier claims that cannibalism is a *politically* driven metaphor of extreme violence and suffering (Pottier 2007, 825; emphasis mine) that needs to be contextualized in order to be understood. He condemns the UN forces in DR Congo at the time (MONUC) and the international media who were quick to churn up the news on cannibalism and unnecessarily sensationalized the horror of Ituri. Yet, they acted more timidly when the pygmies retracted their complaint, a retraction that was documented by the Congolese media but received little further attention in the international media (Pottier 2007, 835).

Contrary to more acceptable interpretations (for Western readers), which reduce cannibalism to madness and tribalism, Ceriana Mayneri suggests that the cannibalistic gesture that took place in Bangui needs to be understood within an existing idiom of witchcraft, omnipresent in Central Africa. The name the man who ate human flesh chose for himself (*chien méchant*, Mad Dog) is a nickname that has been circulating for years in the conflicts around the Equator, one which is inspired by the 2008 filmed version of Dongala's novel *Johnny chien méchant,* named after one of the protagonists (Dongala 2002; Ceriana Mayneri 2014c). Within the context of Bangui, at that particular time, 'the cannibal' felt the need to boost his strength in front of the community and, especially, in front of the 'other'—in this case the Muslim community, which is accused of causing all ills to his own community. Part of a conception of strength is inseparable from the human body in which it is contained (Ceriana Mayneri 2014c). In this sense, the consumption of human flesh, human blood, human bones is intimately linked to (political) power (Bernault 2018).

However, *Johnny chien méchant* is not the only protagonist in Dongala's novel; in fact, there are two (equally important) main characters, their voices alternating with one another throughout the whole book. The other protagonist is a young girl who flees the conflict in order to survive—in other words, a refugee. It is interesting to note that while *Johnny chient méchant*—which was published in the same year as Kourouma's famous *Allah n'est pas obligé* (Gray 2013)—gave a voice to the ever more mediatized figure of the child soldier, the personage of the refugee was relegated to the shadow. This young refugee girl is not only a victim of war; she is also a witness, to both the horrors of war and the retreat of humanitarian agencies when conflicts escalate. Dongola's female protagonist can be read, within the context of this thesis, as an invitation to broaden the limited gaze not only of the

stereotyped and restrictive trope 'child soldier' (Both et al., unpublished), but also of the victimized refugee trope (Fresia 2007).

It is challenging to communicate a conflict (any conflict) in all its complexity to headline-hungry journalists and, through them, to a wider public. Even if my purpose here is not to criticize all media outlets, and certainly not all journalists, one needs to move beyond antagonistic terms (e.g. Muslims vs Christians) if one wants to clarify more than to obscure. In one of the CTD seminars, Prof. Shamil Jeppie shared his frustration with South African journalists who claimed that the Timbuktu archives had been lost at the beginning of the Mali crisis in 2012; as he knew from firsthand sources, this was not the case. Prof. Jeppie refers to this practice in terms of *churnalism*, where churning something out means to produce something mechanically and in large quantities, without thinking (Jeppie 2013).[70] This term is useful to understand the news making about CAR. Sadly enough, while scholars have failed to place CAR on the world map, the conflict, and its *churned* news coverage, did manage to fill in that blank spot.

7) F(ol)lowing networks

a) Kinshasa

As the situation in Bangui deteriorated, north-west Congo became an alternative research area. Because Bangui became off-limits, this area was accessible only through Kinshasa, which became an obligatory logistical passage for the north. Kinshasa had not been part of my field of research from the outset; but in April 2014, I serendipitously met CAR refugees in the city. In contrast to the hybridity described above, and especially outside the CAR borders, these refugees would see themselves as being 100 per cent Centrafricains. For many, this was their first trip abroad. They spoke French and Sango only (and perhaps understood other local CAR languages), but Lingala was certainly not part of their repertoire. Many of the 500 refugees were from the Yakoma ethnic group, a rather small yet influential community, known as southerners or *riverains*, because they live along the shores of the Mboumou and Ubangi rivers—the very same rivers that form the border between present-day CAR and DR Congo, a border which was drawn arbitrarily during the last colonial conquest on the African continent at the end of the nineteenth century, which will be discussed in Chapter IV.

[70] Term coined by BBC journalist Wakeem Zakir. A form of journalism that relies on recycling press releases and agency copy and which involves little or no independent reporting or attempt at verification. Churnalism is also the result of increasing pressures of time and cost demands for journalists (Harcup 2014).

There exists a wealth of works, especially anthropologically inspired accounts, on Kinshasa and the paradoxical livelihoods of its inhabitants, the Kinois: modes of urbanization; the inequalities in the city; witchcraft and religion, especially the mushrooming Pentecostal churches; the politics behind music and fashion; juggling livelihoods and getting by (*la débrouille*); migration to *Poto*;[71] and more. But while displacement and refugeehood are overly described for the eastern part of the country, there are few studies that concentrate on the urban migrants and urban refugees in Kinshasa.[72]

As I started following closely the CAR refugees in Kinshasa, I realized I was offered a unique opportunity to look at Kinshasa through the eyes of refugees. Fuelled by personal and logistical motives and a piling up of coincidences, I decided to prolong my stay in Kinshasa, without dropping altogether a shorter field research period in the north. The new challenge became, then, how to combine two fields into one, as after every encounter with one of the refugees, I was unsure if I had just carried out research about Bangui or about Kinshasa. Looking through my fieldwork notes, I realize that I devoted a lot of words to this ambivalence—and I really struggled to combine two cities, both capitals of a Central African country, yet so different. This ambivalence was undoubtedly also felt by the CAR refugees upon arrival in Kinshasa, and I have dedicated a sub-section to this topic in Chapter V, an ambivalent state which can be summarized in one word: bewilderment.

[71] Lingala colloquialism for Europe and the West in general

[72] I had the chance to meet members of the different refugee communities in Kinshasa, among whom—in addition to the recent wave of CAR refugees—were members of the Congolese (Brazzaville), Rwandese, and Ugandan communities. I even met a woman from as far away as Ethiopia. Members of the Angolan refugee community had been at the time recently repatriated.

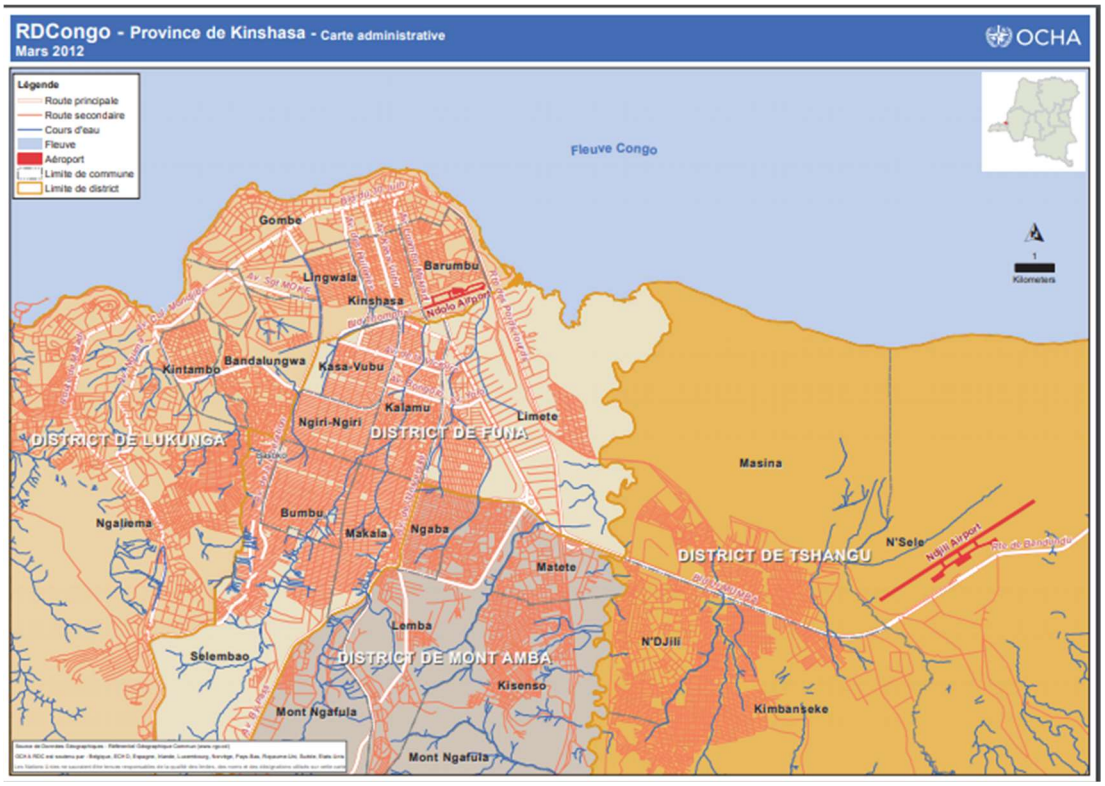

Figure 26 Map of Kinshasa
(OCHA reference map 2012)

Moving through the city with the refugees was like moving together through their fears: the fear of being recognized as an outsider, the fear of standing in front of a closed door at the UNHCR doorstep, the fear of becoming disposable. Even though I had been to Kinshasa several times prior to 2014, the sheer size of the city continued to overwhelm me, just as it did the CAR refugee-students. Through participant observation, I learned to navigate Kinshasa in their way—and I was shown the city and taken to places not by the Kinois, but by the Centrafricains. As outsiders, they were often forced to move to the fringes of Kinshasa; and thanks to the CAR refugees I visited places such as Kingabwa, Kimbanseke, Pompage, but also more central neighbourhoods such as Bon Marché, Matonge, Lingwala, Kitambo, and Limete (see Figure 26).

Slowly but surely, I came to understand I needed not to exclude one or the other city but could embrace both. While at the beginning I had had a hard time establishing connections between the two cities, after some time, the combination of both was thrown into my face. In August 2014, a Handball Cup for Central African countries was held in Kinshasa, for instance, and CAR was one of the participating teams. As I met some of the team players, I learned that they were sojourning in the Centre Bondeko in Limete. The Centre Bondeko was not only four blocks away from the place I was staying, but also a personal touch base, a centre I have kept visiting throughout the years since my first trip to DR Congo in 2005. This trivial detail was of great importance to me. It made me look at

my field in a more integrated way. Carrying out research among the CAR refugees meant simultaneously doing research *in* Bangui *and in* Kinshasa (see also Chapter III).

Figure 27 Kinkole
Behind us the Congo River, together with two CAR refugees pointing northwards to Bangui. (Photograph taken by Sapin Makengele, 7 September 2014)

Old acquaintances led me along new paths. In 2014 I met Aristo again; we had known each other since 2005, when he was still a schoolboy and I was an undergraduate student. While waiting for his final examination results (he had recently finished a degree in communications), Aristo had time on his hands and I was looking for a research assistant. We decided to work together. It was he who brought me into contact with Max, the first CAR refugee I would meet in Kinshasa. One of Aristo's neighbours, who worked for the local Catholic radio station, took me to the radio premises where I ended up meeting Max. I remember him standing in the corridor, leaning against the wall: a slim young man, wearing an orange t-shirt, gentle and well-spoken.

Aristo turned out to be an important gatekeeper and a joker. Collaterally, he introduced me to his world, which was inhabited by one of his biggest passions: capoeira.[73] Along with some friends, Aristo gave classes to the deprived youth in Kinshasa in the hope of guiding them through their lives

[73] AfroBrazilian self-defence sport (or dance), with historical links to slavery. During a '*roda'* (circle of capoeira), two *capoeiristas* (those who play capoeira) face one another in the circle while the others stand around watching and clapping. Besides the physical training, this self-defence group sport enhances the *capoeiristas'* sense of self-discipline, respect, solidarity, loyalty to the group, and self-control. According to the Kinois *capoeiristas*, it also teaches them how to deal with adversity.

in the challenging city. Capoeira had offered Aristo a place in which to retreat from the world and a willingness to hold on and not to give up; he wished to pass on this wisdom. I was introduced to the circle of *capoeiristas* in Kinshasa, a motivated handful of young men who defied gravity and the system by taking care of children in their respective neighbourhoods.

As it turned out, a deal was brokered between the Kinois *capoeiristas* and UNICEF in August 2014, giving birth to the Capoeira pour la Paix (Capoeira for Peace) project. The different members of the group then started to leave to the different corners of DR Congo. Aristo was coincidentally stationed at the Mole camp to teach capoeira among the CAR refugees. Within the blink of an eye, Aristo was no longer my research 'assistant' but became a research 'subject' too. The intertwinement does not end here. During my trip to Bangui in May 2018, I was contacted by Aristo through a messenger, again coincidentally—we had not been in contact for some time. Knowing I was in Bangui, he encouraged me to visit some of the students he had taught in the camp and sent me their contact details. I met this group, and I again felt as I had done in Kinshasa, mesmerized by how they practised capoeira. Capoeira know-how had travelled upriver, was transferred to youth in a refugee camp, and then crossed the border into Bangui. Visiting the *capoeiristas* in Bangui, I was following the threads from Kinshasa, across the border—I found Kinshasa *in* Bangui.

b) Brazzaville

> Kinshasa and Brazzaville are face to face. It is like Bangui Zongo. If you are in Zongo you look at Bangui; if you are in Bangui, you also look at Zongo. So Kinshasa is like that. If you are in Brazzaville, you look at the lights of Kinshasa. Thus, crossing to Brazzaville is not far away.[74]
> (Vasco, Libenge 16 July 2013, interview held in Lingala)

The preceding quotation makes reference to a conversation I had with a young motorbike driver while riding from Gemena to Libenge. Originally from north-west DR Congo, Vasco, who had previously lived with his uncle in Brazzaville, had taken up riding the motorbike recently and was growing acquainted with crossing from Zongo to Bangui and back. He underlined the similarities between the two river sites, that of Bangui–Zongo with that of Brazzaville–Kinshasa. By doing so, Vasco swiftly linked for me these three Central African capitals.

[74] *Kinshasa Brazzaville eza kaka face à face. Eza kaka Bangui Zongo. Soki oza na Zongo ozotala Bangui, soki oza na Bangui, ozotala mpe Zongo, donc Kinshasa c'est comme ça. Soki oza na Brazzaville, ozotala lumière ya Kinshasa. Sikoyo wana kokatisa Brazzaville eza mosika té.*

Separated by only a river, Brazzaville and Kinshasa are the two closest capitals in the world. As we will see later (in Chapter IV), in the past the river did not form a border between the two banks; the area in which Kinshasa and Brazzaville are found was part of a single Kongo kingdom. The historian Didier Gondola, who has a Congolese father and a Zairean mother, has dedicated part of his work to the closeness of these two mirror cities, or *Villes Miroirs* (1997). He is of course not the only one; scholars interested in the Congolese rumba (Stewart 2003; White 2008), the phenomenon of *la sape* (Gandoulou 1989; Friedman 1994; Gondola 1999; MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000), and more recently the economic exchanges across the river (Ayimpam 2015; Devlieger 2018) all have difficulty describing the one city without the other.[75] Separating them completely has proven obsolete, as the 'we are the same people' discourse seems to be on the lips of many Kinois. Nevertheless, from the period of colonization onwards, the histories of the two countries have often been described separately—that is, following colonial borders, very much like the histories of DR Congo and CAR, a historiography which I try to bring together in Chapter IV.

It was not so much the vicinity, but the CAR refugees I met who moved from Kinshasa to Brazzaville that triggered my curiosity. Like DR Congo, Congo-Brazzaville received CAR refugees fleeing the conflict in their country, but in fewer numbers.[76] And like Kinshasa, Brazzaville, too, received the more enterprising and clever of the pack. Because of the closeness of the two capital cities, it was do-able for refugees to try their luck in both cities, crossing from Brazzaville to Kinshasa and vice versa. Following the networks and migration itineraries, I crossed the river in November 2014, and during the course of a week I traced the CAR refugees, and some of their family members, who had crossed in the previous months. Brazzaville is smaller than Kinshasa, and in the eyes of the CAR refugee-students, it shares many similarities with Bangui: a (not-too-large) capital on the riverside, a shared colonial history, shared colonial legacies such as the education system, a similar use of the French language and its orthography,[77] and a comparable system of public transportation.[78] Moreover, the two countries are part of the CEMAC and share the same currency (the franc CFA). To the refugees,

[75] Not to forget the visual, rich in transborder maps, publication entitled *Brakin* (**Bra**zzaville **Kin**shasa) by the Jan van Eyck Academie (2006).

[76] According to Jeune Afrique, Congo (RC) hosted 32,000 CAR refugees. Of these, 6,000 found refuge in the Betout refugee camp. There is also a community of CAR citizens (immigrants yet not necessarily refugees) in Brazzaville (Jeune Afrique and AFP 2018).

[77] French French rather than Belgian French

[78] Green-and-white minibuses and yellow taxis

Brazzaville felt less foreign and thus less overwhelming than Kinshasa, because they could more easily relate to it.

Gondola (1997) argues that an irreparable disjunction took place when the Zairois were first expelled from Brazzaville in the 1970s. These expulsions would repeat themselves over the years, the most recent episode being the Operation Mbata ya Bakolo launched in April 2014. Operation Mbata ya Bakolo officially targeted all undocumented foreigners in Brazzaville, who were held accountable for the rise in criminality in the city. However, it was particularly the Congolese (DRC), both documented and undocumented, who were expelled from Congo (RC). A causal link to the infamous Operation Likofi in Kinshasa was made. The 2013 Operation Likofi, on the other riverbank, was set up to fight against the growing number of gangs (*kuluna*). *Kuluneurs,* or gang members, were imprisoned, many disappeared (presumably murdered), and yet others illegally crossed the border into Brazzaville (Sawyer 2014). Operation Mbata ya Bakolo was presented as a reaction to Operation Likofi.[79] By assimilating the Kinois to thugs and prostitutes, the Congolese media fed xenophobic feelings among the population (Lossayi 2016). *Chefs de quartier* were asked to identify foreigners, schools were asked to demand that DRC children leave their classrooms, and pastors risked fines if they allowed Congolese (DRC) into their churches (Amnesty International 2015, 11).

The cruelty of both operations was remarkable and, until today, little documented. Many people died or disappeared. In both cases, the operations became a veil behind which innocent civilians were turned into victims. With regards to Operation Mbata ya Bakolo, properties were looted and the brutal actions of soldiers were shared through YouTube, insulting many Congolese (DRC) as they watched and shared the videos. Once again, the mirror cities were driven apart. There was undoubtedly more to it than just petty crime and undocumented foreigners. *Radio trottoir*—an important, yet informal, source of information and political commentary in many (Central) African countries (Ellis 1989; Nyamnjoh 2005)—offered alternative interpretations of the events. One of these interpretations related to Kabila's previous official visit to Brazzaville, where he faced a demonstration of Congolese (DRC) decrying his regime. Offended, Kabila had, so to say, arranged for these demonstrators to be punished. Another rumour attributed the operation to the cooling relations between two presidents—and hence the image of a 70-year old Sassou, the older president of the two, slapping the younger Kabila (42 years old at the time) (Kibangula 2014).

[79] It is interesting to underline their semantic closeness. *Likofi* means 'hit by the fist' in Lingala, while *Mbata ya Bakolo,* also Lingala, means 'the slap by the elders'.

Whatever the cause, the number of expelled individuals was enormous (of the order of tens of thousands),[80] and its consequences were strongly felt on both riverbanks. A large number of *refoulés*, as the expelled Congolese (DRC) came to be known, ended up squatting the *Estade du 24* in the Kinshasa city district (see Figure 26). Many among these *refoulés* had come from rural areas in northern DR Congo and had never set foot in the capital of their own country; they did not have family in Kinshasa. Others could not return to the already crowded houses they had left behind. Being neither refugees nor IDPs, it was unclear which agency should be responsible for them. They ended up living months, even years, in deplorable conditions along one of Kinshasa's central arteries. Brazzavillois students living in Kinshasa also fled, fearing reprisals. Expensive visas were imposed and the commerce between the two cities came almost to a standstill, causing an inflation in foodstuff prices in Brazzaville. Markets, nightclubs, and churches in Brazzaville emptied (Kengué 2014); while the demand for manual labour, especially in the construction sector, increased.

Interestingly enough, a collateral consequence of this closure against the Congolese (DRC) was felt in a simultaneous opening up of the labour, and housing, opportunities for the CAR refugees; and so the latter took the place of the former (see also Lossayi 2016, 146–47). Among the CAR refugees I had met in Kinshasa, there were about a dozen who moved to Brazzaville by mid-2014, a couple of months into Operation Mbata ya Bakolo. Many of them ended up living in Ouenzé and Mpila, neighbourhoods close to the military depository of arms which exploded, accidentally, on 4 March 2012, blowing up with it many of the houses in its surroundings. Prior to the *refoulement* (expulsion), these houses had been inhabited by Congolese (DRC); CAR refugees now became the new tenants.

Figure 28 Mpila
Roofless houses at different locations in Mpila inhabited by CAR refugees (Photographs by author November 2014)

[80] The numbers of *refoulés* vary depending on who is counting and how the counting is being done. Bouvier and Omasombo state 80,000 individuals had been expelled up until early May 2014 (Bouvier and OmasomboTshonda 2015). Amnesty international suggest between 180,000 and 245,000 expelled individuals until the operation's end in September 2014 (Amnesty International 2015).

c) Cameroon and N'Djaména: Fleeing the Anti-Balaka

In April 2014, I spent one month in Cameroon, where I managed to carry out research, in hindsight, even if impressionistically. In order to broaden my perspective on the CAR refugee situation, I followed some networks from Bangui into Cameroon, more specifically in Douala, a city that serves as the harbour for the land-locked country.[81] Moreover, I visited my colleague Adamou Amadou at his field site; as mentioned above, he had been conducting research among the Fulani in eastern Cameroon. My description hereunder is based mainly on Adamou's observations and knowledge about his field site, which he shared with me; for more details I have to refer to his work (Amadou 2018a; 2018b; De Bruijn et al. 2016).

In the last two decades, the Fulani have escaped CAR in different waves. The first wave coincides with the period that saw the birth of many rebel groups, around 2007, under Bozizé's regime (as will be discussed in Chapter IV). The CAR Fulani were targeted by armed militias and *coupeurs de route* (road cutters)[82] roaming the region for bounty. Many crossed the border and found refuge in eastern Cameroon. The second wave resulted from the 2013 coup d'état and its aftermath. In fact, the CAR Fulani were caught between two fires. Despite being from the same religious background as their aggressors, the Fulani were persecuted by the Seleka; on the other hand, as reprisals against the Seleka—and in extension to the Muslim community—became more commonplace later in 2013, the Fulani were also persecuted by the Anti-Balaka, and the latter ended up chasing the Fulani and their cattle out of the country.

The visit to Adamou's field site was invaluable in terms of broadening, complementing, and layering my comprehension of the CAR conflict. The majority of CAR refugees I met in eastern Cameroon were Muslim, yet not exclusively so. Their stories were different from the stories I had heard in Bangui, and also from those I would hear in Kinshasa (at the time I had not met even one CAR refugee in Kinshasa). Fulani in eastern Cameroon had already fled the Seleka, but it was the Anti-Balaka, in particular, who had committed atrocities against them. Even though explaining the conflict in religious terms is short-sighted and unhelpful, the religious factor cannot be ignored. By misusing religion as a political tool to polarize the population, the conflict had been *made* a religious one; and as crimes were committed on both sides, sentiments of grief and revenge became logical outcomes and instigators of new acts of violence. On one occasion, at the Cameroonian town of Garoua-

[81] A land-locked country with porous borders. However, there are two main arteries: Ubangi River and the, at times, paved road that leaves Bangui north to Bouar up to the border.

[82] Or *zaraguinas* (see also Saïbou 2010; and Lombard 2013 on this topic)

Mboulaï, which lies on the border with CAR, I asked two young Fulani men to accompany me to the border crossing. Despite the conflict, people were still crossing, yet not *all* people crossed. With every step we took closer to the border, the atmosphere grew more tense and unpleasant; the young Fulani men grew uncomfortable, and fear could be read in their awkward movements.

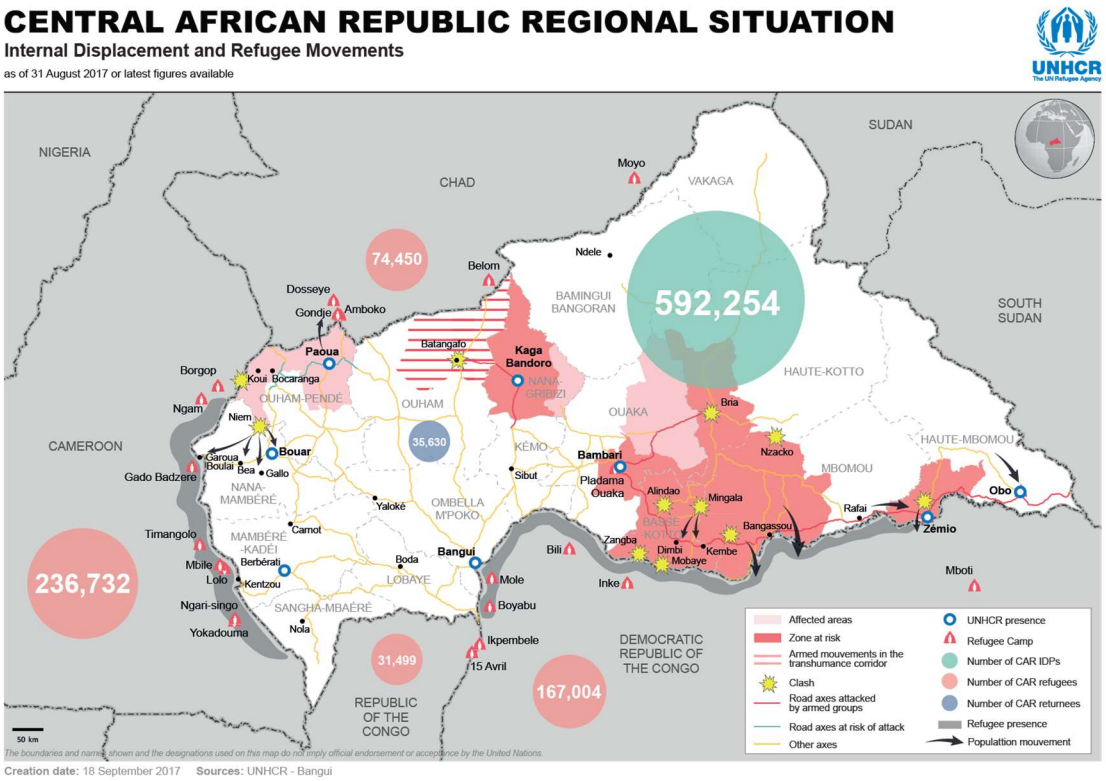

Figure 29 Number of CAR refugees in neighbouring countries[83]

In addition to Cameroon, a short visit to N'Djaména at the end of 2017, as well as my discussions with colleagues working in Chad, helped me to put the refugee flow into DR Congo further into perspective (Wilson 2017). After Cameroon and DR Congo, Chad listed as the third in terms of number of CAR refugees (see Figure 29). Moreover, as we will see in Chapter IV, Chad has played a prominent role in the shaping of contemporary CAR politics. The hidden, or perhaps not so hidden, hand of Chad contributed to bringing both Bozizé and Djotodia to the head of the CAR government; and the same hand later deposed them. As the conflict evolved, discourses about it seemed to be worryingly simplified. As such, both the Muslim community in CAR and Chadian nationals came to be viewed as partisans of the Seleka and thus as foreigners who had come to pillage the country. This restrictive and dangerous reading was fostered by a mediatized discourse—of intercommunal fighting and even genocide—on the part of the international media, even though, as we have seen above, religion is not the root cause.

[83] (UNHCR Bangui 2017)

Through social media, I had begun to follow another engaged individual who ended up in N'Djaména in early 2014. Facebook had brought us digitally into contact and eventually facilitated our encounter. After being digital friends for over two years, we ended up meeting in person and since then we keep in contact (through Facebook and Messenger). The person in question, a CAR Muslim, had been forced, too, to present himself as a foreigner in order to save his life. He left everything behind. Deeply touched by the stories of his fellow refugees in N'Djaména, this man took it upon himself to represent the CAR refugee community in N'Djaména. His commitment would remind me of Euloge's commitment to the CAR refugees in Kinshasa. Both found themselves in exile, and both had fled Bangui, yet at different times and towards different directions. While Euloge, who would become one of the representatives of the CAR refugee community in Kinshasa, had fled the Seleka southwards to Kinshasa, the former had fled the Anti-Balaka northwards to N'Djaména.

As in Kinshasa, the CAR refugee community in N'Djaména is composed of both Muslims and Christians; yet in contrast to Kinshasa, it counts an important Muslim community. Like Kinshasa and Brazzaville, N'Djaména attracted enterprising and clever youngsters. Looking beyond the capital, however, especially in the south-western regions bordering CAR, the picture of displaced people is once again complex. Forced to leave their country of birth (CAR), many Chadians 'returned' to Chad, the country their parents and grandparents had left behind. Being Chadian by descent, yet not necessarily by practice (they felt most comfortable speaking Sango, for instance), these returnees, as they came to be known, fled CAR looking for safety. Like the *refoulés* in Kinshasa, the second- and third-generation Chadians did not fall under anyone's responsibility—since they were neither refugees nor *repatriates* (Chauvin 2018).

Eastern Cameroon undoubtedly prepared me for the research ahead. N'Djaména helped me to put it in perspective retrospectively. In contrast to both, the majority of CAR refugees in Kinshasa were Christian—yet again, not exclusively so. Meeting the CAR refugees in Kinshasa only two weeks after I had left Bertoua was a little mind-boggling. Their discourse was different: the Anti-Balaka were not pointed at as the main aggressors, but the Seleka was. (Once again, the majority of CAR refugees in Kinshasa fled just after the coup, thus before the Anti-Balaka had entered Bangui). Ethnographic research cannot be objective, and ethnographers have often been criticized for taking the part of the people they research (Scheper-Hughes 1995). In order to balance this inevitable bias, the time spent in the field, the exercise of critical reflection, and short field trips to other sides and sites of the story can help ethnographers to remind themselves, over and again, of the complexity, layered-ness, and incompleteness of any field. It is by being exposed to different realities that one can combat simplifications and stereotypical explanations of conflicts. The real perpetrators are not one

community or the other; they are part of the national political order linked to a global system of inequality that is difficult to point the finger at—a system of which, oftentimes, the ethnographer forms a part (Farmer 2004a).

d) Rebellion and revolution

Elections in CAR

Before moving on to the methodological chapter, the last part of this chapter will touch upon the growing awareness of the civil society in CAR and especially in DR Congo. After an interim period of two weeks, a transitional president was appointed in CAR in February 2014. Catherine Samba-Panza became CAR's first female president. Her main task as president was to steer the country towards democratic elections. The fighting, nevertheless, continued and even intensified throughout 2014. Especially in the interior of the country, the situation was dire. Both the Seleka and the—from the outset acephalous—Anti-Balaka further disintegrated into an ever-growing number of splinter groups.[84] Political, social, and security ideals made room for a competition to control and pillage the country's natural resources. Despite repeated attempts at dialogue and signed peace agreements,[85] crimes and atrocities continued to go unpunished, and rebel groups even called for the partition of the country and the creation of the Republic de Logone (RFI 2015). The violence in Bangui (in particular the Fatima attack in May 2014, widely shared through SMS and in social media); the overall impunity in the country; the futile attempts at reconciliation; and the extravagant expenditure of the on every occasion more elegantly dressed Catherine Samba-Panza—like her predecessors, she would be accused of embezzlement, particularly with regards to the money granted by the Angolan government (Nzilo 2014; Soudan 2014)—all these were among the hotly debated topics within the CAR refugee community in Kinshasa.

The preparation for CAR elections was another important topic and, interestingly, one characterized by a changing discourse. In 2014, several of the CAR refugees in Kinshasa disliked the idea of presidential elections. In their eyes, the need to punish those who had committed crimes, together with the securitization of the borders and local-level elections, seemed more urgent than elections. Unfortunately, rather than bottom-up, grassroots initiatives, imposed top-down solutions continue to be the preferred way out of conflicts. In this sense, Lombard rightly views CAR as an experiment in

[84] For a mind-boggling and chronological visualization of this splintering, see Dukhan (2017) and Weyns et al. (2014, 12).

[85] Up to February 2019, eight different peace agreements had been signed, and seven breached (Tarif and Vircoulon 2019).

governance where the same mistakes, such as prioritizing presidential elections, seem to be made over and over again (Lombard 2016). Interestingly, by 2015 the discourse among the CAR refugees started to change. They had been sceptical about presidential elections at the beginning of the year, but by the end of the year, all hopes had been euphorically set on these elections, and they even joyfully posted their political alliances on Facebook. The refugee community in Kinshasa was mainly divided into two camps: those in support of Désiré Kolingba, on the one hand, and those who supported Karim Meckassoua, on the other.[86] As elsewhere, politics seem to be played out in the diaspora, and official and unofficial visits of potential candidates took place.

In December 2015 the first round of presidential elections was held in CAR. Neither Meckassoua nor Kolingba made it to the second round, which was fought out by Dologuélé and Touadera. On 14 February 2016, Touadera, a mathematician and former minister under Bozizé, was voted into office. As I visited Bangui in August 2016, the situation seemed to have improved and people had hope this trend would continue. After all, the new president had been voted into office through fair elections and had not imposed himself by yet another coup. Soon, however, it became clear that Touadera's rule did not extend beyond Bangui, and his legitimacy started to unravel. The interior of the country had fallen prey to over a dozen militarized groups.

#Telema: The January 2015 uprising

Although much attention has been given in this chapter to the conflict in CAR, the political climate across the border was imminently changing too. Even if there were no signs of a visible rebellion threatening the capital,[87] as had been the case in CAR, the first glimpses of a boil-over began to appear. The example of Operation Mbata ya Bakolo, described above, is only one of the many cracks in the wall. With presidential elections in DR Congo on the horizon—supposed to take place in December 2016[88]—repression, on the one hand, seemed to be on the rise; on the other hand, civil society also became more vociferous. Important organizations, such as La Lucha in the east and Filimbi in Kinshasa, were born. They had been inspired by the 'Y-en-a-marre' movement in Senegal, and especially by the October 2014 Burkinabé revolution, through which the people of Burkina Faso

[86] Désiré Kolingba is the son of the former president André Kolingba. Karim Meckassoua is a CAR politician. Both are Muslim; the latter was born in the controversial 5 Kilo neighbourhood, the former converted to Islam in the 80s. Both held ministerial posts under the Bozizé regime (Duhem 2015; RFI 2016).

[87] In the west of the country. Eastern DRC is another story and falls beyond the scope of this thesis. The Kamuina Nsapu conflict, which exploded in 2016 in the Kasai provinces, is also not treated in this thesis.

[88] But ended up taking place two years later in December 2018 after having been twice postponed unconstitutionally.

managed to chase out Compaoré after 27 years of power. At that point, in October 2014, I was in Kinshasa, and the events taking place in Ouagadougou were closely followed, thanks to social media, and became the talk of the day, digitally but also among the *parlementaires debouts* on Kinshasa's streets corners.[89]

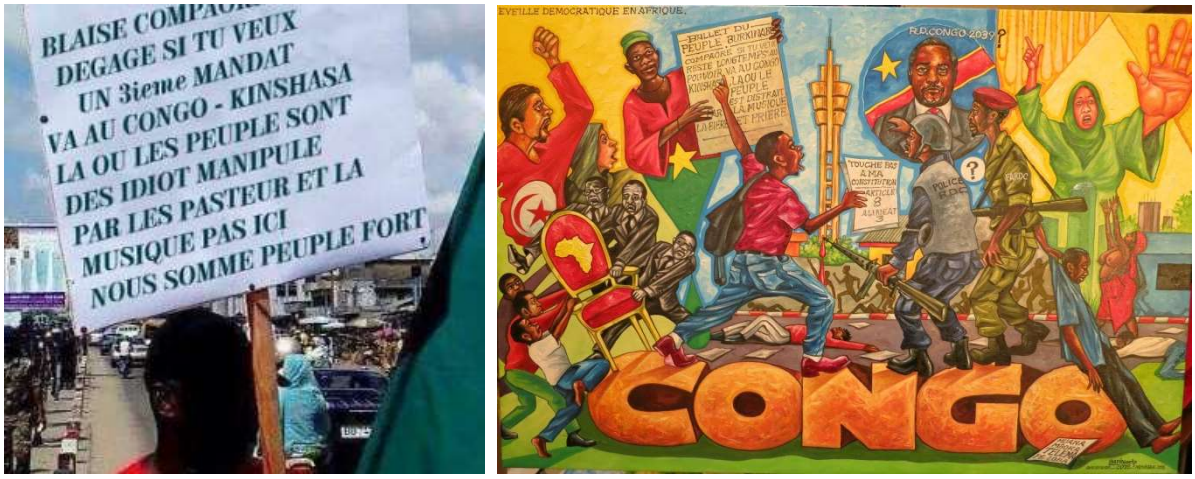

Figure 30 'Blaise Compaoré dégage'
(Left) Photoshopped image that went around Facebook at the end of 2014. (Right) Eveille démocratique en Afrique (Makengele 2015a).

The revolution in Burkina stimulated many in Kinshasa, and I argue that it was even a direct source of inspiration for the events that took place in January 2015. When the Congolese government announced an official population census before the 2016 elections could take place, the Kinois, as elsewhere in the country, interpreted this census as *glissement*, a manoeuvre to extend Kabila's mandate, and took their discontent onto the streets (Wilson 2015b; 2015c). This uprising resulted in clashes with armed men, whereby between 27 and 42 people, depending on the source, lost their lives. Moreover, seeing how fast the news spread on social media—for instance, through the *#Telema* and *#Simama* hashtags ('stand up', in Lingala and Swahili respectively)—the government decided to shut down Internet access. The spreading of hashtags (Olivier 2015; Kibangula 2016) and subsequent shutting down of Internet access became a precedent in Central Africa, closely linked to the waking up of a society that is fed up with political leaders who refuse to leave power when their mandates terminate, while the daily realities of citizens only worsen. Important demonstrations followed in DR Congo in September 2015 and February and December 2016. Also in Congo-Brazzaville, people stood up against a third term for Sassou Nguesso[90]—which he finally did obtain,

[89] See also de Goede (2012)

[90] The hashtag for this occasion was #Sassoufit, a play on words that could be translated as 'fed up with Sassou'.

not without repression and even bombardment of the Pool region, another episode which went more or less unrecorded in the international press.

Even if in DR Congo, Congo-Brazzaville, and Chad a change of power did not come about as it had for Burkina Faso (Hagberg et al. 2018), the *android generation*[91] have started to make themselves more and more heard. In a way, one could argue that after the 2011 Arab Spring, an African Spring announced itself on the continent. When I came back from the field in January 2015, I was surprised how little media attention the manifestations in Burkina had received in the West. Experiencing it in Kinshasa, it felt as a pivotal moment not only for the country but for the continent's history. The 'African Spring' was, however, overshadowed by how its precursor, the Arab Spring, had turned sour, bringing radicalization instead of the much-hoped-for democratization to the fore (De Bruijn 2018). Furthermore, it was unable to topple the heads of state in Central Africa. Sassou and Déby are still presidents of their respective countries, yet no longer incontestably so. Kabila did finally cede the presidency to his follower, even if it has been claimed by many observers that he still holds the reins in his hands (Englebert 2019; Kibala Bauer 2019; Kibangula 2019).

[91] 'Android generation' was first used by President Paul Biya during his annual message to the youth on 10 February 2016. It refers to the young generation, avid users of Internet and social media, who make use of these tools in order to make ends meet. In this context, I use it more as meaning the young generation who are connected and informed about what happens in the world.

Chapter III. Nomadic minds and moving methods

Figure 31 'L'entretien'
Sapin Makengele (2018)

1) Introduction

> Experiences, storytelling, and travelling are interweaved. To experience is to go along a way. (Khosravi 2018)

Whereas in the previous chapter the field and methods employed during fieldwork were presented, this chapter, more than an enumeration of methods (such as interviews, participant observation, and informal conversations), is a reflection on methodology—wherein methodology is understood as an *approach* towards fieldwork, an almost philosophical stance vis-à-vis data collection and the ways in which researchers relate to and work *with* the people they 'research'. In line with Khosravi, in this chapter I look for ways to question and go beyond the North–South division that so often characterizes ethnographic research—a division wherein theory and concepts are produced in the global North, while the global South is reduced to generating empirical data (Khosravi 2018).

Working with a community of conflict (im)mobiles, moreover, has pushed me to espouse a 'nomadic mind' (Hazan and Hertzog 2012; De Bruijn et al. 2017). Characterized by a continual adaptation to a changing world (Marx in Hazan and Hertzog 2012, 1), the nomadic mind resists settling into socially coded, or conventional, modes of thought and behaviour (Braidotti in Hazan and Hertzog 2012, 1). Embracing the nomadic mind is a phenomenological choice that tunes in with a 'rolling with it'

mentality (Thomson, Ansoms and Murison 2013), in which contingency and serendipity are not feared and omitted; on the contrary, they are embraced, valued, and theorized upon (Rivoal and Salazar 2013).

The methods I describe in this chapter do not necessarily differ from those of other researchers. The difference lies in the approach. Participant observation, the ethnographic method *par excellence*, is a point in case. Depending on the balance between participation and observation, one can employ participant observation or *observant participation* (Tedlock 1991; Culhane 2017, 10). Whereas in the former the focus tends towards observation (a very important tool, notwithstanding), in the latter it gravitates around a more bilaterally engaged form of participation. It is not the method itself, but the approach to it that will decide whether one is doing the one or the other. The approach deals also with the ways of observing: is the researcher observing with her eyes only, or is she also registering the environment with other senses, such as taste and smell (Pink 2009; 2011)?

Embracing a nomadic mind is not only about embracing different sites and travelling a part of the methodology—both will be discussed in this chapter—it is about being sensible to other methodological wanderings that instigate an 'opening up' to the senses. Becoming aware of flirting, for instance, opened a door into paying attention to other aspects of fieldwork and other sources of knowledge. Flirting catalysed the phenomenological journey that included sensory and sensuous ethnographic practices (Stoller 1997; Pink 2009)—both in terms of senses and emotions, as well as in experience and intersubjectivity (M. Jackson 1998; Lucht 2012). Flirting, I will argue, was only a door to other emotions, such as fear, frustration, longing, and grief—to name but a few.

Accounting for senses and emotions is not only a reflexive exercise but also 'a route to knowledge' (Pink 2009, 3). In other words, facing and describing the emotions I felt while doing research not only says something about me as a researcher in the field (it certainly does this), but more interestingly it points towards the informants' feelings and sense of belonging. I am hereby not claiming that a researcher can and should experience other people's lives, but reflexivity does facilitate learning about people's ways of knowing (Pink 2011). Researchers enquiring into duress, for example, are confronted with different forms of physical and emotional risks—which need to be expressed and acknowledged (Thomson, Ansoms and Murison 2013), as they facilitate deeper 'scratching of the surface' into the complexities of other people's lives (Khosravi 2018). Empathy is useful not to equate the researcher with the researched, but to reach a better understanding of the lifeworlds of both.

Thus, *moving* methods, as mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, do not relate only to mobility, but *moving* also encapsulates being emotionally touched (Adey 2009) by the field, the people, and

their stories. Furthermore, it can also be interpreted as *moving towards* others and thus underlines intersubjectivity. In this chapter, therefore, I explore the methodological journey of a nomadic mind. This journey starts with a very concrete and physical interpretation of mobility, in terms of multi-sitedness and travelling between these different sites. Slowly but surely, the physical makes room for a 'wakening up' to the senses (Stoller 1997)—that is, the being-moved-by and moving-towards-one-another approach. A nomadic mind approach thus includes multiple 'others', with whom we conduct research: the informants that inspire our work, the gatekeepers, artists, facilitators and assistants, the friends and acquaintances we make in the field. It also includes the colleagues with whom we work: our supervisors, our fellow PhD students, student assistants, cartographers, language editors and translators, technology experts and filmmakers. A nomadic mind leads to acknowledging all these people, their roles in the process of production of an exceptional fruit: the co-creation knowledge.

2) Mobile methods: Multi-sited ethnography and travelling

Marcus defines multi-sited research as being 'designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites' (Marcus 1995, 105). The researcher needs to make, in other words, the links between the places that would not (necessarily) be linked, by 'following the people' and by paying attention to their life stories (Marcus 1995, 106 and 110). As described in Chapter II, my field of research consisted of at least nine different physical sites in at least five Central African countries (to different degrees, of course). Like Hannerz, I felt I was doing research there … there … and there (2003).

From 2013 to 2015, I visited the multi-sited field four times for a total period of 12 months. After leaving the field (and longest period of field research) in February 2015, I carried out additional follow-up visits in August 2016 and May 2018 to Bangui, as well as in October 2017 to N'Djaména. But the field extended beyond the physical, as discussed in Chapter II, to include the digital sphere. I can say that I was personally 'digitized' by this PhD project. It required me to open Facebook and Twitter accounts and to buy a smartphone. In fact, I bought my first smartphone, a TECHNO, while visiting Inge Ligtvoet, a PhD colleague in Lagos (Nigeria).

Throughout the research, I have kept in contact and followed many of the conflict mobiles through Facebook, Facebook Messenger, and WhatsApp. Time and again, especially during crisis peaks, I have turned into a 'phoning anthropologist' (Pelckmans 2009). Up until the time of writing, I keep in contact with several of my informants. With the advent of social media, it has become almost

impossible to disconnect; one continues to follow with one eye what happens on the ground and, almost inadvertently, to collect data. In a way, the field 'persecutes' you, and stopping data collection in the digital age has become a real challenge.

By following conflict mobiles, I became a conflict mobile myself—I also moved because conflict informed my research. More than a means of arriving to potential research sites, the travelling I carried out during my fieldwork became part and parcel of the field itself and, especially, of its methodology—it was 'methodological generative' (Büscher and Urry 2009b, 104). Travelling became a reflection of the movement of people between CAR, DR Congo, and other countries in Central Africa. As we have seen before, in Central Africa mobility is the norm rather than the exception; and travel is part of society and informs social change (De Bruijn and Brinkman 2012). The more I travelled, the more I felt part of a mobile community—that of the road, and that of conflict mobiles. Within my research, travelling as a method was not only a choice, nor merely prescriptive; travel as a method was a consequence of the social realities of my field. I did not embrace mobile methods blindly; I did so because the realities I encountered on the ground required me to do so (Merriman 2014).

In hindsight, I travelled along the same paths as many of my informants, but often in the opposite direction (while I travelled northwards from Kinshasa to Bangui, they went southwards from Bangui to Kinshasa).[92] At times I used the same means of transport they did: the motorbike or the pirogue. At others I made use of more expensive, yet not completely exclusive to refugees, internal and humanitarian flights. Bangui and Kinshasa lie over 1,000 km apart and are not connected by any direct means of transportation. The trip between the two capitals is rather difficult and tedious and can take up to between a week and two months. Travel as a method does not place the experience of the researcher at the forefront. But travelling from Kinshasa to Bangui has helped me to relate to the students-refugees' travel accounts on various levels. For one, it helped me empathize and identify cognitively and intellectually with them (Marcus 1995, 112). Travelling provided me with a 'better understanding' (De Bruijn and Brinkman 2012, 53) of the experiences; the joys and frustrations; the arduousness and required tenacity of trips taken along Equatorial roads; the getting stuck in mud; the back pain and exhaustion after long trips on motorbikes; the unofficial molestations along the road—but also enjoying breathtaking views, for instance.

[92] Except for when some of them decided to return voluntarily, of course.

It must be acknowledged that even if we were travelling on the same roads, the experience and velocity of travelling differed. Travelling made me aware of the inequalities between my informants' and my own means of travel, in terms of different travelling choices (motorbike versus truck), hierarchies and regimes of mobility (international passport versus certificate of refuge). More than empathy, the shared experiences along the road offered me a doorway into engaging with the refugee-student community in Kinshasa. Small talk about our experiences *en route*, or the places we had passed, contributed in reinforcing the credibility of my research in the eyes of the Central African refugees in Kinshasa (Driessen and Jansen 2013). In other words, we had travelled and experienced the same route and therefore we could connect (Büscher and Urry 2009b, 106).

In addition to the movement between cities, the 'walk-along' or 'drive-along' method were also part of the methodology *within* the sites (Kusenbach 2003; Moretti 2017). I here extend the meaning of 'travelling' to include the many walks and rides I conducted with my informants in, for instance, Kinshasa or Bangui. In Chapter II, I described how I discovered Bangui by taking extensive walks with Émile. Such walks were insightful in multiple ways: they brought up relations (and memories) between people and places (Both 2017, 33); they were indicative of the security level of the city (think of the circulation metaphor described for Bangui in Chapter II); and, on a more personal note, they were a way to feel rooted and connected to the city.

Figure 32 Walking with Max and Tezman
along the Kasa-Vubu cemetery turned urban agricultural field. Photograph taken by Aristo (Kinshasa, 7 May 2014)

In contrast to Bangui, in Kinshasa, where the CAR students did not have as many embodied memories related to places (as they were still new to the city), walks were a way to discover the city together and to see Kinshasa through the foreign eyes of the refugees. I remember a particularly long walk between Limete and Kitambo (see Figure 32 above) in May 2014. As the CAR refugees often complained about the expensive transport, I decided to accompany Max and Tezman on a walk to the CAR embassy, where they wanted to apply for a *laisser-passer* (see Chapter V). During our walk, we crossed five *communes* of Kinshasa—Limete, Kalamu, Ngiri-Ngiri, Bandalungwa, and Kitambo (see Figure 26)—and the walk took us several hours along busy streets under a burning sun. It was insightful, but equally exhausting, even though I am accustomed to walking a lot. At the end of that day, I went to bed with a backache. Sharing mobile experiences taught me something about the daily hardships. This walk was reminiscent of the back pain felt after travelling eight hours on dusty roads on the back of a motorbike. Both are indicative of the hardships endured when having to travel along roads on a regular basis—either in terms of the state of the road, as in the countryside, or in terms of the expensive public transport, as in the city.[93] While walking in Kinshasa was a choice for the researcher, it was less so for the refugee-students, who could not always afford to pay transport fees.

One of the things that really attracted me to 'talking whilst walking' (Anderson 2004) was the intimate public space for discussion that these walks created. As Both rightly suggests, not sitting together face to face triggered other kinds of informal conversations and made interlocutors less (or perhaps differently) conscious of what they were sharing (Both 2017, 34). Walking together, side by side, and especially riding on a motorbike together—a 'ride-along' method, sitting one behind the other, as I often did with Euloge in Kinshasa, or during the long motorbike trips in Sud-Ubangi—opened up a space for conversation. I would even argue that this space elicited confessions and the sharing of doubts and reflections, not only on the side of the informants, but also on my own side. Issues about mistrust, secretiveness, and the purpose of my research, for instance, often came up during such walks (see also 4.a hereunder).

[93] Even though it must be noted that the state of the streets in Kinshasa is often deplorable too.

Figure 33 The ride-along method
(Left) Sitting on the back of the motorbike while riding the landing lane of Libenge's airport with Frère Georges (20 July 2013). (Right) An intimate moving public space on the road between Gemena and Libenge (Photographed by Mirjam de Bruijn, 10 June 2014). It is interesting to note that as I look at the pictures, I can clearly remember what we were discussing on that particular day

I nevertheless felt a doubleness, on repeated occasions, when spending time with Centrafricains in Kinshasa: was my field CAR or Congo? Using the metaphor of the school atlas, Malkki explains how places seem to be rooted, with clear-cut delimitations, so that 'one country cannot at the same time be another country' (Malkki 1992, 26). In reality a country *can* be within another country, and two sites can overlap in one geographical location. This was the case when I hung around the CAR students in Kinshasa and we would greet one another in Sango and eat *koko*[94] together while locating streets on a mental map of Bangui. I was simultaneously in both cities. While sitting physically in Kinshasa, we would talk about Bangui in terms of past anecdotes, recent political developments, and the future plans to rebuild the country. Bangui turned into a melancholic image of what they had left behind.

The more time I spent among the Central African refugee-students in Kinshasa, the fuzzier the division between the two sites became: Centrafricain informants would meet Congolese friends; Congolese friends would comment upon my research about the refugees; and Centrafricains learned Lingala. While trying to understand the Central African refugees in Congo, it was as if two apparent 'worlds apart' (Marcus 1995, 102) melted into one another before my eyes. While the Banguissois in Kinshasa imagined Bangui, they also adapted to and integrated their environment into their processes of identification and sense of belonging (see Chapter VI). In multi-sited ethnography, therefore, the multiple sites do not point strictly to physical locations. Remembered and invented homes and imagined homelands count as sites too (Gupta and Ferguson 1992b; Malkki 1992, 24).

[94] A green leaf found in Central Africa

Going to Bangui for follow-up visits, respectively a year-and-a-half and three years after leaving Kinshasa in 2015, was also an exercise in multi-sitedness. During both visits (August 2016 and May 2018), the experience was reversed; and encountering Kinshasa *in* Bangui, as in the memories of the returned refugees, proved to be equally insightful. These visits gave me the opportunity to extend the following strategy even further. While, on the one hand, I was able to catch up and reconnect with those refugees who had returned to the country of origin, on the other hand, I was also able to strengthen the connections with those who were still in Kinshasa, as they eagerly provided me with the contact details of their friends and family members and encouraged me to visit them. During the follow-up visits I was in close contact, through social media, with the refugees in Kinshasa and would send them pictures of their parents and siblings. The follow-up visits, moreover, made me even more credible and trustworthy, a researcher who makes the effort.

Regarding the collection of data, these visits highlighted the gaps, and they gave meaning to the silences and omissions in our conversations in Kinshasa. Not everything can be shared through speech; some things one needs to see for oneself. The longer I stayed in Bangui, the more I learned about the refugees. I learned, for instance, that Le Firmin had a young daughter he had never seen, as he had left before her birth, but whose mother was in good contact with Le Firmin's sibling. Or that Francis was married and his father a *chef de quartier* (both Le Firmin and Francis will be discussed in the empirical section). The family members of the refugees would receive me at times warmly, at other times with apprehension. In both cases it was instructive.

3) Opening up to senses and emotions

In his book *After Method* (2004), John Law describes different types of knowledge. In the social sciences, he argues, the primacy of cognitive knowledge seems to reign above other types of knowledge. Even if Law does not want to dismiss the importance of cognitive knowledge and its accompanying, perhaps more positivistic, methods, he nevertheless underlines that focusing only on this type of knowledge is incomplete. There are other ways of knowing the world:

> We will need to teach ourselves to know some of the realities of the world using methods unusual to or unknown in social science. … Here are some possibilities. Perhaps we will need to know them [the realities] through the hungers, tastes, discomforts, or pains of our bodies. These would be forms of knowing as embodiment. Perhaps we will need to know them through 'private' emotions that open us to worlds of sensibilities, passions, intuitions, fears and betrayals. These would be forms of knowing as emotionality or apprehension. Perhaps… (Law 2004, 3)

… And so he goes on to describe forms of knowing linked to 'deliberate imprecision', 'situated inquiry', and more. The point is that cognitive knowing is incomplete and cannot encompass all knowledge; there is room needed for other types of knowledge in order to better understand the world we live in. 'My aim is to broaden method,' he writes, 'to subvert it, but also to remake it' (Law 2004, 9).

Since '[r]esearch is a series of positive and negative emotions that will be experienced daily' (Thomson, Ansoms and Murison 2013, 3), it appears that more and more researchers advocate for the integration of emotions and imagination into ethnography. Culhane, for instance, invites us to defy the hierarchy of the five senses, wherein sight is the privileged one, and to take seriously into consideration the other senses: sound, taste, smell, and touch (Culhane 2017, 11). She invites us, furthermore, to expand the five senses so as to include emotions, especially considering that the line between senses and emotions is often blurred. Think for instance of feelings of belonging and exclusion, or imagination. In my writing, I struggle at times to differentiate sense from sentiment (feeling). Touching and hearing relate to the senses; fear and frustration are sentiments. But what about attraction or intuition? Can the latter pair also be operationalized as tools of analysis?

a) From Bangui 'la coquette' to Bangui 'la roquette'

One of the first emotions/senses I started experiencing and experimenting with in the field was attraction, which would translate itself into 'practices' of flirting. Going over my notes and observations, descriptions of innocent 'flirting' caught my attention on more than one occasion. I grew to understand my flirtatious attitude, firstly, as a tactic to deal with the practicalities of a challenging and mobile field setting. I realized I flirted to gain access to places and to people, but also for a whole bunch of administrative procedures: to facilitate the crossing of international borders, to avoid paying fees along the road, and so on. In these instances, flirting was always accompanied by language. Being fluent in Lingala and having a smattering of Sango and Swahili helped me to work my way through different checkpoints and bargain on improvised fees. Language protected me in a way; I felt I was less easily taken advantage from. This would later also instruct me in understanding the difficulties that the CAR refugee-students must have experienced when dealing with Congolese government officials (see Chapter V).

However, this practical explanation soon became unsatisfactory; I felt, in other words, that there was more to flirting. Was it perhaps indicative of my cognitive attraction towards the topic of research? Or to my position in the field? The provocative chapter by Altork in a handbook on ethnographic fieldwork, 'Walking the Fire Line: The Erotic Dimension of the Fieldwork Experience' (Altork 2006),

triggered something in me: 'an opening of one's being to the world' (Stoller 1997, xviii). Flirting prompted me to think of myself as a researcher with a need to experiment with the senses; it encouraged me to 'open up'. More than the act itself, or a catalyst for tedious administrative procedures, flirting made me aware of how I stood in the field. Taking into consideration that the ethnographer's best and worst tool is the ethnographer herself, flirting helped me to reflect on the use of myself and my body, my senses and my emotions, in the field. It activated my mind to use other senses and emotions as paths towards knowledge.

Soon afterward, flirting was pushed into the background. I started to dream about my field during research, and on more than one occasion my dreams left me with a feeling of anxiety and fear. The title of this sub-section reflects the shift from flirting to fear. In the 1970s, Bangui, as if impersonating a beautiful lady, came to be known as *Bangui la coquette*—the flirtatious; since the recent crisis, the city became known as *Bangui la roqu*ette—the rocket. Two episodes come to mind: the first was an accident that took place during a walk in Bangui in August 2013 (as described before in Chapter II); the second took place during the anti-Kabila riots in Kinshasa in January 2015. But, more banally, many of my anxieties also dealt with travelling along new and challenging roads. In dealing with fear, as with other emotions, I have chosen to take a phenomenological approach. There is no stark separation between the feeling of fear felt by the informants and researcher. Even if one cannot equate both feelings—the researcher's experience of extreme emotions is just the tip of the iceberg compared with what our research subjects feel every day (Begley in Thomson, Ansoms and Murison 2013, 6; see also Khosravi 2018)—the former is nevertheless informative of the latter and can lead to an understanding of the daily living experiences and hardships.

During fieldwork, therefore, I observed that when faced with fear there are some who become paranoid and mistrust everyone, while others prefer to (force themselves to) remain calm and keep to the daily routines so as to remain sane—and yet others flaunt their heroic nonchalance while drinking themselves numb. Fear can ignite complete abjection, but it can also ignite the opposite: curiosity. The night I first heard clear shootings in Bangui, at a distance, I took to sweeping my room. This incident is remembered as a joke; in times of conflict, humour also seems to play a vital role (van Roekel 2016).

Anger and frustration are other 'feelings' of note. On several occasions, I wrote about my frustration vis-à-vis the humanitarian presence, and their bubble, in the field. I am not alone; writing about Libenge, Jourdan even refers to the attitude of many of these organizations as one that carries traces of colonial times (2013). On one occasion, I felt publicly belittled in the premises of the UNHCR in

Libenge, where I had naively trespassed the boundaries between those who belonged to the humanitarian world and those who do not. I was soon put in my place. Feeling excluded on that day helped me emotionally understand what the inhabitants of Libenge must feel on a regular basis (Law 2004, 3–4; Culhane 2017, 11). I was able to share this anger and frustration, even if just the tip of the iceberg, with my informants, which Max expresses in the following lines:

> And yes, the principle is simple: no crisis, no UN mission. We must therefore maintain the crisis to keep this cursed system alive. Because we eat there, we screw there, we kill there, we rape there. That's life and it's too bad for the victims. They will find themselves in hell 'another day', but above all they must live on Central African blood. (M.-L. Kassaï in preparation)

The accusations Max makes towards the UN missions in this excerpt may seem harsh, biased, the result of personal frustration—yet they are not based on nothing.[95] My purpose in sharing his insights and that of others is to bring out the voices of those who are supposed to benefit from these agencies' actions, as well as to point out the inequalities between the two. It is part of the asymmetry of the world: the actors within humanitarian agencies have more voice, are more easily heard, than the silenced (supposed) benefiters—even if, were it not for the latter, the former would be out of work.

Finally, I would like to point out that in my fieldwork notes I have devoted many lines to the description of atmospheres: sunsets, colours, and energy flows. These excerpts are not only enjoyable to read, they also bring me back to the field and help me remember the context of research in more detail (just as visuals do). Through the use of humour and flowery language (Sand-Jensen 2007), these atmosphere descriptions evoke something beyond ideas and concepts: they give the reader the taste of ethnographic things (Altork 2006) and tell it 'as it is' (Thomson, Ansoms and Murison 2013). Mixing head and heart (Stoller 1997, xviii), opening up to the senses, leads to data that add to the data collected through the more standardized participant observation or interview methods; such mixing can foster triangulation. Utilizing the senses is a 'critical methodology' (Pink 2009), a way of looking at method and being in the field.

[95] There have been different sexual scandals (also with minors) involving peacekeeping missions in CAR. The perpetrators are both African and European. One of the most shocking examples was the child abuse by French troops as reported by the UN whistleblower Andre Kompass (Laville 2015; 2016). It exposed not only the abuses themselves, but also the culture of silence that is practised within the UN.

b) Visuals

The use of the numerous photographs, maps (even the one created in collaboration with a cartographer), and works of art (paintings and drawings) fits very well in an ethnography that opens up to the senses. Visuals are not only complementary to the (written or oral) text; photographs, like fieldwork notes, are attempts at capturing moments, atmospheres, and intersubjective situations as researchers experience them. They depict an interpretation of concrete situations (Kusk 2018, 111). Sometimes, visuals add to the written text; other times, they can evoke something completely different. In any case, they are more than just an illustration of the text.

The use of visuals, furthermore, impacts one's way of doing fieldwork. The felt presence of the camera during filming and taking photographs can be, at times, pleasant, but also disturbing at other times. It can elicit curiosity or aversion. Visuals can also be used to connect and to stimulate people to talk. I remember, for instance, one day chatting in the kitchen with Papa Michel, the cook of a compound where I was staying. As he started telling me about his trips in the Ubangi region during times of rebellion in the early 2000s, exchanging salt and soap for eggs, I brought out a map to follow his wanderings with my finger. It was as if the map triggered his talking even more, reading the names of small towns prompted memories but also smiles.[96] I had a prop in hand through which I could relate differently to him, break the ice, narrow the distance between researcher and informant and, eventually, elicit new and unexpected information.

Back at home, visuals change how the researcher comes to grips with the data collected (MacDougall 1998; Boudreault-Fournier 2017). They are powerful tools to remember the context in more detail, but also what was said during conversations. In the last month of my fieldwork, Sjoerd Sijsma, a Dutch ethnographic filmmaker who is part of the CTD research project, visited the field of research in Kinshasa. The purpose of this trip was to meet and film the refugee-students with whom I had worked for months. As it took place at the end of my research, the CAR refugee-students were open to the filming—in fact, overwhelmed by Sjoerd's improvised yet fully equipped studio, it even added a layer of credibility and professionalism to my research, at least in the eyes of the CAR refugee-students. His visit resulted concretely in beautiful photographs, and two videos which have been published online (Wilson and Sijsma 2015; 2016). Moreover, working with (moving) images has pushed me to analyse the stories of the CAR refugees differently and to find new links and connections (for a concrete example, see Figure 34). In addition, it motivated me to walk down the path of co-creation. The video we edited on the making of the featured single, *'On a du mal'* (Wilson

[96] Fieldwork notes 14 August 2013

and Sijsma 2015), reinforced our friendship with Esatis, a CAR refugee slam poet, whom we would later meet in N'Djaména 2017 (see also Chapter VIII).

Figure 34 The two towers
Seeing things differently: One tower, two towers, as pointed out by Sjoerd Sijsma. Photographs on the shores of the Congo River in Kinshasa, looking at Brazzaville's iconic Nabemba tower while standing next to a buoy (Photographs by Sjoerd Sijsma, 4 February 2015)

c) Painting performance

By far the most 'revolutionizing' visual method we employed during fieldwork (and I write 'we' because it was a joint endeavour in collaborative ethnography) was the ten days' long painting performance based on the life story of Papa Henri, that Sapin Makengele and I carried out in January 2015 in Libenge. Despite having started as a little side project, Papa Henri's project turned out to be the cherry on top of my experience in the field. A painting performance is one or several public life painting sessions in front of a group of passers-by (often outdoors), who, attracted by the painting scene, end up forming a semicircle around the painter. The canvas on which the painter works metamorphoses into a medium of communication and exchange and thus also a tool of research. Through brush strokes, the artist elicits thoughts, provokes reactions from the public, and triggers conversation. When used as a tool of research, the painting performance offers the researcher the opportunity to observe reactions and interactions, record comments, and eventually give additional explanations to the public on the sidelines. The exchange is multilateral: new connections between topics and people are made, ideas go back and forth among the participants, and some even materialize in painted details on the canvas. (For a more detailed description, see Makengele and Wilson in preparation).

Based on Papa Henri Azunda's life story, the painting performance in Libenge brought about different results. Some were very concrete, others more abstract. For one, it resulted in two paintings (see Figure 35), one of which stayed with Papa Henri, while the other travelled to Kinshasa and eventually made it to the Netherlands, where it has been exhibited twice up to the date of writing. In addition

to the paintings, there was a locally made easel, two repainted school street signs, a lecture for the students at the ISP,[97] and a jointly written book chapter (Makengele and Wilson in preparation). Secondly, it is hoped that the performance itself—a social product of exchange, one that existed *in situ*—lingers in the memories and the stories of those who witnessed it. Finally, it was a lesson in co-creation—that is, the joint production of knowledge, a concrete example of how one can 'reinvent a classroom without walls in which artists, participants of the research, public and researchers are all co-learners' (Mbembe, 2015).

Figure 35 Painting performance Libenge Histoire
(Left) Second day of the painting performance at the landing runway of the Libenge Airport (1 January 2015). (Right) The painting that resulted from the performance 'Libenge Histoire' (Makengele 2015b). In the caption at the bottom, the following text is written: 'Abandoned to its fate, the Libenge Airport is the first international airport in the DR Congo, it was created around 1910. Papa Henri Azunda is an agent and former airport manager with more than 60 years of service and has not yet retired!'

Barber argues that, for historians, new popular cultural forms have double lives; they are objects of historical inquiry and also among its (unique) sources (Barber 2018, 3). Likewise, the painting performance encouraged me to look at popular art as more than a complement to text, or an illustration; art is the result of the production of knowledge, worthy of historical inquiry. But I would like to add a 'third life' to the cultural forms. Also methodologically speaking, these forms can be used as powerful tools of research and exchange. It is through this triple lens that the use of the images, paintings, photographs, poems, and excerpts of a novel included in this thesis must be understood. They should be read as objects of historical inquiry, sources and tools of research. They playfully reverse the role of artists to that of researchers and of researchers to that of artists, in a joint venture to create knowledge. In this light, Tshibumba, a Congolese popular painter from

[97] Institute Supérieur Pédagogique—in other words, an institution for higher education

Lubumbashi, who worked together with a European historian in the 1970s, saw himself not only as an artist, but also as an historian:

> I tell things through painting. That is to say, through painting I show how events happened, right? I don't write but I bring ideas, I show how a certain event happened. In a way, I am producing a monument. (Tshibumba in Fabian 1996, 14)

Tshibumba's words resonate in the observation made by one of the Libengesois students mentioned above who, when asked to reflect on the method of the painting performance in contrast to other methods, responded :

> Painting materializes what speech expresses ephemerally. Words are carried away, but that which is written (painted) is kept. (Titi, January 2015)[98]

The use of visuals as a tool of collaboration and joint research will be further discussed at the end of this chapter. But before going into the details of how to work together, there are some ethical considerations, including trust, that need to be discussed first.

4) Gaining trust

a) 'Bê ti mo a de awè?'

> Lucky is the researcher who stumbles upon a lying informant. (Van der Geest 2010, 102)

Even if the researcher 'opens up' to the field, access to data is thereby not assured. In ethnography the researcher works together with other people, and thus there is more to doing fieldwork than just opening up. In fact, you are not only dependent on yourself as a tool, but you are also dependent on the openness and willingness of others. Trust plays herein a pivotal role. It is in this context that ethnographers must utilize one of the instruments they (still?) have and that journalists, for instance, do not: time. In their book about the challenges of doing fieldwork in Africa, Thomson et al. write:

> Why would anyone divulge sensitive information, that if known beyond the confines of your interview could get them into trouble with neighbours and local authorities alike? This is why building trust takes time. It cannot be instantly gained. We must demonstrate that we can be

[98] Questionnaire handed out to the students of the ISP Libenge after an interactive class, January 2015. Translated from French: *Bref, on peut conclure que la peinture est le monument de la parole. Elle matérialise en concrétisant ce que la parole exprime par l'air, volatif comme on a dit tantôt: La parole s'en va mais les écrits (peintures) restent.*

> trusted, that we respect our research subject, and that we have a genuine interest in their lives and livelihoods (Thomson, Ansoms and Murison 2013, 6).

It takes time to build up relationships based on mutual trust and respect. It takes time to talk about sensitive issues. It takes time to understand and to analyse them. In 'A manifesto for live methods', Back and Puwar advocate for slow academia, where the researcher has the possibility and the room to 'take time, think carefully and slowly' (Back and Puwar 2013).

In the next couple of paragraphs, I would like to discuss and shed some light on the issue of trust by describing my relationship with the group of CAR students in Kinshasa that form the core of this thesis. Regarding trust, there were, one can say, roughly two types of refugee among the students. On the one hand, there were those who seemed to trust me and were fairly open to my presence and my questions; and, on the other, there were those who were more apprehensive, both in explicit and less explicit ways.

To the researcher, her presence in the field seems logical; it is taken for granted as it were: at the end of the day, this is what we do. For those living in the field, however, the sudden presence of someone who asks a lot of questions, some very intimate ones, may be a source of suspicion. Some of the Central African refugees were intrigued by and wary of my presence. It is indeed strange that a white lady tries to speak the local language and knows the places one has been. I remember one day meeting a Central African refugee who used to travel back and forth to Cameroon. He had heard me exchanging with his friends in the very basic Sango I knew. He told me he was Fulani and started boasting about Douala to his friends. He mentioned a famous roundabout. His hyperactivity triggered me and thus I greeted him in Fulfulde (using a couple of words I had learned during a fieldtrip to Cameroon the month before). I then showed him a picture I had taken with my phone of the roundabout he was talking about. This young man was simply flabbergasted. When thinking back over this episode, I must admit that I even consider myself to have been suspicious!

It took me a long time and conscious efforts to gain the trust of the refugees. My relationship with the refugee described in the episode above was one of those relationships completely enveloped by mistrust, yet I could not help feeling drawn to his story and his performance. Who was this man? The mistrust I felt seemed to trigger me and we kept in contact until the end of my fieldwork. This young man was not the only person who would carefully observe my movements and behaviour; he was just the most conspicuous person to do so. In fact, rumour had it that my case 'was discussed' in the group. Le Firmin was a case in point too. As a university student, on the one hand, he was eager to talk to me; but, on the other hand, he preferred to keep his distance. We spent many hours talking

about my research, and I explained him over and over again the reason for my long stay in Kinshasa and how I came to meet them. But he just did not seem convinced by it.

Time had its effects and the ice started melting slowly. There was a small incident that marked a change when, on one occasion, feeling tired because of the heat and rain, I asked the group of students if I could have a short nap. This trivial question, and the fact that I did lie down for half an hour, loosened something up in the group. I think it is because I was acting 'normal'; I was showing my vulnerability, like any other tired human being.[99]

When my supervisor, Mirjam de Bruijn, came to visit me in the field in June 2014 and I 'officially' introduced her to the group of CAR refugees, it changed my relation with most of them positively. I was credibly linked to a university; my professor was a proof of it, and thus my research gained more 'weight'. The first night my supervisor met the refugees, we even interviewed and filmed them! Until that day I had tried to record an interview with Le Firmin, but it had never worked out because he just did not trust me enough. The first time he agreed to be interviewed, for instance, he ended by blowing it off. Sitting in front of the camera at my studio, he commented: 'Why do you ask me the same questions as those who work for the UNHCR?' I could just as well be a spy for the UNHCR! I dropped the interview, frustrated. Researchers working with refugees have documented the latter's mistrust towards humanitarians and, by extension, towards researchers since the 1980s (Harrell-Bond, Voutira and Leopold 1992; Malkki 1995, 48). Looking back at this particular incident, Le Firmin's unwillingness, doubt, and distrust taught me that I was experiencing what researchers experience when confronted by 'lying informants' faces: discomfort and confusion (Berckmoes 2013). However, and especially considering the challenging situation in which refugees find themselves, it pointed exactly to the core of my research—in terms of the duress, uncertainty, and violence experienced by the refugees.

On the day that I visited the students in their compound with Mirjam, however, Le Firmin opened up. After the interview he asked me teasingly in Sango: '*Bê ti mo a de awè?*' (lit. 'Has your heart cooled down?'). Yes, my heart was appeased, and so was theirs. It took me a long time, however, to understand the meaning of the mistrust–appeasement–trust continuum (a theme I will further discuss in Chapter VII). The fact is that the visit of my supervisor reassured the refugees and contributed to building our relationship of trust. It demonstrated, to paraphrase Thomson, Ansoms

[99] Fieldwork notes

and Murison, that I could be trusted, that I respected them, and that I had a genuine interest in their lives and livelihoods (2013, 6).

Going back to Europe for the summer break, in order to pick up my daughter, proved to be more effective, in terms of trust, than staying for a long and continuous period. Returning to the field showed commitment and an interest in following-up (*suivi*). It is precisely the lack of this vital *suivi* they so much criticize vis-à-vis humanitarian agencies. By following them, I was doing something the refugees requested from the humanitarian agencies: they were being heard. Thus, I had come back with my almost four-year-old daughter; and even if her presence was not directly linked to how I conducted research, it did say something about the way I stood in the field (Brown and Dreby 2013). How can one gather so much personal information about the other without sharing one's own? By bringing my daughter along I shared some of my personal information, beyond the mask of the ethnographer. Showing a piece of one's humanity makes one more human and thus, I would argue, more credible to others. But it also makes one more vulnerable; not without reason, Eriksen writes that 'fieldwork is extremely demanding, both in professional and in human terms' (Eriksen 2010, 28).

Having my daughter by my side influenced my mobility patterns. It was as if, instead going *into* the field, in terms of moving around the city, the field started coming *towards* me. During the month and a half Erikah was with me, I received a lot of visitors in my little studio. I look back at this period with a mixture of nostalgia and romanticism. Being there with her 'grounded' me to the compound, positively in hindsight, and it gave me roots. I may have roamed less around the city, but people always knew where to find me. In September 2014, I was forced to leave the field unexpectedly. After a six-week break, I had gone back to Kinshasa without my daughter, but pregnant with my second baby. Again, I cannot say for a fact that pregnancy gave more credibility, but some people started treating me differently, and I definitely started frequenting places I had never visited before—such as maternity clinics for routine checkups. The pregnancy was again a proof of my human side; many were surprised to see a white woman with a big belly, especially in the countryside. Building a relationship of trust is also about sharing your life, and a protruding belly did not stand in the way.

b) Ethical considerations

Next to (winning) trust, there are many other ethical considerations that should be discussed in relation to ethnographic fieldwork. I have chosen to touch upon two: (1) anonymity and the use of pseudonyms, and (2) engagement and acknowledgement of the joint effort. Regarding the former, there is no one-size-fits-all answer regarding the issue of anonymity. In fact, the use of pseudonyms

depends on the field and topic of research. In some cases, pseudonyms are an absolute necessity, while in other cases, withholding the identity of an individual can be rude and belittling. This is the case for artists, politicians, and other public figures, for instance, for whom fame (being known), is linked to their professional identity and success. In this thesis, I applied different rules to different people, the reasoning for which I will now set out. In most cases, I asked the informants with whom I worked about their wishes. Their agreement to participate is not written down as a formal consent but based on a relationship of trust. I respect their choices with regards to anonymity, even if it sometimes poses a challenge in the digital age in which people expose their lives on social media. Many of my informants have chosen their own pseudonyms. Those who appear in photographs are either unrecognizable or unidentified, and they personally agreed to have the photographs taken. Regarding the informants who explicitly forbade me to use their names, I have made them as vague as possible.

Artists are called by their artist name, especially if they do the same in their publications or performances. In relation to the elderly, on the other hand, I have chosen to take a different approach. In DR Congo, for instance, there is a tradition of name-dropping (or *kobwaka libanga* in Lingala),[100] very present in popular music (White 2008, 170; see also Trapido 2010; Tsambu 2015; the latter for a visual interpretation), but also in other cultural expressions , such as TV and radio shows, and even in popular painting (Makengele 2011). In addition to being a sign of reciprocity or of patrimonial relationships, name-dropping is illustrative of respect and consideration. People have often asked me during informal conversations, jokingly, whether I would 'drop' their names in my thesis. Considering the latter, I have taken the liberty to use the real names of some of the informants mentioned herein. For instance, Papa Henri—his story needs to be told and given a name; anonymity would not serve this purpose.

As Western researchers we take a lot away from our informants and the field in general—such as images, objects, and life stories. Even if ethnographers who work with qualitative methods sometimes claim to be the voice of the voiceless, sharing the stories of our informants often benefits the researcher more (in terms of pursuing a professional career) than it does the sources of these stories. There are different issues at play. The first relates to engagement, at times choosing sides

[100] Literally throwing stones. 'This expression is also used to describe young children who throw pebbles at parents in an attempt to attract their attention or provoke a response. Throwing pebbles, both literally and figuratively, can be a way of getting attention, affection, or material support' (White 2008, 170; see also Wilson 2012, 131–32).

(Scheper-Hughes 1995; Sanford and Angel-Ajani 2006), as well as to reciprocity: what we can give back to the field in material and non-material terms. The second touches upon giving back in terms of acknowledging the informants in the production of knowledge. It deals, in other words, with epistemological issues in the hierarchical institution of knowledge *par excellence*: the university.

Reciprocity, as Krause suggests, refers to mutual benefits of research projects for both participants and researchers—in other words, 'in return for their help, those studied must also be helped' (Krause 2017a, 15). Academic publications might not be the most useful form of reciprocity; they often take a long time to publish, and the final product is not always accessible to all (in terms of jargon and language, for instance, but also in terms of open access issues). Yet, feedback to the field is important, and the researcher can think of other more personal or virtual ways of disseminating results—for instance, group discussions, sending reports via e-mail, personal exchange and keeping in touch (Krause 2017a, 25), but also setting up (long-term) projects together (Willson 2007; Van Damme 2013) and looking for alternative ways to publish, such as short films, travelling exhibitions, and more. 'Our job is to *correspond* with those among whom we have worked,' Ingold argues, 'not to speak for them' (Ingold 2017, 21; italics in original).

In the initial design of my research, there was a budget allocated for a short dissemination trip in order to hold a workshop with the informants in the field. Unfortunately, until the date of writing, this trip has not taken place owing to time constraints. On the other hand, in a field characterized by mobility, it must be noted that many of the refugees have moved elsewhere. I did try to share the problematics of urban refugees in Africa, however, through different channels to a wider public: radio and written press (Jonkman 2015), different guest seminars (SIB Utrecht 2014; UN Humanity House 2015; Africa students community 2017; Wilson 2018c), the 'Rumours on the Ubangui' personal blog,[101] two short films accessible online (Wilson and Sijsma 2015, 2016)—as well as through the final conference of Connecting in Times of Duress, which will be discussed in the following section. Together with two academic articles, I have shared these activities on my Facebook wall, and in private chat conversations through which I have kept in touch with many of my informants until the time of writing.

Acknowledgement of the role of the informants in the production of knowledge is in a way an extension of reciprocity, but, as we will see hereunder, its scope goes well beyond the relationship

[101] http://rumoursontheubangui.tumblr.com/

between researcher and researched (and also beyond the involvement of potential stakeholders such as NGOs).

5) Producing knowledge together: Co-creation

> Researchers only find themselves in a truly dominant position above participants if collaborations are not acknowledged. (Krause 2017a, 15)

In terms of acknowledgement, two important methodological processes were taking place simultaneously during fieldwork. In hindsight, I can say they were intimately linked. The first process entails the painting performance discussed above. The second is related to the ways, facilitated through art, in which we grew closer towards the end of fieldwork, and also thereafter. Because I feel that were it not for Sapin's painting performance, I would never have experimented with co-creation, I will begin by acknowledging the role of artists in the creation of knowledge. Without words, without a concrete explanation in cognitive terms, Sapin introduced me to a wonderful, open-ended but also challenging methodological journey. He triggered my mind and 'revolutionized' me to think beyond writing as the only semiotic system through which knowledge can be collected and communicated (Wilson 2015d). I will then turn to other co-creators, in particular the urban refugees, and my colleagues. I will round up this section by looking at the meaning of acknowledgement in the production of knowledge by non-academic actors and its place within the epistemological practices of the university.

a) Acknowledging the researched as researcher

In addition to Sapin's previous personal experience with working with researchers (Michel 2013; Makengele and Wilson in preparation), another very inspiring example of co-creation is the work of the historian Johannes Fabian—and, in particular, Fabian's collaboration with the Congolese painter Tshibumba. This collaboration resulted, among others, in the book *Remembering the Present,* a work that combines illustrated paintings, interviews, and academic essays. Published more than two decades after Tshibumba and Fabian last met, the foreword to the book particularly caught my attention. In it Fabian writes:

> To acknowledge debts to Tshibumba Kanda Matulu by expressing the usual gratitude to him as my 'informant' would be inappropriate. The briefest glance at our relationship, as evidenced in the texts presented here, shows that we were engaged in a common task. To the extent possible under the economic and political circumstances, we owed each other. It is thus all the more saddening that Tshibumba could not take part in the completion of our project. (Fabian 1996, xiv)

In line with Fabian, I advocate for the research participant (in this case an artist) as a creator of knowledge, rather than a gatekeeper to facts and stories. The challenge in co-creation lies in 'acknowledg[ing] "Others" as thinking and knowledge-producing subjects' (Mbembe 2015). Just like Tshibumba and Fabian, Sapin and I in Libenge were engaged in a common task. In another article, Fabian argues that ethnographic knowledge demands recognition, a kind of acknowledgement that must be given to human beings who are subjected to inquiries (Fabian 1999, 50).[102] I am inspired by the reading of recognition as an act of acknowledgement, one that gives people 'the recognition they ask for and deserve' (Fabian 1999, 53). Like communication, the act of recognition is mutual. It is not 'something that one party can simply grant the other' (Fabian 1999, 66), but it rather happens both ways.

By bringing back the known and the knower into contact, to use Mbembe's words, recognition is able to transform them both (Mbembe 2015; Fabian 1999). Acknowledgement then takes place in different steps. One of the first steps is to recognize, name, acknowledge, discuss, and problematize the asymmetrical relationship between the researcher, who usually is from the global North, and her subject of study, oftentimes from the global South (Khosravi 2018). The former is funded by a Western university; the latter has to fend for him- or herself. Even if it is not entirely possible to prevent power asymmetries, the researcher should try to alleviate top-down hierarchies (Krause 2017b).

Basing himself on Geertz, Khosravi rightly claims that researchers cannot live migrants' lives (nor refugees' lives for that matter). Thus, instead of objectifying them and creating knowledge *about* them, what scholars can do is to invite them to write together and include them in the process of creating knowledge. Krause, for instance, suggests working with refugee peer-researchers—that is, conducting and analysing research together (Krause 2017b). Khosravi, on the other hand, calls for a collaborative auto-ethnographic approach involving both the researcher and the migrant (Khosravi 2018). Inspired by Fiddian-Qasmiyeh's 'third voice', Krause maintains that research should neither speak *about* nor *for* refugees, but should be developed *with* them. This joint voice emerges in the process of shared experiences, collaborative interpretation, and analysis of data (Krause 2017b). It is in this way that methods can be 'generous' (Ingold 2017), inclusive (Law 2004, 15), and recognizant of the other (Fabian 1999).

[102] In his article, Fabian scrutinises *recognition* in three glosses: recognition as an (1) act of cognition, (2) an act of memory, and finally (3) an act of acknowledgement (Fabian 1999).

Speaking with refugees can be empowering not only for the researched, but also for the researcher herself (Fessenden 2015). With regards to the CAR refugees, we did try out this participatory approach—for instance, with Esatis, whom we saw grow from an apprentice rapper into a fully fledged slammer (as we will discuss in Chapter VIII); or with Max, who grew from an incidental blogger into a novelist and whose work, which resembles an auto-ethnography, I extensively quote in the course of this thesis (M.-L. Kassaï in preparation). But there were also smaller instances of co-creation, which have not led to concrete projects, but which were valuable experiences—such as the joint interviews of other refugees we carried out with Le Firmin in Kinshasa, or the life stories about elderly people in Libenge we collected and filmed with a Congolese journalist.[103]

b) On Matsutake

There are different levels of co-creating. The production of knowledge with artists, refugees, and other informants in the field is just one of them. In this section, I present another type of co-creative endeavour, one carried out with my colleagues. From the outset, the CTD research project, under which my work falls, called for a collaborative approach among fellow PhD colleagues, junior and senior researchers (in other words, PhDs and supervisor), as well as between PhDs and an ethnographic filmmaker. From the outset, the overall project was characterized by a philosophy of deep exchange—meaning that colleagues should not only exchange ideas during workshops or writing periods, but should experience one another's fields of research. I admit I extensively picked the fruits of this philosophy and visited colleagues in three different African countries, which not only introduced me to new fields and perspectives, but made me understand my own field and my own research better. The visits included Inge Ligtvoet's multi-sited field in Nigeria (in March 2014), Adamou Amadou's field in eastern Cameroon (in April 2014 and already described in Chapter II), and a short visit to Souleymane Adoum in Brazzaville (in November 2014). Conversely, I too received field

[103] As a journalist working within the Congolese police, working with this person brought up a lot of sensitive and ethical issues, and I have chosen to not include data about this person in this thesis. However, this historical joint project, which we had even named *Lisapo ya Mboka* (Story of the country), cannot be omitted in a paragraph about acknowledgement and co-creation. Through *Lisapo ya Mboka* we collected the (filmed) stories and photographs of four elderly people in Libenge, the oldest one being 92 at the time of interviewing. Being a journalist, this person would carry out the interviews, pushing my role as a researcher from interviewer to filmer, forcing me to not intervene and keep quiet as the interview was taking place. We would carefully prepare the interviews and the questions and discuss our different approaches towards them, which ranged from a very entertaining and even comic Congolese journalism, to a more observing and withholding-from-interruptions Western ethnographic approach.

visits in DR Congo: I travelled with my supervisor Mirjam de Bruijn from Kinshasa to Bangui (in June 2014), and the photographs from this trip are used throughout this thesis; and I received Inge Ligtvoet and Sjoerd Sijsma both for a week but at different stages of my stay in Kinshasa (in August 2014 and February 2014 respectively). The visits of all three not only helped me to reflect about my field but, as I have mentioned in this chapter, it gave me 'weight' and credibility in the eyes of the CAR refugee-students and thus had a direct impact on trust building.

Thus, recognizing debts to both my informants and colleagues by expressing the usual gratitude in the Acknowledgements (and only in the Acknowledgements) would be inappropriate. During but also after fieldwork, we were engaged in a common task, that of creating knowledge together. The Matsutake Worlds Research Group (MWRG) rightly claim that scholars need to start by recognizing they never work alone (Choy et al. 2009). Even if the MWRG do not cross the boundaries of the academic world—they limit themselves to co-creation within academia—the authors, nevertheless, highlight some important points. In order to do so, they employ the metaphor of Matsutake, a very rare but coveted mushroom, a sought-after culinary delicacy. First of all, they explain, it is impossible to cultivate Matsutake. Gatherers simply need to wait for all the right conditions to be in place in order for it to grow. Like the Matsutake, the authors argue, collaboration is difficult to plan and only arises if all the right elements are in place. Secondly, the research on and commerce in Matsutake requires the involvement of different experts. The task of writing with others is not an easy one, but it is certainly a rewarding task. Working with others, the authors write, defies the impulse of centralizing and totalizing knowledge production (Inoue in Choy et al. 2009, 399). Thus, for instance, even though I am writing this thesis 'alone', the process on which it is based is a joint effort and involves many hands and heads. The process was anything but single-authored. Knowledge cannot be hijacked by a single author; it belongs to us all. If researchers (academic and others) allow themselves such openness to others as well as to the unexpected, the result is an exceptional and unique fruit, an intricate rose.

Figure 36 The intricate rose
(Left) The beloved rose of the Little Prince (Saint-Exupéry 2007, 45). (Right) Close-up of a flower in Libenge, taken in front of the AT's veranda (December 2014). The rose can stand as a symbol for the co-creative project carried out together with Sapin Makengele and Papa Henri Azunda, yet it also symbolizes co-creation in general.

c) The walls of the university

My purpose in taking so many words to describe the collaboration with informants, refugees, artists, and other scholars is not merely anecdotal. There is something larger at stake. I am inspired by scholars who formulate post-modern critiques of the process of epistemology of the university in order to critically question our own methods and actions, as well as the systems in which they are rooted. Collaboration does not relate merely to the researcher's personal relations with others; it uncovers a fundamentally unequal system, one that ranks knowledge in types. Collaborative approaches towards knowledge production, on the contrary, do not consider academic knowledge produced in an institute (or university) more valuable than the knowledge produced by artists, activists, migrants, peasants, and other individuals. It is just different knowledge.

The challenge lies in how to level down these inequalities and aim at inclusiveness beyond the walls of academic institutions. In addition to how we collect, interpret, and give back data, the discussion also deals with output and the end-products of research: dissemination, to use Ingold's term. By being the one who translates the field into *graphy*, into written words, the author (the ethnographer, the researcher, the historian—in sum, the academic attached to a university) retains authority—and responsibility—over her book. But by doing so, does she give in to the power hierarchies? Are researchers who advocate for collaboration, co-creation, alternative methods, and inclusive epistemologies doomed to be part of the inequalities of the academic world?

Should then academic publications still be the only results academics should strive for? And conversely, is it the only criterion on which academic competence should be assessed? Inoue calls for new modes of ethnographic writing, and Law suggests that the academy needs to imagine other metaphors for its activities(Law 2004; Inoue in Choy et al. 2009, 398) . Other scholars, too, have explored and created new possibilities to present results of research and to reach new, and wider,

publics (Puwar and Sharma 2012).There is a growing trend whereby researchers work together with activists or artists (Puwar 2011; Michel 2013; Battaglia 2014; De Boeck and Baloji 2016; Bruijn and Lalaye 2016; De Bruijn et al. 2017). Just like *curating sociology,* co-creation cannot be 'be reduced to a set of research techniques or methods'. It goes deeper: it is an approach to method, a methodological commitment to collaborative knowledge production for creative public intervention and engagement (Puwar and Sharma 2012, 43).

Puwar encourages and challenges other scholars to use the walls of universities, not as barriers but as contact zones that offer opportunities to present academic work differently—in her case through exhibitions.[104] Co-creative and collaborative approaches towards epistemology equally encouraged the CTD team, despite the challenges, to hold its final conference in Central Africa, more specifically in N'Djaména (Chad) instead of in Leiden (The Netherlands) (De Bruijn and Both unpublished). Over the period of a week, different scholars, artists, journalists, activists, and other engaged citizens from Western Europe and Central Africa met in N'Djaména in October 2017, in order to discuss, to learn, and to 'un-border'. 'Now that we have written the script,' De Bruijn writes, 'we do not know where this will go. The project has an ending that is an opening towards the future, and this is an intrinsic feature of this work' (De Bruijn and et al. 2017). There cannot be an end to creation; where there is a call, there will always be a response (Puwar and Sharma 2012). Results and observations lead to new questions and give birth to new thoughts, and ideas develop further. Co-creation, despite its challenges, is an open door to a path that never seems to end. It is in this sense that I hope this thesis contributes to debates that push scholars to think differently about methodology and epistemology.

[104] Seminar 'Migrant Ethnographies', Universiteit Utrecht, 22 September 2017

Chapter IV. A history of mobility in a transborder region

Figure 37 Yaya Rico's handwoven bottle wraps
exhibited in front of his compound in the cité (Libenge, 4 January 2015)

1) Introduction

'My mother gave birth to me under a tree in the forest' —so the story of Yaya Rico (born in 1953) begins.[105] I met Yaya Rico one morning in Libenge. I saw him from afar; we were walking in opposite directions towards one another. He was carrying a dozen colourful handwoven bottle wraps, which I loved at first sight. I bought two of these carefully coated plastic water bottles and we chatted a bit. In the weeks that followed, Yaya Rico and I befriended one another. We often sat together in front of his merchandise, exposed on one of the corners of Libenge's main market, adjacent to the Chinese shop and across the road from the UNHCR head office. As Yaya Rico waited for potential customers, we shared stories and watched people stroll by. With a growing pregnancy, I did not mind these moments of rest. I grew fond of Yaya Rico's curiosity and gentleness, which contrasted with the confessions he jokingly made about his rough years as a young man before he settled down, years when he was bold, physically strong, and a reckless womanizer.

Yaya Rico's is one of the biographies on which this chapter is based (the biographical approach has been previously explained in Chapter I). His path, like that of many other inhabitants of the region,

[105] Nickname of the informant

meanders among countries and crosses the Ubangi River on several occasions. In this chapter, his life story will be placed next to other life stories, covering four countries in Central Africa: CAR, DR Congo and, to a lesser extent, Congo-Brazzaville and Chad. Added together, these stories set the historical scene of this thesis. They do so from a micro-historical and subjective perspective, 'from below'. Yet they are also connected 'dialogically' (Fabian 2000) to macro-historical events and national histories.

Because life paths do not stop at borders, the purpose of this chapter is to integrate at least two lines of (national) history, that of CAR and DR Congo. In line with Glick Schiller and Salazar's methodological nationalism, I contest historiography that is contained within national borders (Malkki 1992; Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013)—that is to say that, often, CAR scholars who work on CAR write histories contained within the borders of CAR, and Congolese scholars do the same for DR Congo.[106] Few works combine both countries as one unit of study, despite their long shared border and history. There are, nevertheless, a few exceptions, such as Boulvert's detailed geo-historical article which describes the fixation of the colonial border between the French Oubangui-Chari and the Belgian Free State at the end of the nineteenth century (1985), or Carayannis' description of DR Congo in terms of CAR's southern identity (2015).[107]

Writing an alternative and joint historiography, one that brings together that which has been arbitrarily set apart, might, however, confuse the reader, who at times might not know whether she is reading about CAR or DR Congo. If that is the case, the reader is on the right track—it is exactly the feeling I want to convey. The confusion supports the argument that what historiography has separated can be brought together again. My aim is not necessarily to contest national histories, but to complement methodological nationalism by offering an alternative reading, one that is inspired by individual life paths that transcend borders. Out of the many alternative readings, I present one that combines parts of CAR and DR Congo—an inclusive historiography along both shores of the Ubangi River. In the experiences of many people living between Bangui and Kinshasa, this reading is not exceptional but part of their daily realities. Esatis, a young slammer who signs his songs with '*Esatis*

[106] Keynote speech Jewsiewicki, April 26 2018.

[107] I mean from a holistic approach, and I am not making reference here to comparative works, in which two different cases are put one next to the other; see for instance Schouten, Murairi, and Kubuya Batundi 2016; Schouten and Kalessopo 2017.

Lebon, de Banguissois à Kinois / Je reste un noir d'Afrique centrale'[108] expresses this relationship in a poem entitled 'Mezamours', in which he proclaims his feeling for his two lovers (Esatis Le Bon 2018):

> *Elles sont à deux à pouvoir partager mon coeur*
> *Elles n'ont jamais vécu une relation tendue*
> *Malgré les temps durs, la haine et la rivalité sont inclues parmi elles*
> *…*
> *Refrain*
> *Je clame mon affinité à Bangui la coquette;*
> *Et, Kinshasa la plus belle.*
> *Au début l'aventure était belle,*
> *Jusqu'à ce que Bangui deviant la roquette;*
> *Kinshasa la poubelle.*
> *Je n'ai pas besoin de pourparlers*
> *Pour parler de l'hétéroclité entre la coquette et la roquette.*
> *La plus belle et la poubelle.*
>
> They're two who can share my heart
> They've never had a strained relationship
> Despite the hard times, hatred and rivalry are included among them
> …
> Refrain
> I proclaim my affinity with Bangui the coquette,
> And Kinshasa the most beautiful.
> At the beginning the adventure was lovely,
> Until Bangui turned to the rocket,
> Kinshasa to the garbage can.
> I don't need no negotiations
> To talk about the mismatch between the coquette and the rocket,
> The most beautiful and the garbage can.

This chapter is chronologically structured, but unequally so, since some sections carry more weight and are more elaborated than others. The starting point is Yaya Rico's birth, just before independence. In Section 2, I will touch upon the post-colonial decades, which were characterized by hope but also by dictatorship. As history unfolds, the life stories of Yaya Rico, Espérance, Émile,

[108] 'Esatis Lebon, from Banguissois to Kinois / I remain a black person from Central Africa.'

Madjelo, Dorothée and Popol, Papa Henri, Max, and Papa Pascal will be gradually introduced. In Section 3, I will focus on the decade of the 1990s, the arrival of democracy and its breakdown, which resulted in war/rebellion and the breaking down of the social fabric. Section 4 touches upon the first decade of the new millennium, up until 2011. Here, I discuss the three (instead of two) wars in north-west Congo, as well as the presence of Jean-Pierre Bemba's MLC rebel troops in CAR. (The ongoing Seleka–Anti-Balaka conflict in CAR and the political turmoil in Kinshasa brought about by an incumbent president who does not want to leave the power stool have already been dealt with in Chapter II).

Borders, violence, and mobility have historical roots. The structures of violence and the cycles of crises in which the region finds itself today, as well as the mobile nature of a large proportion of its people, have their roots in the *longue durée*. Hence, in Section 5 I will touch upon pre-colonial Central Africa, the fixation of the borders between the French and Belgian colonies, and the rise and growth of the concessions and concessionary politics or mentality (Hardin 2011). Ending with what should perhaps have been the beginning (at least chronological) is not without reason. The impact of colonization continues to play an important role today in the popular reading of violence, poverty, and misfortune. In this sense, neither DR Congo nor CAR has found redemption yet (De Goede 2015b).

2) Dictatorship and democracy: The first decades after independence

Around the time of Congo's independence in 1960, Yaya Rico reached school-going age. He remembers those days well, he said. After his parents passed away, Yaya Rico grew up with his uncles and aunts. They were farmers and did not see the use of sending Yaya Rico to school. From a young age, however, Yaya Rico stood up against their decision. He proudly recounts the first time he went to school without their knowledge:

> I followed a friend on his way to school [as he entered the classroom at the local run missionary school]. I came, stood next to the window, looked, listened to things. The teacher was speaking and writing on the blackboard. He saw me and told me to come in! I entered. 'What?' he said. I told him I wanted to be in the classroom. 'Ah? Come in then!' I entered, sat down. They were not teaching in Lingala; they were teaching in the local language. If he spoke, I would listen. So I started going, two days, three days. My uncles caught me. They said, 'Why do you want to go to

school?' I was hungry to learn! They did not allow me to go. What a pity! (Interview on 4 January 2015)[109]

Just as Yaya Rico's hunger to learn and to go to school was thwarted by his family, so was the thrust towards a second and real Congolese independence cut short by Mobutu shortly after independence. After five turbulent years between 1960 and 1965, a period that is often referred to as the 'First Congo Crisis', Mobutu came to power by means of a coup d'état in November 1965. Mobutu's externally backed autocracy was a product of the Cold War (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2003, 142), where Western powers (i.e. the United States, France, and Belgium), using a discourse of ethnic strife and chaos prevention, placed someone who could best protect their interests in the mineral-rich new nation.

Despite the many signs of repression, Mobutu was, during the first decade of his rule, respected and successful, and the country even enjoyed some economic growth. People remember 1974 in particular as a golden age. The national soccer team had won the African Cup and was about to participate in its first, and only, World Cup. It was also the year of the battle of the century, the famous 'Rumble in the Jungle', when boxer Muhammad Ali confronted George Foreman in Kinshasa for the world title. The cultural programme adjacent to the world title fight included world-renowned artists, who performed at an exceptional concert in the Zairean capital.[110]

[109] *Ngai naye natelemi na fenêtre, natala, nayoka makambo, maître azoloba, aza kokoma na tableau, amoni ngai alobi yaka, naye. Nini? Nalobi naye kokota classe. Ah! Bon kota. Nakoti, navandi. Classe bazolakisa yango, mais Lingala té, na munoko ya mboka. Soki alobi ngai nayoki ti nabandi kokende deux jours, trois jours, bakangi ngai na baparents. Balobi nani olingi kokende classe, babeti ngai, posa ya classe moyen té, batika ngai na classe té, mawa!*

[110] Among them: James Brown, Celia Cruz, Miriam Makeba, BB King, and many others.

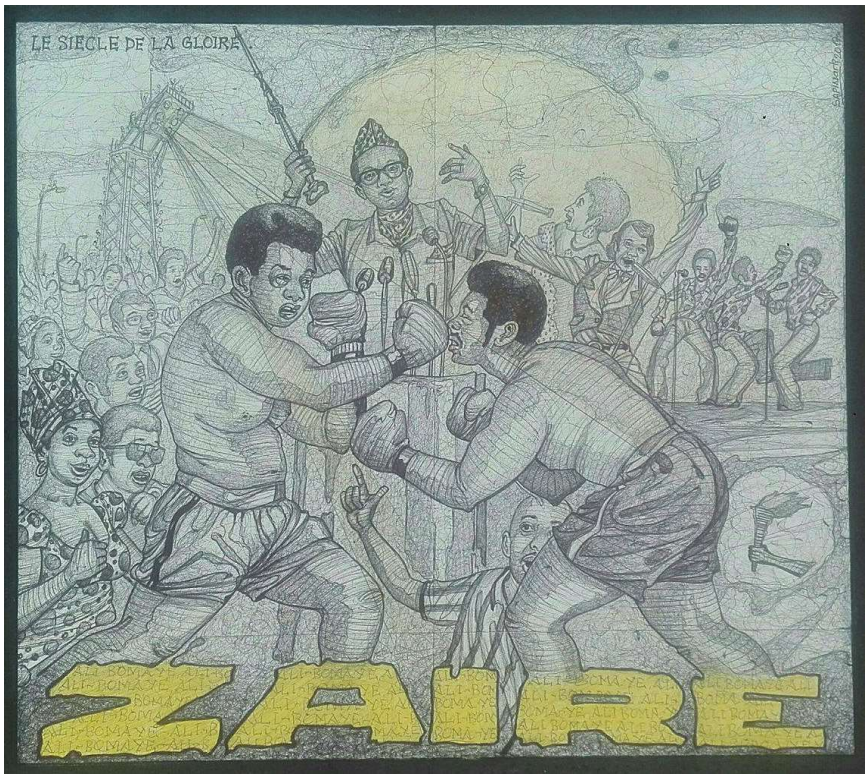

Figure 38 Le siècle de la gloire
Sapin Makengele (2016)

Yaya Rico remembers this period well. Feeling stuck at home, at the age of 17, he made himself the promise to never become a farmer and decided to run away. He first worked in a palm-oil concession near Dongo, a couple of hundred kilometres south of his natal village. He then boarded a boat that took him downstream to Mbandaka, where he arrived empty-handed. A military officer ended up taking him under his wing. Slowly but surely, the adjutant entrusted him with the sale of beer. Yaya Rico could not read, but he knew the value of money and could count.

This was in the 1970s, during Mobutu's heyday. Being a military man at the time was a prestigious, well-paid job, unlike today. In a philosophy of uniting the country, the military and civil servants were often posted all over the country. Even today, this is considered to be one of the most important legacies of the Mobutu era. In the eyes of the population, Mobutu managed to hold the country together. Despite the growing corruption and patrimonial rule, there was at least peace and people could freely travel from one province to another. The adjutant who had taken Yaya Rico under his wing was posted outside Mbandaka, leaving his family behind and Yaya Rico under the care of his wife. She started taking advantage of him, refusing to feed and pay him. This angered Yaya Rico, so he decided to look for better horizons and crossed the river into the other Congo.

On the other shore of the Ubangi, Jean-Bedel Bokassa came to power on 31 December 1965 by means of a military coup—merely five weeks after Mobutu's coup. Both pawns on the Central African chessboard during the Cold War became feared rulers and self-proclaimed fathers of their nations: the Marechal Mobutu and the Emperor Bokassa. There seem to be many parallels between the two men; they must have inspired one another. In any case, their personal ties were evident from the frequent meetings in Kinshasa and Bangui (Carayannis 2015). There is much written about these two megalomaniac and iconic Central African dictators and their grand architectural projects, where no amount of luxury seemed to be indulgent enough: palaces in their respective villages of origin, Mobutu's newly built town with international airport in Gbadolite and Bokassa's palace in Berengo, exuberant parties and festivities—think for instance of Bokassa's 1977 coronation on a diamond-coated throne—and numerous other white elephants and symbols of national pride (Carayannis 2015).[111]

But while Mobutu ruled over a span of 32 years, Bokassa's rule was shorter. Discontent was voiced, among others, by school pupils, who took their protests to the streets when new (and expensive) school uniforms were imposed at a time when state agents had not received their salaries for several months; the pupils would be joined by the university students. This episode came to a tragic end when police received orders to open fire (with real bullets) on the marching students. It was finally the French, through the infamous Operation Barracuda in September 1979, that brought an end to Bokassa's empire. David Dacko was installed, for a second time and almost unwillingly, as the head of the country, but he would not last long. On 1 September 1981, Kolingba, Dacko's chief of staff, removed the president from power by means of a coup which has been described as artificial and even wanted, '*un coup de théâtre*' (Bigo 1988, 260). In the years that followed, Kolingba grew to be an autocrat. Like Bokassa and Mobutu, he installed a military rule with little room for opposition. Bangui's ties with Kinshasa deepened. Kolingba was a Yakoma, a minority ethnic group that lives on both shores of the Ubangi River and that shares close ties with Mobutu's Ngbandi group. Mobutu would say that Bokassa was his brother and Kolingba his son (Carayannis 2015).

Unlike Bokassa, who had managed to create a CAR identity (Wohlers 2015), Kolingba's autocracy soon developed into an ethnocracy (Lafargue 1998, 238): a system of patrimonialism in which Kolingba favoured members of his family and ethnic group on every possible occasion. This was badly received by the majority of the population, who felt excluded from power and from their share of the Central African cake. The sentiment was further exacerbated when Yakoma took up arms and razed

[111] This palace was inhabited by Russian military training CAR soldiers in 2018.

several villages in the north in order to punish those involved in the 1982 coup attempt against Kolingba. These events led to the north–south divide that would be politically exploited by Patassé. Kolingba's most important legacy seems to have been the ethnicization of the state apparatus. In a country where ethnic origin had little importance prior to his mandate, Kolingba led the way to ethnic-based governance (Wohlers 2015).[112] When he lost the 1993 elections, 70 per cent of the army was drawn from the Yakoma minority (ICG 2007).

After the implementation of disastrous economic measures, starting with the 1973 'Zairianization', the Mobutu dictatorship began to erode from the inside.[113] Zairianization consisted in the confiscation of enterprises owned by foreigners for the benefit of Congolese nationals (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2003, 148). This led to the creation of a state bourgeoisie caught in a system of patronage. The new ruling class benefited from Mobutu's dictatorship but also granted the patrimonial leader the possibility to manipulate individuals members of the ruling class at his own pleasure. This system was replicated at all levels of the social ladder where officials had access to public revenues. It led to the de facto privatization of the state and the collapse of the economy (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2003, 150). The biggest losers were not so much the state bourgeoisie but the Congolese population, who were reduced to a daily quest for sheer survival (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2003, 149). Gondola points towards a 'psychological devastation' and argues that people have seen themselves forced to adopt several behaviours, including corruption, that continue to hinder economic development (Gondola 2002, 146). Other scholars, in contrast, differentiate between large-scale corruption and ordinary practices of corruption that need to be seen from the actors' point of view; even if these practices are a form of corruption, they should not be seen as corruption *per se* but rather in terms of redistribution (Sardan 1999).

From the 1980s onwards, Mobutu's rule was characterized by rapid economic and social decay, yet at the same time, the struggle for multi-party democracy became more visible. In 1982 a group of parliamentarians wrote a manifesto indicting the regime for corruption and human rights abuses and

[112] Wohlers writes: 'Although both Dacko and Bokassa created ethnic-based personal guards, neither practiced ethnic favouritism on a wide scale' (2015).

[113] The economic deterioration was also instigated by the fall of the price of copper in 1975, as well as Zaire's involvement in Angola's civil war (Gondola 2002).

gave birth to the UDPS[114] opposition party (Gondola 2002, 152). In CAR also, the MLPC,[115] led by Patassé, made itself heard, even if clandestinely, from the mid-1980s. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the cards were shuffled in the global North. As the Cold War came to an end, strategic friendships were of no use any longer, and dictatorial regimes could not be accounted for anymore. This had a profound impact on Africa and on Central Africa in particular. The end of Communism brought about a wave of liberalization, similar to the wave of the independence movements during the 1960s. Both Mobutu and Kolingba felt the pressure to liberalize the system.

Although the wind of democracy blew over Central Africa, it had a hard time establishing roots. It was an imposed, top-down solution more than a result of grassroots activity, even if some historians argue that democratization was also manipulated from below (M'Bokolo 1998). In any case, violence soon followed. Remembering this chapter in DR Congo's history, Papa Madjelo is reminded of the predictory words of his former French tutor:

> You see how things turned sour in the USSR? It will come here too. And when it will be here, you will not manage because you will not see any Europeans. [They'll all be gone.] (Interview with Papa Madjelo, Gemena, July 2018)[116]

In April 1990 Mobutu declared the end of single-party rule and finally gave ear to the call for a Sovereign National Conference (CNS), which first opened in August 1991 and was arbitrarily closed after a few months in January 1992. Thousands of people demonstrated against the closure during the 'March of Hope' on Sunday, 16 February 1992; the march was met with unprecedented violence and 45 unarmed civilians were killed (Gondola 2002, 156). National conferences became a 'phenomenon' in Francophone Africa; they also took place in Congo-Brazzaville (from February to June 1991) and Chad (from January to March 1993) (Robinson 1994). Political change, according to M'Bokolo, was most problematic in CAR. Even though Kolingba's party allowed multiple candidates to stand for office in the 1998 municipal elections, he simultaneously responded with force against

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[114] Union pour la Démocratie et le Progrès Social (Union for Democracy and Social Progress). The UDPS is historically the opposition party and was founded by Étienne Tshisekedi in 1982. It is the party of DR Congo's current president, as from January 2019, Félix Tshisekedi, the son of Étienne.

[115] Mouvement pour la Libération du Peuple Centrafricain (Movement for the Liberation of the Central African People). The party was founded by Ange-Félix Patasséin 1978 in Paris and is currently presided over by Martin Ziguélé.

[116] *Omoni kuna na URSS ndenge ebebi kuna? Ekokoma awa. Tango yango ekokoma awa bokozala lisusu na moyen té mpo bokomona lisusu mindele té.*

any demonstration, declaring strikes and public gatherings illegal. The May 1990 petition circulated by opposition groups calling for a national conference was met with disdain. Kolingba proposed a 'great national debate' instead, which he tightly controlled and in which the principal opposition parties were absent. The CAR president's measure, however, failed to derail subsequent elections (M'Bokolo 1998, 86).

Hope enveloped Central Africa, this time as a wind of democracy, and many countries in Africa held elections in the first half of the 1990s. In Zaire, the CNS reopened; and in August 1992, Tshisekedi was elected as the prime minister of a transition government. In CAR, Patassé came to power in the first democratic elections held in the country, in 1993. Hope is also reflected in the life stories of my informants. Yaya Rico, for instance, after arriving in Brazzaville in the early 1980s, marrying and giving birth to his first daughter in 1985, was finally able to enrol as a young father in an evening literacy course for adults. Yaya Rico overcame his shame and explained proudly:

> I was placed in the first grade. They taught us the numbers. I started going. We would have class until 10 o'clock in the evenings. I learned, I learned, I learned until we were examined. I passed the first grade. Time passed. They asked me, '*Vous connaissez parler Français*?' (You speak French?). (Interview on 4 January 2015)[117]

Little by little Yaya Rico learned to read and write, also in French. It is interesting to note to what extent formal education is important to him, especially since it was not a value inculcated by his family of farmers. Through adult schooling, Yaya Rico managed to obtain his primary school education, but his hunger was not satisfied. It was the mid-1990s at that time, and as a man in his mid-forties he felt motivated to pursue his studies.

3) The turbulent 1990s

a) Hope

Around the time Yaya Rico started going to school in Brazzaville, a brave young woman escaped her native Chad in search of better horizons. Espérance, an elegant, ambitious, and jovial woman, was born in a small village in southern Chad in the early 1970s. Disappointed to have a daughter for a fourth time in a row, her father named her 'woman again' in the local vernacular and brought her up as a boy. This marked Espérance. Out of all her sisters and her one brother, she is the only one to

[117] *Batie ngai na classe ya liboso, bazolakisa bachiffres, ba nini, ti ti ti nazokende kaka! Totanga na pokwa ti 22h, tobimi jusqu'à… natangi, natangi, natangi, natala tosali examen, amatisi ngai classe ya liboso, maintenant ti natala est-ce que vous connaissez parler Français?*

have graduated from secondary school. Aspiring for more than her surroundings could offer her, Espérance sought in the religious path an opportunity to study. An Italian sister advised her to finish her schooling in Bangui and to join afterwards, if she wanted, their congregation in CAR. With the money she had saved by selling self-made scarves and baby clothing, Espérance left Chad in September 1993 and enrolled in the last year of secondary school in Bangui, in the hope of continuing her education.

In CAR, 1993 was a hopeful year. The first elections in the country's history had just taken place, and the first democratically elected president, Ange-Félix Patassé, was installed in office. This was not a small achievement for a country that, in its thirty years since independence, had gone through two coups, manifold French interventions, more than a decade of dictatorship, and another decade of military rule. Patassé's MLPC party had defeated the incumbent president Kolingba and the socialist Goumba. As such, Patassé became the first president from 'the north',[118] a banal fact in itself, but one that acquired significance later in his mandate (ICG 2007, 9). Congo-Brazzaville also went through democratization. In the 1992 elections, Lissouba brought an end to almost 13 years of a government ruled by Sassou Nguesso. The latter joined forces with Kolélas and contested the result of the elections, resulting in civil war. Nevertheless, a peace agreement was soon signed, which brought some years of relative calm to Congo-Brazzaville (Themner 2011).

b) 1996–1997

Zaire, on the other hand, did not see a real change in power in the first half of the 1990s. The CNS had de facto led to two parallel governments, one led by the prime minister Tshisekedi and supported by the Belgians, and another led by Mobutu, who desperately held on to power (Gondola 2002, 157–58; Nzongola-Ntalaja 2003, 163). Even if political changes were on the way, the situation in Zaire deteriorated by the day. Owing to hyperinflation, the average Zairois had great difficulty in making ends meet. Students and pupils did not go to school for long periods of time during the 1992–93 and 1993–94 academic years, leading to two '*années blanches*'[119] in terms of education. The praetorian guard of the president, mostly constituted of Ngbandi (Mobutu's ethnic group), was well trained and enjoyed sophisticated equipment, which stood in stark contrast to the irregular salaries and poor living conditions of the Zairean armed forces (FAZ). This resulted in two looting incidents

[118] Just as Espérance does, Patassé belongs to the Sara ethnic group, which is to be found on both sides of the CAR–Chad border.

[119] Lit. white years. It refers to a time when unpaid school teachers strike, schools are closed, and children stay at home and receive no school education.

involving serious fighting in 1991 and 1993, which are still very much alive in popular memory (Gondola 2002, 153; Nzongola-Ntalaja 2003, 168).

By the mid-1990s, Mobutu's power had eroded, people in the country had little respect for him, and he was abandoned by his international supporters. This created a power vacuum in the region. Yet, next to the decay of Zaire, there was another major determinant, with far-reaching implications, of instability in the Central African region: the 1994 Rwanda Genocide (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2003, 214). After the tragedy subsided in June with the arrival of the Tutsi-dominated RPF (Rwandan Patriotic Front) troops under the leadership of Paul Kagame, the defeated Hutu-led Rwandan Armed Forces (FAR) and 'Interahamwe' militias fled across the border into Zaire. What had been a Rwandan conflict now turned into a Congolese one, with the Congolese population caught in the middle and the Banyamulenge (the Congolese Tutsis) divided into two camps.

Meanwhile in CAR, Espérance lived through one of the darkest chapters in her life and in Bangui's history. Three years into his mandate, Patassé failed to deal with the increasing malaise and division in his country. In 1996, civil servants had not been paid for several months, and they demonstrated their discontent on several occasions (Ngoupandé 1997). So did the military, who, in addition to the non-payment of their salaries, felt marginalized and rejected as Patassé, like Mobutu, started to surround himself by a presidential guard that was constituted exclusively by individuals of his own Sara-Kaba ethnic group. Patassé further promoted political polarization between the people from the savannah (the northerners, Sara-Kaba), on the one hand, and the people from the river (the southerners, Yakoma), on the other (ICG 2007, 9–10). The situation exploded in April 1996 when the military took control of the city. Four days later, power was restored to Patassé through French intervention. Precisely a month later, a second mutiny took place and, again, the French intervened. In November that year, a third mutiny took place, and again the French intervened to stop the escalation of violence. This repeated French interference in CAR politics came to be labelled Barracuda Syndrome (Ngoupandé 1997).[120] Each mutiny would be accompanied by growing destruction, looting, and chaos, just as it had been in Zaire a couple of years before.

In early January 1997, two French soldiers died, and the French retaliated by bombarding Bangui (ICG 2007, 10). At the time, Espérance lived in a congregation of sisters next to the town hall in Bimbo, one of Bangui's southern neighbourhoods. She can laugh about it today, as she vividly recounts how they faced death on that day:

[120] In reference to the French operation (and intervention) that ousted Bokassa in 1979

> It happened on the night of January 2nd and 3rd … At a given point, the whole room was under attack; we could not breathe … But if we went out, the helicopter that hovered above the house would have bombarded us, and at night who would see we are religious sisters [in the dark]?
>
> CW: *Who was bombarding?*
>
> The French military. They were taking over the area, attacking. There was the helicopter, war tanks, and soldiers on foot. … They cut the electricity and the operation began.[121] … We stayed inside the kitchen, next to the gas bottles. We saw bullets falling [laughs]. At five in the morning we went out holding our hands up. Come here, ka ka ka; how many are dead, how many are injured? … When they saw there was nothing, they asked us: 'Where were you? Your God was with you.' Because the house had been left roofless.[122] (Interview 21 May 2018, Bangui)

From then onwards, the city grew divided along a north–south axis and the fighting degenerated. People from the northern neighbourhoods could not visit the southern neighbourhoods and vice versa; barricades had been set up, and people were filtered along ethnic lines (Chauvin 2018, 68). Espérance recounts:

> We did everything in Bimbo. At first we didn't want to buy looted goods. But at the end we had no choice; we had to buy looted flour to make our own bread![123] (Interview 21 May 2018, Bangui)

Two months afterwards, the Accords de Bangui were signed and the French forces were replaced by the multilateral African MISAB.[124] At the time Déby supported Patassé against the mutineers, in the

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[121] Espérance refers here to the French Almandin II operation, which ran from May 1996 until June 1997 (Chauvin 2018, 37).

[122] *C'est la nuit du 2 au 3 janvier que nous serons vraiment touchées. … A un certain moment toute la pièce était attaquée, on était presque étouffé … Mais si on serait sorti, l'hélico tournait sur la maison, allait nous bombarder dans la nuit, qui saura que ce sont des sœurs?*
CW: Qui bombardait?
L'hélicoptère des militaires français. Ils prenaient le quartier, attaquaient. Il y avait l'hélico, des chars, aussi un groupe à pied. … La nuit ils ont coupé l'électricité, et l'opération a commencé. C'est comme ça qu'on est restées dans la cuisine intérieur, avec beaucoup de bouteilles de gaz. Seulement on voit les balles tombées [laughs]. A 5h on est sorti les mains en haut. Venez, kakaka, combien de morts, combien de blessés? … Quand ils ont vérifié qu'il n'y a rien, ils nous ont demandé, où est-ce que vous étiez? Votre Dieu était avec vous ! Parce que la maison était à belle étoile.

[123] *On fait tout du côté de Bimbo, au début on ne voulait pas acheter les choses pillées, mais à la fin on était obligées d'acheter la farine pillée pour faire du pain!*

hope the CAR president would prevent Chadian rebels from having a rear base in northern CAR (Chauvin 2018, 39).[125] The MISAB was composed of different nationalities, but it is the Chadians who would be especially remembered for their brutality. According to Espérance, this intervention marked the beginning of the deterioration of the relations between the Chadians and Centrafricains in Bangui. Of the three mutinies, the third one marked Espérance the most. As the city slowly slid into a state of psychosis, she also felt she would never be the same person again:

> This is when I started experiencing things differently. I did not have the same courage I had before … I had the impression that everyone was being indiscriminately shot at, and I started being afraid; and within four months I had a melt-down. It was just enough for the door to bang on itself—and I would jump. From then on I have not been the same person. I do not recognize myself anymore.[126] (Interview 21 May 2018, Bangui)

While CAR sank deeper and deeper in chaos after each mutiny, Mobutu also sank deeper and deeper into isolation. No longer at ease in the capital, he secluded himself in his palace in Gbadolite, about 2,200 km north of Kinshasa, leaving the country ungoverned. This political confusion in Kinshasa opened the door to civil strife and the revival of military networks elsewhere in the country (Gondola 2002, 158–60). One of these openings was occupied by Laurent-Désiré Kabila in east Zaire, who led an alliance of various groups under the banner of the Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo-Zaïre (AFDL). In northern Équateur, another opening was filled by Chadian troops occupying Congolese towns. The Chadians here too would acquire the same fearsome reputation as in Bangui (Carayannis 2015).

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[124] Mission Interafricaine de Surveillance des Accords de Bangui, or the French in disguise (Thomas 2016, 68–69).

[125] See also interview with Espérance on 21 May 2018

[126] *Donc, là j'ai commencé à vivre les choses autrement, je n'avais plus le même courage qu'avant … j'ai l'impression qu'on tire sur tout le monde et j'ai commencé à avoir peur et c'est là qu'en 4 mois je me suis fondue. Il suffit que la porte fasse boum et je sursaute. Et depuis lors ce n'est plus la même personne. Je ne me retrouves plus*.

Figure 39 Le dernier voyage du Roi Léopard
Painting by Sapin Makengele (2014). Papa Madjelo relates about the last years of Mobutu: 'If someone steals money from the state, he goes with it to Libenge. It is not his [Mobutu's] business; he just worries about his throne' (Madjelo 2013).[127] Curiously, Mobutu did not leave by boat but by plane (Nzongola-Ntalaja), while in popular memory this is remembered and depicted differently. For the popular painter Sapin Makengele, Mobutu escaped the country not by plane but by crossing the river.

Kabila's alliance with several neighbouring African governments, as well as the disintegration of the FAZ, facilitated his incredible march from the east (Gondola 2002, 160). As the AFDL marched towards Kinshasa, many people who had earned a living during the dictatorship fled the country, most notoriously Mobutu (see Figure 39). Kabila entered Kinshasa on 17 May 1997 amidst the apprehensive applause of the Kinois. This period is often referred to in the literature as the First Congo War (November 1996 – May 1997). Not knowing what would come, Madjelo also left Gbadolite to find refuge in CAR across the Ubangi River, as many Zairians would do. He remembers this period bitterly:

> You know, all the money I worked for, I did not eat it. If I don't like Kabila, it is because of this. The Rwandans entered our homes, they fired their arms, they took our money. In order to survive, I was forced to hand them my money; that is how I am still alive. All my money, I did not eat it, Kathy! … We could not win; they took, they went away. I crossed into CAR empty-handed! (interview in Gemena, July 2013)[128]

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Congo River, in Brazzaville, Yaya Rico and his wife were settled and had given birth to four children. The adult school where Yaya Rico had obtained his primary

[127] *Na moto azwi mbongo ya létat, akei na yango ti Libenge, etali ye té, lui il voit son fauteuil.*

[128] *Oyebi mbongo na ngai nyoso nazwa wana, nalia na ngai yango té. Soki ngai nalingaka Kabila té, c'est pour cela, ba Rwandais bakotela biso, babeti manduki epai na biso, bazwi mbongo. Mpo baboma ngai té, il faut nazwa mbongo na ngai napesa bango, nde naza na vie, soki té baboma ngai. Mbongo na ngai tout, nalia yango té Kathy! ... Mais tolongaki té, bazwi bakeyi, nabimi Centrafrique maboko pamba!*

degree offered secondary education too. Excited, Yaya Rico enrolled to continue. But as he paid the school fees:

> Pa! […] Lissouba and Sassou's war fell upon us in 1997, right? The country exploded, people fled, school died. It saddened me strooongly! (Interview in Libenge, 4 January 2015)[129]

Even if tensions had been on the rise in the Republic of Congo (RC), the war in Brazzaville started abruptly on 5 June 1997, less than a month after Kabila's coup d'état in Kinshasa. Yaya Rico clearly remembers the day when the fighting started. It began at dawn and escalated as the sun came up. A month before, supporters of Lissouba and Sassou Nguesso had clashed in the north of the country. Lissouba, who was at the time the elected president, retaliated for these clashes by sending soldiers and his Cocoye militia to arrest Sassou Nguesso and disarm the latter's Cobra militia. The move signalled the beginning of the second round[130] of fighting in Congo and went on until the signing of a comprehensive peace agreement in December 1999 (Themner 2011, 43–45).[131] Yaya Rico and his family fled the fighting. At first, he crossed the border to Kinshasa by himself; this was the first time he had set foot in the capital of his own country. Yaya Rico then travelled upriver to look for help among his acquaintances. During the boat journey, he remembers listening to the news of Mobutu's death in exile in Morocco on RFI (the former president died on 7 September 1997). Yaya Rico travelled back to Brazzaville, and joined by his family, they fled together to Kinshasa. They had to get used to this foreign city; but luckily for them, Yaya Rico soon managed to secure a job at a congregation of sisters.

c) Paranoia

A decade before Mobutu's fall and Congo-Brazzaville's civil war, Émile, the only son of a preacher and his wife, moved in 1987 as a young boy from Kinshasa to Bangui for his father's work. Émile grew up partly in Bangui, a city he quickly embraced as a second home. During his adolescence, however, he moved back to Kinshasa in 1996 to live under the wing of his uncle, an influential military man in the FAZ. Émile talks of his uncle with awe and describes him as a man of faith and culture. His close

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[129] *Guerre ya Lissouba na Sassou ekweyi na quatre-vingts dix-sept, c'est ça non ? … Mboka epanzani, bato bakimi, classe ekufi, ezwi ngai makasi!*

[130] The first war took place in 1993–1994, in the aftermath of the presidential and legislative elections of 1992, through which Lissouba had won by the ballot, bringing Sassou-Nguesso's 12-year single-party regime to an end.

[131] For further reading on the wars in Congo-Brazzaville, see Bazenguissa-Ganga (1999), Bazenguissa-Ganga and Yengo (1999) and Ngodi (2006).

relationship to him, in combination with his rebellious age, put Émile in danger. He certainly witnessed the change of power in Kinshasa, but also the deterioration that came afterwards (Villers and Omasombo Tshonda 2001). Émile, a determined young man, persecuted because of his uncle, was considered as an enemy by the new regime and fled Kinshasa to regain Bangui. This time he did not arrive as the son of a migrant, but also as a refugee fleeing his country. Émile explains:

> There were nightly visits from armed people who came, who said they came to search for the weapons we hid at home, so it was a bit complicated for me, I was reactive, *nalingaki té* [in Lingala: I did not want] ... The decision to leave was taken one evening when they arrived. They threatened, I also protested, they promised to come back for me ... I left Kin ... 1998, it was a pretty decisive year, because I arrived in CAR with a new cap—not as the child that Bangui knew, but the child that Bangui had to accept, accept because we no longer wanted to live a certain life, of persecution in our own country. (Interview, Bangui, 15 August 2016)[132]

Émile arrived in a divided city, which had gone through a lot of turbulence in the past year. One can wonder how much safer in absolute terms Bangui was in comparison with Kinshasa. Nevertheless, in 1998 Bangui offered Émile protection and room to breathe, to regenerate himself, and also an opportunity to study. At the time, Bangui had turned into a crossroads of nationalities. Drawn into the orbit of the Congo wars, as well as into the networks of its northern neighbours (Carayannis 2015), CAR at the turn of the century granted refuge to people from different countries in the region and beyond: ex-Zaire, Congo-Brazzaville, Angola, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda.[133]

The same city that gave Émile room to flourish asphyxiated Espérance, almost literally. In August 1998, after having left the convent, Espérance started studying sociology at the University of Bangui and moved in with a cousin into a small room on campus. Next to her studies, she continued to travel regularly up north to buy groundnuts at the Chad, Cameroon, CAR border markets and resell them in Bangui.[134] With this money, Espérance managed to pay for her education fees and to help others.

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[132] *Il y eu des visites nocturnes des gens armés qui venaient, qui disaient qui venaient fouiller les armes qu'on cachait à la maison, donc ça était un peu très compliqué, pour moi, j'étais réactif, nalingaki té … La décision de partir c'était quand un soir ils sont arrivés, menaçaient, j'ai aussi protesté, ils ont promis repasser pour s'occuper de mon cas… J'ai quitté Kin … 1998 ça était une année assez décisive, parce que j'arrive en RCA avec une nouvelle casquette, pas l'enfant que Bangui a vu, mais l'enfant que Bangui doit accepter, accepter parce que nous voulons plus vivre une certaine vie, d'être persécuter chez soi.*

[133] Interview Émile, Bangui, 15 August 2016.

[134] See Karine Bennafla for more about the tri-border markets between CAR, Chad, and Cameroon (Bennafla 1998; 1999)

There were many Chadian students in Bangui at the time. Whereas the relations between CAR and Chad had been fairly good in the past—Chadians were colloquially called '*oncle oncle'*—things started deteriorating in the second half of the 1990s. On the state level, Patassé had managed to anger Déby by offering hospitality to the armed Chadian opposition and turning to Qaddafi for support (Wohlers 2015, 309; Chauvin 2018, 45–46).[135] The Banguissois grew less tolerant towards the Chadian contingent of the MISAB, especially the brutality they used against civilians (Chauvin 2018, 42).[136] By mid-1999, intolerance turned into vengeance, and this had repercussions for the numerous Chadian students living Bangui—including Espérance. She recalls the appearance one day of an angry mob:

> They attacked in the morning at 5:00 a.m. The others started to destroy their belongings. I was in the shower; my niece had come to tell me ... I took my purse, my bra. I had sold ten bags of groundnuts the day before—that's 138,000 FCFA [about $220]. I put the money between the clothes. We went to close the door... . Students came to barricade our door to protect us. These students said to the attackers: 'Not them!' The attackers responded: 'Are these your girlfriends? Are you defending them?' The attackers went around the barricading students to get into the room. They made a big fire; everything went up in flames! (Interview Espérance, Bangui, 21 May 2018)[137]

After witnessing the loss of all her belongings, Espérance moved in with an aunt, with whom she then lived for two years. The year after this tragic event, in September 1999, Patassé won the presidential elections for a second time. Amidst growing discontent, due to salary arrears and the further ethnicization of the presidential guard—and hence exclusion of others—civil servants demanded the president step down in December 2000. Patassé's second mandate was to be characterized by

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[135] It was even said he had recruited ex-codos into his presidential guard (Chauvin 2018, 45)

[136] In the 1990s and in the new millennium, international missions would parade through one after another: MISAB (1996–1997), MINURCA (1998–2000), BONUCA (2000–2010), FOMUC (2002–2008), FOMAC (2003–time of writing), BINUCA (2010–2014), MISCA, and finally the MINUSCA (2014–time of writing). See also Chauvin 2018, 37.

[137] *Ils ont attaqué le matin à 5h, les autres ont commencé à casser leurs effets. Moi j'étais dans la douche, ma nièce était venue me dire … J'ai pris mon sac à main, mon brassière, j'ai vendu dix sacs d'arachide la veille, ça fait 138.000 FCFA. J'avais mis l'argent entre les habits. On est parti fermer la porte. … Les autres étudiants sont venus pour barricader: Pas celles-là! Ah ce sont vos copines? Vous les défendez? Ils les ont contournés pour entrer dans la chambre, ils ont fait un grand feu, tout partait dans le feu!*

suspicion and paranoia (ICG 2007, 12–13). The president spiralled down with the country and, at the turn of the century, CAR drifted into a period of one coup attempt after another (Porgès 2001).

On the other side of the border, just a year after the First Congo War had subsided, Kabila, like Patassé, managed to anger the neighbours who had helped him to power. A week after he announced the retreat of neighbouring Rwandan and Ugandan forces, they retaliated by bringing about the Second Congo War, which was initiated in August 1998. This war has often been referred as the African Holocaust / Great War of Africa, because of the high death toll, the number of displaced people, and the number of actors involved (from Libya to South Africa). It subsided, on paper, in 2002 with the Sun City Accords and later, on the ground, in 2003. However, as we have seen above, for many Congolese, especially in the east of the country, war is still ongoing.

4) Deep water: More violence and new dictatorships

When there is war in one country, bullets fall in the other. (Fieldwork notes 18 December 2014)

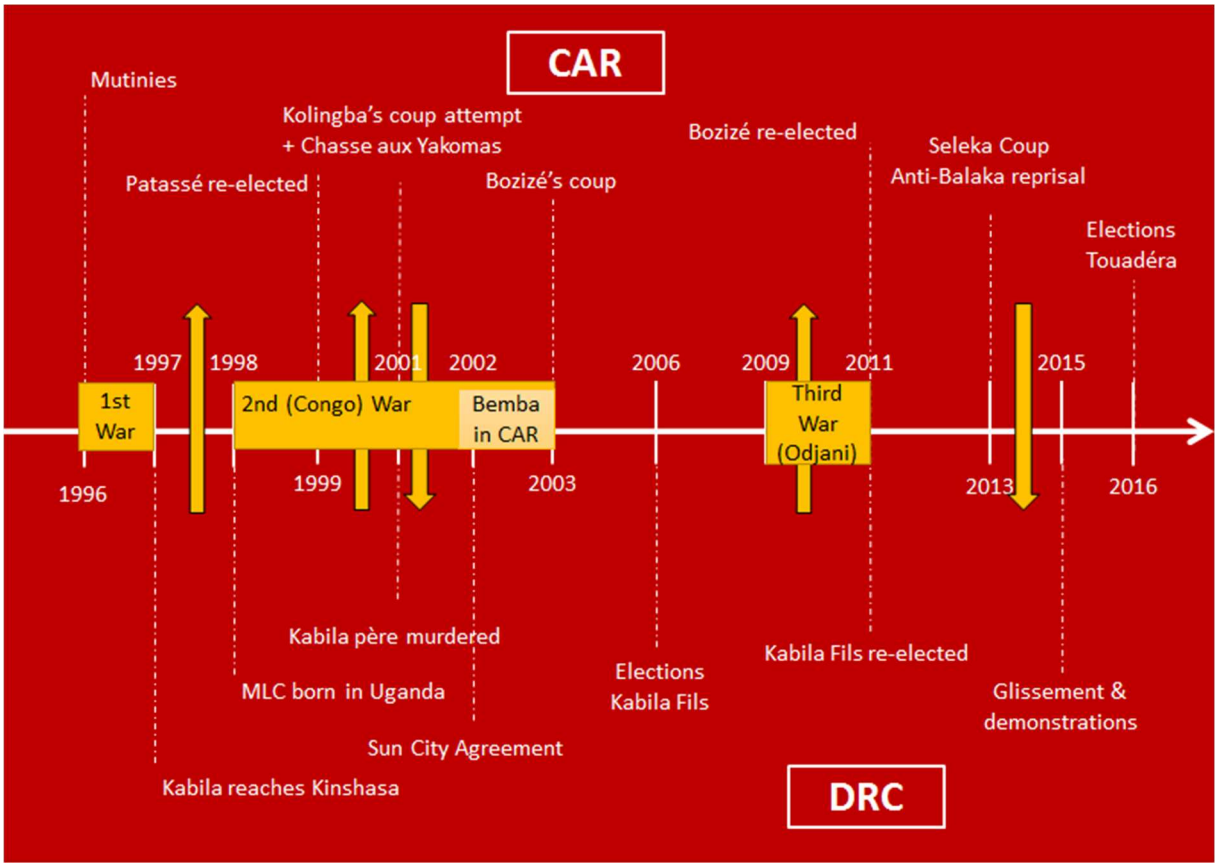

Figure 40 Combined timeline CAR – DR Congo
From the mutinies until the 2016 CAR elections. The arrows stand for refugee flows.

a) The Congo wars

As I arrived in northern Équateur in 2013, people recounted three waves of conflict, which can be summarized as follows:[138] (1) the chaos brought about by the change in power—that is, when Kabila père ousted Mobutu, and its continuation—that is, the fighting between Bemba and Kabila le Père (1996–1999); (2) the fighting between Kabila le Fils and Bemba (2001–2003); and (3) Odjani's embryonic rebellion (2009–2010). Leaving Odjani's rebellion (the third wave of conflict) aside, one tends to draw a parallel between the first two waves of conflict and the two Congo wars so often mentioned in the literature. However, based on a close reading of the collected data in north-western Équateur, the first two waves of conflicts, even if overlapping, cannot be matched one to one with the two Congo wars. The first and second Congo wars are clearly separated in the literature, and there was even an interval of over a year between the two. But the chronological limits between the first and second wave of conflict—as here described and proposed in Figure 40—is fuzzy in the experience of the people in north-western Équateur. When precisely the first conflict stopped and the second began is difficult to determine. There is a rather grey zone between the two, similar to what Debos calls 'interwar' for the Chadian context—that is, a period in which violence affects the spaces and times, and thus also the experience thereof, even if there is no direct or openly visible fighting involved (Debos 2016, 8). Nevertheless, there is an important difference between the first and the second wave of conflict: the degree of violence experienced. In this section, I guide my analysis by the three waves of conflicts in Sud-Ubangi—that is, an emic reading of the conflict—rather than by the two Congo wars.

The first wave of conflict in NW Congo

The first conflict is colloquially referred as the conflict between Mobutu and Kabila le Père, or alternatively, between Bemba and Kabila le Père. Note that the role of Bemba in this first wave of conflict is a clear indication that it does not strictly overlap with the First Congo War. As the troops of Kabila conquered the country, many people who had benefited during the Mobutu period, such as Papa Madjelo, ran away. Characteristic of this wave of conflict was not so much the killing—not to say that it did not take place—but rather the large-scale looting often carried out by Mobutu's own security forces. The *pillage* (as the looting came to be known) and physical destruction of the country's amenities are remembered as a historic turning point. In Libenge, for instance, the once to

[138] The colloquial term used is *etumba/bitumba*, which can be translated as both war and conflict. However, in order to differentiate, I prefer to use 'war' in reference to the first and second Congo wars, and conflict in reference to the three waves of conflict in Équateur.

be Pan-African University was completely stripped: street lamps, window frames, and electricity generators were stolen and sold on the other side of the river.

Figure 41 Pan-African University of Libenge
View of the students' dorms (11 in total) of the Pan-African University. Notice the lampless electricity poles (Photograph by Mirjam de Bruijn, Libenge 11 June 2014)

It was during this first wave of conflict that Bemba's MLC was created, with Ugandan President Museveni's support, in late 1998. Jean-Pierre Bemba, the son of one of Équateur's most prominent businessmen, stood up against Kabila for both personal and ideological reasons. As part of the Congolese elite under Mobutu, Bemba strongly disagreed with Kabila's exclusion of the political class from Équateur Province, as well as with the confiscation of his family's business property. He claimed to have been motivated by Kabila's disregard for human rights, racist propaganda, and *tribalisme* (Carayannis 2008, 3). In any case, Bemba managed to mobilize support in his home region for the military wing of his movement, the Armée de Libération du Congo (ALC), that fought against Kinshasa.

Figure 42 Violent memories of Chadian intervention in DR Congo
(Left) Bullet-hole in a tractor, shot during fighting against the Chadians (Gemena July 2013). (Right) Water well where Chadians threw Congolese dead bodies (Photograph by Mirjam de Bruijn, on the road between Libenge and Zongo, June 2014).

Chad, which since 1998 started fulfilling France's duty of soldiering in Central Africa, joined the side of Kabila in mid-1998 by sending 2,000 troops to northern Congo to fight the ALC. France did not want to see Congo drift away from the Francophone atmosphere, as Rwanda had done. In July 1999,

with the support of Uganda, Bemba managed to dislodge the Chadian troops, who came to be remembered for their looting and brutality (see Figure 42). Bemba turned into the liberator of the northern part of Équateur Province (Carayannis 2008, 7). In fact, after chasing away the Chadians and the Congolese Armed Forces (FAC), Équateur was divided de facto into two: Kabila controlled the south, including the provincial capital Mbandaka, while Bemba controlled the north and declared his capital in Gemena. At first, order was partly restored and things started working. Dorothée and Popol remember that by circumventing Kinshasa, Bemba managed to:

> … cut Équateur in two. We would have our capital in Gemena, they would have their capital in Kinshasa. He [Bemba] had good relations with Bangui. Boats would dock [in Dongo], we would charge them with our produce. You would travel without a problem to Brazzaville, where you could sell your merchandise and travel back. (Dorothée and Popol Dongo, December 2014)[139]

There are many stories still to be collected about this historical period in this corner of Central Africa. Humour—perhaps the most useful way of dealing with the memories and facing reality (Jourdan 2006, 183 n1)—often plays an important role in bringing the anecdotes of the rebellion to life. There was, for instance, the lucrative trade in salt and soap, conducted on foot and paid for not in money, but in eggs.[140] Papa Madjelo, also, cannot help laughing when recounting how trucks used to drive:

> There was no petrol. Trucks would run on palm oil [in Lingala: *mafuta ya mbila*], palm oil [to emphasize in French: *huile de palme*]! You had to heat it until it turned *kambili,*[141] then you would pour it in the truck and start driving. This is how we travelled here during the rebellion; we travelled on palm oil … Let's go! Gua Gua Gua [simulates noice of the motor] *abuka lipeko!* [laughs] You won't believe it, Kathy, it was like being in a movie! (Interview July 2013, Gemena)[142]

For the sake of this analysis, I draw the line between the first and the second wave of conflict with the signing of the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement in July 1999, a period during which Bemba liberated

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[139] *ascindé Équateur na mibale, biso tozala na capital ya biso Gemena, bango kuna bazala na bango capitale Kinshasa. Ye asalaki relation na Bangui. Bazoya batelemi, tomati biloko na cargo, o voyager bonnement na Brazza, toteki biloko na biso toye.*

[140] Fieldwork notes 'Refugees, Methodology and Meeting Up With People', Zongo, 14 August 2013.

[141] Colloquial expression for heated palm oil replacing gasoline.

[142] *gasoil ezalaki lisusu té, ekomi kotambusa mituka kaka na mafuta ya mbila, huile de palme, bokalingi yango ekomi kambili, allé botié yango na camion, démarrer camion tokende. Etambolaki na rebellion awa, totamboli na mafuta ya mbila … Toleka dis! Gua Gua Gua Gua, abuka lipeko! [laughs] Tsa tika Kathy, tika, tomoni ba films awa!*

Équateur from the Chadians, but was further dissuaded from proceeding to Mbandaka. Fighting ceased, but not for long.

The second wave of conflict in NW Congo

Figure 43 Bombed hangar at Libenge Airport
Notice the hole at the top right (Photograph by Mirjam de Bruijn, Libenge, 11 June 2014)

'Boum, boum, boum, boum!' exclaimed Papa Henri as he tried to explain how the planes bombarded Libenge in 1999 (see Figure 43).[143] Fighting resumed soon after the disrespected ceasefire agreement was signed, this time bolder and bloodier fighting than before. In Libenge and Dongo, people remember Mirage jets flying over their heads and being bombarded from the air. There is one particular episode, often alluded to, related to the troops Kabila had sent on the river by boat to combat the rebels in the north. The ALC successfully responded to these advances by attacking the boat; as a result, it capsized. In 2014 the carcasses still lay visibly rotting on the shores of the Ubangi River near the village of Mawiya—one of those archives in the landscape referred to in Chapter I.[144]

The local population's experience, especially of the violence, marks the difference between the two waves of conflict. According to the collected life stories in different towns in northern Congo, even though the division between the two waves of conflict is not always clear, there was a stark difference in terms of violence, expressed in the death toll and in the use of weaponry (Mirages during the second wave of conflict), as well as in the number of people who fled to find refuge in the forest, or across the border in Congo-Brazzaville and CAR, from Dongo and Libenge, respectively.

[143] Interview in Libenge 12 June 2014 with Mirjam de Bruijn

[144] Fieldwork notes Dongo, 10 December 2014.

People left in larger numbers, taking their families along and remaining abroad for a longer period of time. The repatriation of this wave of Congolese refugees would take place only in 2007, after the 2006 elections in DR Congo.

b) Coup bid and the Banyamoulengue

While Congolese were running away in large numbers, crossing the Ubangi River into CAR, on the other riverbank, the receiving end, in the host country, a true *chasse aux sorcières*[145] was about to explode. On 28 May 2001 a coup was launched by soldiers loyal to ousted former CAR president Kolingba. The coup was unsuccessful, but its consequences were enormous. Even though the coup was never formally recognized by Kolingba, Patassé's armed forces started to persecute all Yakoma, especially in Bangui's southern neighbourhoods along the shore of the Ubangi River. People hid in their homes as Patassé's loyalist soldiers started raiding the houses one by one. This led to a 'massive exodus' (Porgès 2001, 38), where the population either fled towards calmer northern neighbourhoods of Bangui, or left the city or crossed the river into DR Congo. Women were raped, children abducted, and young boys shot in cool blood (M.-L. Kassaï in preparation). The coup attempt resulted in at least 300 deaths and 50,000 to 80,000 people displaced (Porgès 2001, 41; Carayannis and Lombard 2015). Houses were looted and razed, at first by the armed forces, but later also by the neighbours.[146] Despite its magnitude, this *évènement* ('event'), as it came to be called, received little attention from the international media (Porgès 2001), yet it led to the same paradoxical situation I would encounter in Libenge in 2013. In the case of the former, while Zairean/Congolese refugees fleeing Kabila found refuge in Bangui, on the one hand, CAR citizens, especially members of the army and their families, as well as many Yakoma—who shared the same ethnic group as the defeated president Kolingba—sought refuge in DR Congo from Patassé and his militias.

In order to deal with the abortive coup attempt, Patassé made an appeal to Qaddafi and Bemba. This is how the MLC, and in particular its armed wing, arrived in Bangui. They not only chased the mutineers, but also gave themselves up to looting. Congolese refugees remember this episode with confusion and fear of reprisals against them. On the other side of the river, on rebel territory, a much-needed market was born. Jourdan describes how one of his informants left Libenge for Zongo in order to seize the opportunity to gain something from the looting (Jourdan 2013).

[145] A campaign of reprisal killings

[146] Interview Oscar, Bangui August 2016

It was not only the Yakoma who suffered during this period, however. Because the aunt with whom she was living was from Patassé's ethnic group, Espérance also, for a second time in a row, felt under attack and decided to flee:

> I left to go to the Galabadja neighbourhood, for ten days. After that we came back. It was still hot hot; they wanted to throw grenades at her house. That's how I left to go rent elsewhere. (Interview Bangui, 21 May 2018)[147]

Patassé's paranoia continued to grow. His distrust was directed not only at the Yakomas in particular but at everybody in general. It was said he became an avid reader of intelligence reports and suspected plots everywhere (ICG 2007, 13). The attempted coup by Kolingba was only the first of a series of (alleged) coup attempts.[148] The FACA army chief of staff, François Bozizé, another 'northerner', was accused of being involved in the May coup and was dismissed in October 2001. He fled northwards and reached Deby's Chad. During exile, Bozizé declared the birth of a rebel guerrilla movement that included an important number of youth from Bangui's northern neighbourhoods. Most of these youngsters joined the rebellion not so much because of an ethnic ideology, but rather for economic reasons (Both et al. unpublished). A year after his dismissal, in October 2002 supporters of Bozizé staged an insurrection in Bangui, a third alleged coup attempt in the series of coups. The relationship between CAR and Chad further deteriorated (ICG 2007, 14–15; Chauvin 2009, 37).

Feeling threatened, Patassé called in, for the second time, the help of Qaddafi and Bemba, who managed to drive back the insurrectionists once again. In return, this allowed Bemba to use Bangui as a rear base and Qaddafi to expand his sphere of influence. For a second time in a short period, Bemba's troops stood face to face against Chadian troops, this time on CAR soil. (The previous time had been in Congo when Kabila called on Chad for help). Papa Madjelo remembers sitting next to the harbour at the river front, witnessing how Congolese youngsters crossed the river into CAR and how they were given uniforms to fight. Bemba, busy at the time in the Sun City negotiations, was not physically present in Bangui. Madjelo proudly recounts how Bemba's troops drove the Chadians out of the city and up north towards the border with southern Chad.[149] They managed to retake Bossangoa, the stronghold of the rebellion since November 2001 (ICG 2007, 15).

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[147] *J'ai quitté pour aller vers le quartier Galabadja, dix jours, après nous sommes revenus c'était encore chaud chaud, on voulait jeter des grenades sur sa maison, c'est comme ça que moi j'ai quitté pour aller louer.*

[148] Kolingba, Demafouth, Bozizé

[149] Interview Gemena July 2013

Bemba's troops are remembered quite differently by the CAR population. The memories of their gruesome passage through CAR, literally 'falling upon the heads' of the Banguissois, still persist vividly in the collective memory (Bepou-Bangue 2013; M.-L. Kassaï in preparation). Ironically, Bemba's troops came to be known as the 'Banyamoulengue' by the Centrafricains. In the Congolese context, the Banyamulenge (note the difference in spelling, *-u-* instead of *-ou-* and *-ge* instead of *-gue*)[150] designate the Congolese Tutsis in eastern DRC, a group whose *congolité*[151] has been placed in question (Vlassenroot 2002; Court 2013). The Banyamoulengue in Bangui, however, were viewed as 'real' Congolese. Marchal also picked up this nuance. He argues that what links eastern Congo's Banyamulenge to Bemba's Banyamoulengue is their opposition to the Kinshasa government (Marchal 2015b, 177). The analogy is correct in form but anachronistic: eastern Congo's Banyamulenge opposed the Mobutu government; Bemba's Banyamoulengue opposed the Kabila government.

Bemba's MLC troops in CAR killed people, raped women, and ravaged the city. Their atrocities came to an end when Bozizé and his (in majority) Chadian *libérateurs*[152] marched towards the CAR capital. Max, a 12-year-old boy at the time, remembers how he and his classmates were forced to leave the seminary in Sibut, a town 180 km north of Bangui:

> We were brought back with the help of a Banyamoulengue vehicle. So the Banyamoulengue transported us from Sibut to Bangui. While the rebels were advancing, Bozizé with his troops were advancing. The Banyamoulengue escorted us and took us to Bangui [...] they did not hurt

[150] Banyamulenge (with *-u-* and ending on *-ge-*) is the Lingala spelling and used here to designate the Congolese Tutsis. Banyamoulengue (with *-ou-* and ending on *-gue-*) is the French spelling, in use in CAR, and used here to designate Bemba's MLC troops.

[151] Best translated as 'Congoleseness' or being Congolese, *congolité* emerged as an important term during the 2006 DRC elections period. At the time, it encapsulated an exclusionary definition of autochthony, juxtaposing Jean-Pierre Bemba, as 'son of the nation', to Joseph Kabila, suspected of concealing a foreign origin (Rémy 2006; S. Jackson 2013). More recently, the meaning of *congolité* has shifted to incorporate the affirmation of autochthonic origins, through the use of Lingala (K. Büscher, D'hondt, and Meeuwis 2013), and the expression of Congolese collective experience more broadly. *Congolité* affirms the existence of a shared commonness that unites the Congolese people (Sinnige 2018).

[152] Note the irony in the term liberator, especially as they were mainly Chadian and thus foreigners in CAR. How can foreigners liberate a country?

> us. They took money, petrol, seminar vehicles, but they didn't touch the pupils. (Interview in Bangui, 18 May 2018)[153]

Bozizé took Bangui on 15 March 2003—marking CAR's third successful coup d'état since independence. It is interesting to underline the multilateral regional involvement in this event. On Bozizé's side, his coup could not have been staged were it not for an exemplary regional cooperation; he relied not only on Chad, but also on Joseph Kabila, the Congolese president, who supplied the necessary armaments (ICG 2007, 15–16).[154] On the other side, Patassé could not have fought back were it not for his Congolese and Libyan collaborators. Thus, while Kabila supplied arms but no troops to Bozizé, Bemba, on the other hand, provided mostly troops to Patassé. CAR's southern neighbour was involved in both sides of the fighting.

Going back to Max' quotation above, there is another interesting element to point out which links to discourses and 'levels' of foreignness. While Bemba's deal with Patassé was in essence not that different from Bozizé's deal with Déby, both used CAR's soil as a hub for economic and military activities (Marchal 2015b, 177). But Max does draw a distinction: even if elsewhere (M.-L. Kassaï in preparation) he has described the Banyamoulengue as visceral intruders, in the above quotation Max portrays them as saviours and even justifies their looting, because 'they didn't touch the seminarists'. This stands in stark contrast to how Max relates to the *libérateurs*, or Bozizé's rebels, from whom he had to run away. This distinction runs parallel with the categorization and different levels of foreignness. It seems that despite the great tensions between 2001 and 2003, the presence of the Congolese, the most populous foreign community in CAR,[155] is not resented in the same way as the Chadian presence is. The latter are labelled as the 'absolute' foreigners (Marchal 2015a, 66).

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[153] *On nous avez ramené à l'aide d'un véhicule des Banyamoulengue. Donc les Banyamoulengue nous ont transporté de Sibut envers Bangui. Pendant que les rebelles progressaient, Bozizé avec ses troupes progressaient, les Banyamoulengue nous ont escortés et emmener à Bangui […] ils ne nous ont fait pas de mal, eux ils ont pris de l'argent, de l'essence, des véhicules du séminaire, mais eux ils n'ont pas touché aux séminaristes.*

[154] Next to Déby (troops and arms) and Kabila (arms), Congo-Brazzaville's president Sassou (funding) and Gabon's head of state Omar Bongo (blessing) were also part of the regional cooperation (ICG 2007, 16).

[155] Basing himself on the *'Troisième recensement général de la population et de l'habitat de 2003', Bangui, ministère du Plan, de l'Économie, des Finances, du Budget et de la Coopération internationale, Direction générale de la statistique, des études économiques et sociales, Bureau central du recensement*, Chauvin states that 51% of the foreign population living in Bangui are Congolese from DR Congo (Chauvin 2018, 56).

In other words, even though the Banguissois resent, and rightly so, the passage of the Congolese Banyamoulengue through CAR, the looting engaged in by Bemba's troops did not have the same magnitude, or at least is not viewed in equal terms, as the looting committed by Bozizé's Chadian troops. In comparison with the atrocities of the former, the pillage of the city by Chad mercenaries appeared to be more the work of professionals (ICG 2007, 16). More than resentment, the Chadian presence in Bangui since 1997 has brought up a fear of foreign dominion and undermining of the sovereignty among many Centrafricains (Chauvin 2018, 42), a fear that was only reconfirmed with the entrance of Seleka in 2013. Many people in Bangui explained to me that it was in fact Bozizé who paved the way for the Chadians to come in 2003; the Seleka were just following his example. *Les tchadiens*, as they are called, have come to embody the ultimate foreigner, whereby often no difference is made between northerners and southerners, nor between Christian and Muslim Chadians (Chauvin 2018).

c) La 'Bozizie'

In DR Congo, and especially in northern Équateur, support for Bemba's MLC was substantial until local taxes tripled to finance the movement, and the military operations in CAR and eastern Congo were launched (Carayannis 2008, 7). In both places, Bemba became the embodiment of the committed atrocities, which even included cannibalism (Pottier 2007). For the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in CAR, Bemba stood trial in 2008 at the ICC[156] and was finally judged guilty in 2016. To the surprise of all, he was set free of the charges in June 2018 (Wilson 2018a). Curiously enough, the ICC never judged Bemba for his role in Ituri's bloody 'war within a war' (Vlassenroot and Raeymaekers 2004); and other politico-military figures, both in DR Congo and CAR, never stood trial either for the crimes they committed in CAR during that same period. This leads many people to believe that Bemba's arrest, and especially the timing of it just after the 2006 elections, was a political rather than judicial move.[157] His acquittal in 2018, half a year before the already twice postponed and delicate elections, only confirmed these suspicions (Wilson 2018a).

[156] International Criminal Court in The Hague, Netherlands

[157] In 2006, Bemba challenged Kabila during the presidential elections. They were won by the latter with 58% in the runoff. In the aftermath of the elections, riots and even deadly clashes between Bemba's troops and Kabila's Republican Guard took place. In April 2007, Bemba left the country. He was arrested in 2008, after the ICC had opened an investigation against him for war crimes committed during 2002–2003 in CAR. Bemba's arrest excluded him from the 2011 elections and was considered to be strategically beneficial for Kabila.

Parallel to all the fighting, and thus at the time the MLC troops were ravaging CAR and eastern Congo and Bozizé was preparing to take over Bangui, Bemba took part in the Sun City Agreement. During several months the leaders of the different warring parties in Congo sat around the table under the auspices of President Thabo Mbeki in the luxurious South African casino resort. The inclusive peace agreement was finally signed in April 2002 and led to a transitional period wherein the warring factions would share power in transitional institutions. The interim 1+4 government (one president assisted by four vice-presidents) was to function as a platform to forge consensus in the run-up to the 2006 elections—the first Congolese elections since independence. The president was Kabila, and Bemba was one of the four vice-presidents, one of the two from the two largest rebel movements (De Goede 2015b, 598–99). It was at this time, in 2005, that I visited DR Congo for the first time, as a Bachelor student eager to learn Lingala. It was a time of hope; the elections offered an opportunity for redemption, a new beginning (De Goede 2015b, 601). Pamphlets on how to vote were distributed among the people; the interior of the country started to open up again. I was discouraged from travelling to Kisangani in 2005, but Mbandaka seemed not to be a problem.[158]

In the second half of the 2000s, as war no longer loomed around the corner, Bangui, like Kinshasa, blossomed—at least cosmetically. Streets were paved, avenues were retraced, and monuments and fountains embellished the capital cities (Lombard 2016, 144); in Kinshasa, under the infamous *Cinq Chantiers* programme, the main arteries were widened and roads paved.[159] It seems that hope and despair alternate with one another. After a decade of chaos and war, both countries lived a short time of relative (and partial) calm. This hope appears in the life stories of all the informants cited in this thesis. There are two important caveats, however: the instability/volatility in the interior of both countries, especially in comparison with the capital cities, was always present; and the daily hardships endured in the city. In this period, after working a couple of years at the sisters in Kinshasa, Yaya Rico was posted to Bangui with his family, where he continued working in their congregation. This permitted him to take care of his children's education. Soon, Yaya Rico grew fond of Bangui, perhaps more so than of Kinshasa—especially since his oldest daughter's twins were growing up,

[158] The capital of the Équateur Province, Mbandaka, had never fallen into the hands of the rebels.

[159] The *Cinq Chantiers* was Kabila's campaign motto and main development programme, which was to be realized in collaboration with China's assistance. Even if roads were constructed, only a small percentage of the projects were accomplished. Moreover, locals also criticized the widening of Lumumba Boulevard, as it entailed the uprooting of hundreds of trees under which petty businesses used to flourish, hence eliminating the income of many people. Owing to lack of maintenance, many of the streets that were repaved during the *Cinq Chantiers* now lie in a deplorable state.

which turned him not only into a caring father, but also into a devoted grandfather. Of all the people he was to miss during refuge, the twins' absence seemed to hurt him the most.

The 1996–2001 events were followed by a more peaceful period, allowing for other things to flourish. Espérance moved into a house with two cousins in Miskine, a popular and lively neighbourhood of Bangui. She combined her university studies with the groundnut trade and still felt she had time on her hands, so she decided to take up a second course of study, in accounting in a private institution. During the holidays she would work as a cleaner for an Italian NGO and as a babysitter for the children of the NGO's expatriate employees. Espérance was and still is very ambitious, often to the chagrin of many. While, on the one hand, her ambition and pride were a source of inspiration for other Chadian students,[160] on the other hand, they got her into trouble at university. Some professors, and in particular her thesis supervisor, accused her of fraud and of supposedly employing others to write the thesis for her. After much ado, the work she put so much energy into was graded insufficient to continue on to Master's level. Espérance soon understood that the problem did not lie in the supposedly poor quality of her writing but rather in her reluctance to employ '*la méthode stratégique*', which involves accepting the indecent advances of some of the male professors.

Figure 44 P.S.T. (Les Points Sexuellement Transmissibles)
Berry Matundu †(2012).[161]

[160] Espérance is not the only one who has made the best of the chance she took when leaving Chad in 1990; others have benefitted too. As soon as she had a little extra, from her groundnut commerce, she invited a cousin to join her to study in Bangui—and then another, and then another, and so on. By now she has financially helped and morally encouraged a couple of dozen Chadian and also Centrafricain young men and women to complete their studies in Bangui.

[161] This work is part of the catalogue of the TMB exhibition that was held in 2014–2015 in Kinshasa. The girls represented in this painting are not university students but school pupils (they wear the characteristic

Espérance explained that if you do not have elders in Bangui (to socially protect you), enrolling at university is a risky venture. She learned that at the beginning of each academic year, professors divide the female students among themselves, and they cannot stand to see one 'who does not belong anywhere'.[162] Disillusioned, Espérance put aside her university career, yet still encouraged others to follow it. Out of frustration, she wanted to write an article entitled '*Sexologie ou Sociologie?*' in one of the local journals, but was discouraged from doing so, as she would only make it more difficult for her countrymen to study in CAR. These types of 'strategies' are, sadly enough, not unique to Bangui but are part of the daily hardships of many Central African (female) students. Time and again scandals of this type, in which young girls are forced to sell their bodies for grades, are brought to light in Kinshasa also (Tsakala Munikengi and Bongo-Pasi Moke Sangol 2004). This thematic has been depicted and criticized by several popular painters, as illustrated in the work by the late Berry Matundu (see Figure 44). Disenchanted by the academic world, Espérance left the academic path and entered the world of international organizations. She was at first temporarily employed in a couple of NGOs and soon found work in one of the larger international organizations in Bangui.

Max managed to enrol in a Master's programme. After fleeing Sibut on the pick-up of the rebels, Max obtained his state diploma in 2008 in Bangui. Instead of going back to the seminary, he decided to enrol at the Law Faculty of the University of Bangui. Despite feeling he was advancing in his life path, this period was not easy for Max; and even if university was not expensive, he had trouble getting by. His father had been killed when Bozizé took power,[163] leaving Max and his siblings with no one to financially take care of them. In order to make ends meet, Max started working as a journalist for one of the local newspapers. Even though it was difficult to combine both activities, he was successful in doing so and managed to graduate from the one-year Master's (Master I).

Congolese '*bleu-blanc*', blue-and-white, school uniform). The depicted group of girls are divided into two groups, present in each half of the painting. On the left, one group of girls tries to convince the others not to follow the teacher's indecent advances, to which the other group replies that one time will not harm them but will only raise their marks. (The detail image shows different erotic positions visible through the windows of the classroom). On the right half of the painting, a couple of months later, two girls regret their situation, one of them has AIDS and the other is pregnant.

[162] *Ils ne supportent pas!!! On m'a trouvé nulle part et ils ne supportent pas!* Interview Bangui 21 May 2018.

[163] The assassination of Max's father is somehow ironic. He was a Gbaya, the same ethnic group as Bozizé. However, as a military, he had remained loyal to the army, refusing to defect in the last years of Patassé. He would pay for his loyalty with his life. An ethnic explanation to this passing away is thus easily dismissed.

Perhaps most illustrative of the enthusiasm and hopefulness of this 'interwar' period is Émile. As a young graduate, he rounded up his studies in geology in 2005 and ventured immediately into the working arena. By then many of his older friends, or mentors as he calls them, had left the country for the world's 'Northern hemisphere'. Émile was asked to join them; and, indeed, when I met him for the first time in 2013, he gave me the impression he had wanted to emigrate at all costs. It was only after listening 'against the grain' that I realized how wrong I was, and how embarrassingly so! With a university degree in hand, Émile started to create opportunities for himself. While his friends left, Émile remained because he believed in the potential of the country that had embraced and received him. He tried out many enterprises in different domains. The visiting card he handed me in one of our first encounters is indicative of his adaptability (see Figure 45). His domains of expertise are multiple: transport, construction, public works, renewable energy, printing services, agriculture, artisanal logging, import-export, general trade, telecommunications, and trading.

Figure 45 Émile's visiting card

At the same time as Émile was growing his '*carnet d'adresses*'—in other words, his social capital—and adding to his expertise in various domains, he also established a small family. He had fallen in love with a nurse, a former study mate, who after graduating from nursery school worked in Batalimo, a small town in the south of CAR. Batalimo housed a camp for Congolese refugees who had escaped Odjani, the third wave of conflict in north-western DR Congo. Émile would travel every so often to stay close to her and soon they decided to marry. In 2013, Émile was taking care of his elderly parents, his wife, and three daughters; they all depended on him. Émile had decided to stay in CAR not only because everyone dear to him lived in Bangui, but also because he believed in the country; he foresaw opportunities. This belief put him to the test over and over again—until psychologically cracking him three years after the Seleka crisis.

In north-west DR Congo, the transition period and the 2006 elections brought some calm. As the elections were peaceful and to a great extent the results uncontested, many Congolese refugees in CAR began to return home in 2007. After living in a refugee camp in Lanza (Republic of Congo), Dorothée and her husband were officially repatriated to Dongo (DRC). The repatriation entailed not only crossing the national border, but also had some material benefits: pots, sponge mattresses, money, and especially a small house with a corrugated-iron roof in their own compound. Refugees had also been repatriated to Gemena, among whom were Papa Madjelo and his wife. But the decade-and-a-half of conflict had left its scars. Home to both the previous power house (Mobutu) and current rebel leader turned politician (Bemba), the once bustling north-west corner of the country was left without companies, without roads. As the new government in Kinshasa did not invest in this part of the country, it sank further into oblivion. The people of the Équateur Province felt completely left aside and neglected. Their towns and villages grew more and more isolated.

What does a forgotten and neglected interior, filled with young people who feel cut off from any benefit or possibility to get by, lead to? Frustration. Frustration, combined with lack of education and opportunities, leads to a demand for one rights. Rebelling is one form of demanding. During the 2002 Congolese peace negotiations, all attention went to the national conflict and the installation of a new regime, and local conflicts were ignored or expected to end automatically in the context of the national peace process (Autesserre 2007; De Goede 2015b, 597). Local conflicts were neglected and left to fester. They did not disappear; oftentimes they escalated, and in what follows I illustrate how this has been true for both north-western DR Congo and CAR.

After Bozizé took power in 2003, elections were held in May 2005 to legitimize his rule by the ballot box. The cards were thereby shuffled as to who had access or not to power. Bozizé monopolized the power and started surrounding himself with members of his extended family and ethnic group. While Bangui was being embellished, new exclusions came into being. Especially in the north of the country, the shift in power led to grave human rights abuses, often at the hands of the government forces. Impunity remained the rule. The level of frustration among former holders of power and dissidents of the new regime, and especially among the always excluded population, exploded and created a fertile soil for rebel groups and other systematic forms of banditry, such as the *zaraguinas*, to come into existence. In CAR, in the second half of the 2000s, the risk of renewed violence had never been so great (ICG 2007; 2008).

In her PhD thesis (2012), later a book (2016), Lombard argues that rebel groups came to replace multi-party elections as avenues to power; she uses the term 'conventionalization of rebellion'. Just

after the May 2005 elections, rebel groups with patriotic names and fancy acronyms mushroomed in northern CAR. Some of the groups were Demafouth's APRD, Miskine's FDPC, Djotodia's and Sabone's UFDR, and Charles Massi's CPJP.[164] Note that most of these rebel leaders were not unknown to the CAR population; in fact, many had served in previous governments or had fought side by side with previous presidents.[165] This combination of military and political ambitions exemplifies the fluid loyalties mentioned earlier. The same people seem to rotate through the country's regimes, both formal (government) and informal (rebel groups), in an endless elite recycling that has been appropriately labelled the 'Bangui Carousel' (Day 2016).

Mounting pressure resulted in the Inclusive Political Dialogue held in Libreville (Gabon) in December 2008, which gave way to a second disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) campaign.[166] Ironically, these new rebellions leveraged the DDR and, instead of attenuating their influence, the DDR lent the rebels a voice to lay claims to power sharing, while also making them visible to the international community. Lombard claims that even if DDR did not precede the creation of rebel groups, seeing a causal logic between both—DDR and rebellion—is not completely false (Lombard 2016, 152). Describing how the DDR cyclically fails to bring peace to CAR is beyond the scope of this work; it suffices to point out, however, that these campaigns have often run out of sync with the realities on the ground and have led to an inflation, rather than a mitigation, of rebel troops. Rebels who had hoped to receive something through DDR were in the end left empty-handed, as the accords were not respected and the allocated money disappeared along the way. This led and leads to more frustration and the completion of the cycle of rebellion (ICG 2007: 22). It is often those who are in power who end up benefiting from DDR. However, while at the outset Bozizé benefited from this vicious circle—allegedly he managed to pay for his electoral campaign from it—it would finally turn against him in late 2012.

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[164] APRD: Armée Populaire pour la Restauration de la Démocratie. FDPC: Front Démocratique du Peuple Centrafricain. UFDR: Union des Forces Démocratiques pour le Rassemblement. CPJP: Convention des Patriotes pour la Justice et la Paix. For a more detailed description of the origins of these groups and their leaders, see (ICG 2007; 2008; Spittaels and Hilgert 2009; Mehler 2011; Lombard 2012; 2016)

[165] Demafouth had been Minister of Defence under Patassé, while Miskine had led a special unit for securing the north, also under Patassé. Charles Massi was even a minister of state under Bozizé, but the latter sacked him in 2008.

[166] For a current description of these practices, see (Both et al. unpublished).

d) Odjani: The third war

On the other side of the Ubangi, in DR Congo, there was an uprising that falls precisely under the category of local conflicts that, if ignored, can grow into a national threat. This conflict, colloquially known as the Odjani conflict, was the third wave of conflict in north-west Équateur, as referred to above, and was felt particularly in the surroundings of Dongo and Libenge. Aside from some news items, blog posts, and a couple of humanitarian reports, there is little written about this conflict.[167] A comprehensive description of the conflict falls beyond the scope of this work; not mentioning it, however, would lead to an incomplete history of the region.

In October 2009, a dispute about fishing rights arose between two ethnic groups living in the villages of Enyele and Monzaya in the Kungu district of the then Équateur Province (see Figure 1). The conflict soon escalated and moved from Enyele to the district capital, Dongo. The conflict was embodied by Odjani, a charismatic leader of the Lobala ethnic group who was said to possess mystical power (he was, for instance, supposedly immune to bullets). As Odjani's troops announced they were coming to Dongo, they caused an exodus. Maman Dorothée recalls:

> There is a certain man coming; he is coming with knives to fight people. But who are these people? They are coming; his name is Odjani. We waited until we witnessed. [Dorothée simulating Popol:] 'Let's go to the meeting he is organizing.' [Dorothée:] 'Popol, let's make our bags.' [Dorothée simulating Popol:] 'No, I am going to the meeting to see.' [Dorothée:] I took only my purse; I even left my [youngest] child alone on the bed.[168] (Interview Zongo, 3 August 2013)

In Dongo, Odjani's men fought and killed several police officers, ravaging the town in the aftermath. The conflict was no longer about fishing rights, but had taken an ethnic turn (Lobala versus Boba—the majority of the inhabitants of Dongo are Boba) and opened the door, as is so often the case, to vendettas and personal revenges fed by jealousy, misplaced anger, and frustration. The houses of the people who fled were left to be looted. Papa Popol and Maman Dorothée recount:

D: The third time, the one of Odjani, then …

P: Things got really lost …

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[167] See for instance Olson 2010.

[168] *Mutu moko azoya boye, azoya na mbeli kobundisa bato, bato bango ba nani? Oh azoya kaka. Kombo na ye Odjani. Tofanda ti tokamwa. Tokende koyoka meeting oyo azopesa. Popol tokanga biloko. Té, ngai nakende kuna kotala. Nakumbi kaka sacochi, natiki mwana na mbetu.*

D: A lot! They even wrote on our compound that if they had found him [Popol], they would have killed him.

CW: *Who ?*

P: Odjani's people. There was this one colleague; we taught together at school. He wrote on the door of my house with sand: 'Mr Popol, if we had found you, we would have killed you! You were wise to leave, but we will loot everything from your compound.'

D: And they took everything.[169] (Interview Dongo, 9 December 2014)

As the police forces were unable to stop this uprising, Odjani's conflict soon triggered the attention of former MLC and ex-FAZ men with fluid loyalties, who saw the potential to instrumentalize the uprising for their own political purposes. They soon joined in. The conflict grew from a local into a regional one, and from a regional into an almost national one. In Bobito, on the way from Dongo to Gemena, the conflict came to an end in December 2009. There are two explanations of this sudden halt. The first one is that, as a visionary, Odjani knew that after an elderly woman had shown him her breasts, one long and one short one, he had to withdraw his troops. The second, and perhaps more likely, explanation is that the Congolese army intervened. In any case, Odjani crossed the Ubangi and fled into neighbouring Congo-Brazzaville, where he was supposedly granted asylum by President Sassou Nguesso. In mid-2014, when I was in Kinshasa, I read about Odjani's death during the Mbata ya Bakolo operation, though there were many who doubted this news (Radio Okapi 2014).

One of the elements that most triggers my interest in this conflict is the role of rumour, its tenacity and the physical consequences rumour can have. The Equatorians refer to this conflict as the third wave of violence; and even if it was de facto confined to Dongo, the rumours of it, in terms of *'Odjani is coming'*, had tremendous repercussions for the rest of the area—for instance in Libenge, where Odjani never set foot. Papa Pascale explains:

> After he [Odjani] lost the battle, he started retreating. Once in Mawiya, he sent a message to Libenge that before going to Zongo, he would pass by Libenge. So we—he was not yet close to us, but taking into account that during Jean-Pierre Bemba's and Joseph Kabila's rebellion there had

[169] *Troisième tour, oyo ya Odjani, nde… P: biloko ebungami mwa mingi… D : makasi mingi, kutu bakomi na lopango soki bakuta ye babomi ye. CW : Ba nani ? Bato ya Odjani. Camarade moko tobandaki totangisa na ye esika moko, akomi na porte na ndako na ngai na mabele : Mr. Popol soki tozwaki yo, nde tobomaki yo ! Osali malamu ndenge okei, mais okondima té, tozopillé nyoso na kati ya lopango. D : bamemi mpe nyoso.*

> been a serious number of casualties—everyone was getting ready to cross the river in order to save the lives of their family members.[170] (Interview Libenge, 8 January 2015)

Violence had taken place in Dongo, where there were over a hundred casualties. Yet the number of displaced ran up to 200,000 people (Stearns 2010)—meaning that not only in Dongo did the population flee, but also elsewhere—as in Libenge. Whereas the conflict in Dongo was physical, in Libenge it was lived only in terms of rumours. Yet the impact was in no way smaller in Libenge, where the mere rumour seemed to bring up experiences of previous conflicts, still all too fresh in the memories of people. Rumours do not fall into an experiential void. The fleeing in large numbers as a consequence of rumours points to the internalization of violence, or duress (De Bruijn and Both 2018). Across Dongo, camps were set up in Lanza (Congo-Brazza); across Libenge, they were set up in Batalimo (CAR).

Tensions in both countries were rising high, yet the pot had not yet boiled over. The year 2011 was coincidentally marked by elections on both sides of the Ubangi River. In both cases the incumbent president was re-elected: Bozizé in CAR and Kabila in DRC. Even if both elections were contested by the opposition and said to be mired in fraud, both presidents continued doing business as usual. They did, however, strengthen their grip on dissidents, and repression was on the rise. In DRC the lawyer Floribert Chebeya was killed after he tried to investigate and uncover the atrocities of Bundu dia Kongo.[171] The fighting in the east of the country continued, and the city of Goma was taken by Nkunda's M23 rebels, despite the presence of the UN and the international community (Trefon 2012). In CAR there were rumours of torture camps (M.-L. Kassaï in preparation), the freedom of expression was in decline, and some leaders with political ambitions, such as Charles Massi, mysteriously disappeared. This would finally lead to a demand for rights, in the form of a rebellion certainly, most notably by the Seleka in CAR. But through the presence of new information communication technologies (ICTs), it also led to the rising up of a more vigilant, engaged, and outspoken civil society.

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[170] *Après son échec, il a commence à reculer, arrive à Mawiya, il a envoyé un message ici à Libenge que avant de descendre sur Zongo, il passera ici à Libenge. Alors, nous, il n'était pas encore près de nous, mais vu seulement pendant la rebellion de Jean-Pierre et Joseph Kabila il y avait eu des morts sérieux ici à Libenge, tout le monde s'apprèter à traverser pour sauver la vie de sa famille.*

[171] A religious group in Bas-Congo dissident to the Kabila regime.

5) Movement, violence and borders

a) The longue durée

How can the recurrent conflicts since independence, the cyclical coups d'état, and the decades' long dictatorships be accounted for? Why is this region of Central Africa so violent? Can its roots be found in the ethnic and religious motives that are portrayed in the media every so often as being the cause? Is it the consequence of the misgovernance of corrupt African leaders in failed states and their international allies? Is it the resources curse? And, more importantly, why is it that it does not seem to end? Because of the role attributed, until today, to the colonial and neo-colonial powers—in particular to France and Belgium but also to the international community as a whole—in order to understand violence in Central Africa, one needs to dig into the *longue durée*. The international interference in Central Africa continued to dominate in the late 1990s as Mobutu's imperium crumbled, on the one hand, but also with the repeated French interventions in Bangui, on the other hand. In his analysis of DR Congo's current political state, Papa Madjelo sees the hidden hand of the white colonizer:

> Now they have taken the strong men, you *mindele*[172] took them and locked them up! If Bemba were here, we would not be witnessing all this nonsense. But they found someone, placed him [at the head of the country], tttt ah you see, you *mindele*! … You gave us all this pain… (Interview in Gemena July 2013)[173]

Likewise, in his song '*Colonisateur*' (2018), the Central African slam poet Jeff points the finger at France:

[172] Lingala term used to designate white people.

[173] *Sikoyo bazozwa bato oyo baza ba hommes forts bino mindele bozwi bango, bokangi bango! Mpo soki Bemba azalaki awa, biso tozomona aventure wana té. Mais bazwi mutu moko mwa boye, batie ye, ttt [regrets sucks teeth] ah tala kaka, bino mindele! … Mais bino mindele nde bopesi biso pasi nyoso oyo…*

Toi le colonisateur je te haie	You the colonizer, I hate you
Parce que tu n'es pas un investisseur	Because you are not an investor
Tu n'es qu'un grand pilleur	You are a big looter
Tu as volé tout ce qu'on avait dans nos coffres	You stole everything we had in our suitcases
Et par la suite tu nous a rendu pauvres	And then you made us poor
Tu nous a enfermé dans la misère	You locked us up in misery
Et quand on a essayé de bouder, tu nous as emmené la guerre	And when we tried to sulk, you took us to war
C'est toi qui a mis le feu à mon paradis	It is you who has set my paradise on fire
Tu ne cesses de souffler sur la presse qui brûle mon pays	You continue blowing upon the media that burns my country
Tu n'es qu'un pompier-pyromane	You are not more than a pyromaniac firefighter
Devant mes yeux tu n'es qu'un bouffeur de bananes	In my eyes you are not more than a banana eater

There is no way around Jeff's lack of nuance; the message is clear and straight. The current world leaders—Jeff refers to France in this context—are unwilling to extinguish the fire. Jeff draws a parallel between today and the colonial period and underlines the failure of the media to document what is really happening, turning instead to churnalism, as discussed before. Similarly, Ann Stoler has argued that in the context of duress, one cannot talk about the prefix 'post' in post-colony (2016). She iterates the popular feeling that colonization ended only *de jure*. On a more individual level, De Bruijn and Both (2018) interpreted duress in terms of a deeper, almost subconscious, layer of experience carrying the sorrow suffered in the past. Deeply-rooted and long-lived histories of structural violence inform duress; it continues to shape the lives of the people in this region until today (Farmer 2004a).

Because of the enduring presence of these international actors (both literal presence and in the imagination) on the political scene, the colonial period with its nefarious and long-lasting consequences cannot be omitted from this historical chapter. In an ethnography about Sierra Leonean female fighters, for example, Coulter summarizes these consequences in one phrase: 'A Decade of War – Centuries of Uncertainty' (Coulter 2009). By juxtaposing a decade to centuries, the title acknowledges the role of those centuries of uncertainty in the shaping of one decade. I can write that for CAR and Congo the situation is no different.

In a history of mobility, the starting points are the paths in the rainforest trodden long before colonization (Vansina 1990; Giles-Vernick 1996; 2001)—paths that confirm that the Ubangi River was

not so much the political border it is today, paths that crisscross the Congo River basin, a region characterized by a transportation network that is constituted of mighty rivers that can be used as highways (Vansina 1990, 43) (see Figure 11). In a history of mobility, the starting points are equally the pre-colonial kingdoms, the sultanates, and the slave raids that ravaged the region and forced so many to flee, to cross rivers and become 'refugees'—if we were to use the current terminology—in foreign lands (Cordell 2012; Lombard 2012, 76). It is to this deeper history and its contemporary traces that I will now turn.

b) Pre-colonial times

Long before colonization, movement was already ingrained in what now constitutes CAR and western Congo. In fact, it has always been a central feature of the historical dynamics of the equatorial forest (Giles-Vernick 2000, 298). According to Vansina, during the western Bantu expansion in Equatorial Africa, the areas around the Congo River were slowly colonized by the Bantu as far back as 500 BC (1990, 51). This early migration was not so much motivated by overpopulation as by accident, by a type of natural drift (Vansina 1990, 55). This is not to say that the forests were empty before the arrival of the Bantu. On the contrary, different groups of hunter-gatherers and pygmies already populated them; however, they did not practise agriculture. After the Bantu followed other farmers who spoke Adamawa or Ubangian languages, these groups of farmers were composed of two main blocks: the Gbaya block and the Ngbaka-Mabo-Gbanziri block (Vansina 1990, 65). Together with the autochthonous populations, these two language-family blocks (Bantu and Ubangian) constitute a large part of CAR's and north-western Congo's population today.

Movement also came to be motivated by trade, and later by slave trade and enslavement, especially from the 16th century onwards. The Malebo Pool—what would later become Leopoldville (Kinshasa) and Brazzaville—was a commercial *plaque tournante* ('hub') (M'Bokolo in Gondola 1997, 26). Merchants coming downriver from the northern forests with fish, meat, ivory, and slaves would trade with those coming from the south with materials, weapons, and metals (Gondola 1997, 25). The areas north and south of the dense Central African rainforest served as a reservoir for slave traders, who would penetrate it from all directions. Think for instance of the influential slave trade in what constitutes the borderland between CAR and Cameroon today. In order to satisfy the Bornu, Hausaland, and Sokoto demand for slaves, the Fulani kingdom of Ngaoundere conducted slave raids deep into Gbaya territory from the mid-nineteenth century (Burnham 1980). Hence, Fulani have been present in CAR since that time not only as slave raiders, but also, together with other West Africa Muslim societies, as traders (Burnham 1980, 66). Towards the north-east, in what now constitutes the borderland between CAR and Sudan and Chad, there was intense trans-Saharan slave

trade and raiding from Dar Fur (Cordell 1985; Lombard 2012)—the result being that many fled deeper and deeper into the dense forest, seeking refuge. So also did the Ngbaka-Minagende, said to have crossed from current CAR into DR Congo (Maes 1984), for instance. South-east of the equatorial forest, renowned slave traders, such as Tippu Tipp, were active in what nowadays constitutes Maniema in DRC (Farrant 1975). Finally, south-west of the dense forests, there was the Kongo kingdom, renowned for long-standing exchanges with European powers and the slave trade—as early as the fifteenth century (Vansina 1990).

c) Intruders and explorers

In the late nineteenth century, slave traders were followed by another wave of intruders,[174] in what was referred to as Africa's '*dernier grand blanc*' (Boulvert 1985, 390). In their competition to find the source of the Nile and hence take as much land in Central Africa as possible, the vast areas of imagined empty space preoccupied the imperial powers. This period covers the last two decades of the nineteenth century and up until WWI and came to be known as the 'Scramble for Africa'. The explorations, or intrusions of missionaries and European adventurers, were followed with great interest back at home (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2003, 15). Such was the case of the Welsh-born American journalist Henry Morton Stanley who, on his search for David Livingstone and the source of the Nile, met the infamous slave trader Tippu Tip and ended up travelling together up north on the waters of the Luluaba River that supposedly turned east towards the Great Lakes. At a site that came to be known as 'the bend in the river' (Naipaul 1980), the Luluaba sharply curves to the west instead of to the east. Stanley finally managed to solve the puzzle of the Nile source (Farrant 1975), and the post on the bend in the river was later named 'Stanleyville' after him—and renamed Kisangani after independence. Stanley continued his exploration downstream, tracing the large river out to its mouth in the Atlantic Ocean.

Neglected by Great Britain, Stanley found an ally in the Belgian monarch, King Leopold II, who saw in him a potential agent in making his imperial dream come true. Two years after his return to Europe, Stanley left again for Central Africa, in 1879, on an expedition aimed at acquiring King Leopold 'a slice of the magnificent African cake' (Hochshild in Nzongola-Ntalaja 2003, 16). He then *fixated* administrative and trade stations all along the river, from Boma to Leopoldville and upriver to Stanleyville (Gondola 1990; 1997). Even if one of the most infamous, Stanley was far from being the only explorer/intruder in Central Africa. On the other shore of the river, the French explorer

[174] Note the nuance in language use: 'intruders', an important nuance threaded through the work of the Congolese historian Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja.

Sardognan de Brazza, coming from the north-west on the waters of the Ougooué River (nowadays Gabon), thus skirting the Portuguese and Leopoldian spheres of influence, fixated on the right riverbank in 1880, a year prior to Stanley, a French trading station, which was named after himself, Brazzaville (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1972, 46). Each intruder having a post named after him, the fixation of these two stations—Brazzaville and Leopoldville, which would later become the colonial capitals—intervened within the context of the competition between France and Belgium for the rule of the Congo Basin (Gondola 1990).

Scarcely noticed during Stanley's first expedition in 1877, the Ubangi River is nowadays acknowledged as the most important affluent of the Congo River. It was penetrated for the first time by the Belgian Captain Hanssens in 1884 around the time the infamous 'Conference de Berlin' took place and the Congo Free State, without having any defined borders (!), was established (Boulvert 1985, 394; Cantournet 1986, 348). Imperial powers were dividing the African continent among themselves on maps that were yet to be drawn, their arguments based on fallacies, interpretations, and imagined and 'fantasized rivers' (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1972, 19; Boulvert 1985; Kalck 1992, 131).[175] The goal was political more than geographical: winning as much land as possible. During the Berlin Conference it was agreed that the northern limit of the Congo Free State would be drawn by the (to be determined) line separating the Congo Basin from the Nile Basin (Boulvert 1985, 400).[176] It is difficult to believe that land that had not yet been mapped was conferred upon the Belgian monarch. Fantasies became realities on the ground; borders and nightmares soon followed.

In the last 'grand white', Belgians and French literally raced against the current of the Ubangi River in order to establish as advantageous a border as possible between the two colonial empires (Boulvert 1985, 394). Yet they were not alone: the Germans and the British were never too far away. And so a parade of at least seven hypotheses took place, one after the other, on the division of the river basin and the potential colonial border. While Hanssen was the first European to navigate on the Ubangi River, the English missionary Grenfell was the first to arrive at the site of Bangui in January 1885. He was followed almost two years later, in October 1886, by the Belgian Van Gele, who reached what would become Zongo, on the left riverbank (Cantournet 1986, 348–49). Neither of them created a

[175] Coquery Vidrovitch 1972: 19: '*tracés fantaisistes de rivières*'

[176] *Convention du 27 avril 1887, pourparles franco-belges: à partir du confluent avec le Congo, le thalweg de l'Oubangi formera la frontière limitrophe jusqu'au 4ème degré de latitude nord* (Boulvert 1985, 402).

post.[177] Two years later, as the Germans embarked on an expedition on the Sangha River, the Frenchman Dolisie was ordered to establish a post on the elbow of the Ubangi. Bangui, said to mean 'rapids' in the local patois, was thus fixated on 26 June 1889, and a day later Zongo (Cantournet 1986, 350–52). Pierre Kalck describes the Franco–Belgian race in the following paragraph:

> It must have been only in 1889 that a handful of poor French and Belgians, settled on the pool, came to occupy the famous elbow of the Oubangui. On June 25 and 26, the small French post of Bangui on the right bank and its Leopoldian replica on the left bank, the support point of Zongo, were founded simultaneously at the foot of the first rapids of the great river. (Kalck 1975, 33)[178]

After the fixation of Bangui and Zongo, the race upriver continued. In January 1890, Van Gele arrived at the confluence where the Ubangi splits into two rivers equal in size. According to his observations, the Mbomou slightly exceeded the Uele in size. But for the French, the opposite was true: the Ouellé was greater (Boulvert 1985, 406).[179] This geographical discussion was politicized from the outset. In the case of the former, if the Mbomou was the Ubangi River's '*cours amont*', it would mean that the border would run along the Mbomou, which would benefit the Belgians. In the case of the latter, if the Uele turned out to be the larger of the two, the border would run along its waters, which would benefit the French.[180] Finally, in August 1894, the Mbomou was established as the official frontier between the two colonies (Boulvert 1985, 409), expanding as such the Belgian monarch's territory.

Tracing this colonial border was linked not only to the imperial reveries of Leopold II, but also to those of France and Britain. At the very end of the nineteenth century, the French Major Jean-Baptiste Marchand set out from Brazzaville in a borrowed Belgian steamer with orders to secure the area around Fashoda (i.e. Kodok in present-day South Sudan) and make it a French protectorate.

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[177] A second exploration by Van Gele went beyond the rapids of Bangui but was stopped by the Yakoma, who were hostile to this intrusion. It failed to reach the Ouéllé-Mboumou confluent (Boulvert 1985, 404).

[178] Translated from: '*Ce ne devait être qu'en 1889 que la poignée de Français et de Belges démunis, installés sur le pool, vinrent occuper le fameux coude de l'Oubangui. Les 25 et 26 juin, étaient fondés, simultanément, au pied des premiers rapides de la grande rivière, le petit poste français de Bangui sur la rive droite et sa réplique léopoldienne sur la rive gauche, le point d'appui de Zongo.'* The exact date, however, seems to be an object of debate. According to Cantournet, it is a matter of interpretation whether Bangui was 'created' on 18, 20, or 26 June (Cantournet 1986, 353).

[179] Here again the spelling differs. Uélé is the Belgian spelling (also without diacritics), and Ouellé is the French spelling.

[180] In an attempt to expand the Congo Free State, Van Gele made a (forced) treaty with the Sultan at Bangassou; this treaty was revoked by the French.

Here a decisive incident took place in 1898. It would come to symbolize what was called the climax of imperial territorial disputes between the French and the British: the Battle of Fashoda.[181] Without a real fight, the French troops withdrew. In 1899 France and Britain officially agreed that the border between the French and British territories in Central Africa would run along the Congo–Nile watershed. This brought the French imperial dream of linking the colonies in West Africa to Djibouti to an end (Smith 2015).

During this colonial race, frontiers were traced with disregard of the local people (Boulvert 1985, 390), who were never consulted (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2003, 18). For the imperial intruders, rivers were transformed into frontiers, while for the local population rivers might have been zones of contact—as oftentimes the two banks of a river were inhabited by the same group. Rivers have thus played a pivotal role in bringing together but also in cutting up the continent. Also during the colonization, they were both highways of communication and knowledge (travelled by steamboats), and divisive lines (of the new colonial borders).

d) Belgian Congo and the Afrique Équatoriale Française (AEF)

Concessionary politics and its legacies

Once the borders were fixated, the newly conquered territories had to be exploited in the most profitable way possible. A couple of years after the Fashoda Incident, in 1904, the Oubangui-Chari Territory was established, which comprised the area corresponding to present-day CAR as well as the Logone and Chari-Bangoran in present-day Chad. The territory the French had once hoped would turn into the platform for French penetration became, after Fashoda, 'France's cul-de-sac', a dead-end street (S. Smith 2015).[182] Too far inland to develop durable infrastructure and of too little geopolitical interest to settle a viable administration, the French state—inspired by Leopold's example in the neighbouring Congo Free State, and following a logic that the colonies should cost the metropole as little as possible—decided to subcontract or outsource the Oubangui-Chari Territory (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1972, 26). Oubangui-Chari would later come to be dubbed the 'Cinderella of the Empire', not because of its beauty, but rather because it became the most neglected and forgotten of the French colonies (Kalck 1975, 41).

[181] For more on this topic, see among others, *Fashoda vue de Bangui* (Dias-Briand 1984) and *The Race to Fashoda* (Lewis 1987).

[182] Lombard refers to it in terms of a buffer zone (Lombard 2016). Carayannis writes about the periphery of the periphery (Carayannis 2015).

The historical period that followed came to be known as the time of the big concessionary companies (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1972) and was inspired by a philosophy of concessionary politics (Hardin 2011), characterized by brutal exploitation on both sides of the colonial border. According to Hardin, concessions refer to legal arrangements by which land is temporarily demarcated for specific uses (Hardin 2011, S115). It was a kind of leasing system developed by Leopold II in the Congo Free State whereby exclusive rights of exploitation of all natural and human resources were granted to a number of private companies (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1972, 26; Nzongola-Ntalaja 2003, 22).[183] In times of ivory, but especially during the red rubber boom, this system of exploitation grew into an extremely profitable enterprise for both the monarch and the private companies, while on the other hand it meant the total subjugation, brutal enslavement, and even 'genocide' of the local population (Gondola 2002, 64–72; Nzongola-Ntalaja 2003, 22; Van Reybroeck 2010, 101–3).

Around the turn of the century, members of civil society and missionaries in the Anglo-Saxon world began to bring to light the crimes against humanity committed by Leopold II. A special association, the Congo Reform Association, was launched for this purpose.[184] After much public criticism, international pressure, and negotiations that dragged on for two years between the king and the Belgian government (Gondola 2002, 74), the Congo Free State was annexed as a Belgian colony and renamed Belgian Congo in 1908. The French, who had hoped to acquire the Congo from Leopold, saw themselves, retrospectively, outsmarted by the monarch (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2003, 17). This change of mandate, from a personal possession to a Belgian colony, was only a 'cosmetic change' (Gondola 2002, 75) and did not deal with the root causes of the Congo problem—that is, the subjection of a people to foreign domination. Colonialism was reformed, not abolished, and thus the concessionary system under Leopold was merely replaced by a regime that was just as repressive—perhaps less brutal, but in any case one that did not bring any amelioration to the Congolese people (Gondola 2002, 75; Nzongola-Ntalaja 2003, 26).

The regime that came to rule the Congolese was, like its predecessor, first and foremost focused on profit. While the economic exploitation went on unfettered, the new regime would rely on the 'colonial trinity', as the alliance of the state, the Catholic Church, and the large corporations (the previous concession companies) came to be known. The '*mission civilisatrice*' was three-sided and

[183] The first company in the Congo Free State was established as early as 1886, and by 1900 there were 65 commercial companies (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1972, 48–49).

[184] In a way this is a precursor to NGOs and human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

far-reaching; and in addition to the economic exploitation, the new Belgian rule was also politically repressive and culturally oppressive (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2003, 27).

Meanwhile, in the 'unprofitable' Oubangui-Chari Territory, the exploitation by concessionary companies went on. By 1900, the French territory in Central Africa was dismembered among forty 'enterprises of colonization' that exploited the land (and its human resources) with enormous economic advantages; 17 were situated in present-day CAR (Kalck 1992, 168). It was agreed that the companies would not exert any sovereignty over the territory, yet they were expected to pay royalties to the French state on a yearly basis, to establish posts, and to entertain steamboats on the rivers. On the ground, little was invested, and the heavy toll of exploitation rested neither on the French state nor on the companies, but literally on the shoulders of the local populations who, next to having their land pillaged, were constrained to work for close to nothing and pay taxes, often in kind (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1972).

In 1910, the Afrique équatoriale française (AEF) was established. The AEF regrouped the Oubangui-Chari Territory, Gabon, Moyen-Congo, and the military territory of Chad and extended, as such, from the Atlantic to the Sahel. This reform had an impact on the concessionary companies, for whom unconditional support was revoked. As the news of abuses by the companies arrived in France, public opinion was stirred. In 1927, André Gide published *Voyage au Congo* (1927), denouncing the system, and the French Minister of Colonies saw himself forced to announce the liquidation of all concessionary companies. However, the abusive practices disappeared only gradually; in 1935, for instance, the lucrative Compagnie Forestière Sangha-Oubangui, in present-day south-eastern CAR, was still active (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1972).

Leopold's concessionary model had already been implemented for about ten years in the Congo Free State when it was embraced in French Congo and Oubangui-Chari by 1900. Its main purpose on both sides of the border was linked to the profitable exploitation of red rubber. The suffering of the local population and the abuses of human rights were seen as collateral damage. Yet for all the parallels, there are also striking differences between the two colonies. As the Congo Free State was annexed to Belgium, it did not became a 'forsaken' colony (*une colonie délaissée*), to quote Kalck in reference to the Oubangui-Chari (Kalck 1992, 221)—quite the contrary. While Oubangui-Chari has been described as a dead-end street, the regime in the Belgian Congo came to be characterized by overprotectionism and paternalism (neither of which excluded exploitation or repression). In comparison with AEF, the Belgian colonial state distinguished itself by its deeper penetration and greater organization of the countryside (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2003, 34).

Libenge, the pearl of the jungle, which lies less than 200 km from Bangui, is a case in point. This former colonial town cannot be viewed through the metaphor of Cinderella, unlike Bangui; on the contrary, much was constructed and invested there during colonial times. In fact, the Ubangi districts were agriculturally rich: cotton, cattle, coffee, palm oil, to name a few. Before long, Libenge was the capital of the region. In the Oubangui-Chari, an infrastructure of roads was also developed after WWI (Freed 2010). Nevertheless, Bangui remained an outpost and would never attract a strong European presence. In 1931, at the apogee of popular interest in France's overseas ambitions, Bangui counted less than 5,000 expatriates (Colombani in S. Smith 2015).

If I have taken so much time to explain the period of the concession companies, it is because the legacies of the political culture of the concessions persist until today. A lot of violence was wrought upon the people and whole groups were decimated, leaving a profound impact on the historical consciousness and identity. People grew to be deeply disconnected from their past and lost their religious and other traditions (Ceriana Mayneri 2014a; Bernault 2018). Not all Africans, however, were victims of this system; those who benefited continue to benefit among certain groups within the African elite (Hardin 2011). In her article, Hardin argues that the political culture of concessionary politics was played out through three key phase: (1) prospecting for resources; (2) mapping boundaries or the process of delimitation; (3) negotiating the circumstances of extraction, production, and redistribution of wealth therein (Hardin 2011, S115). These three phases were applied not only during the colonial period, but also in the current politics of (forest) conservation. Retrospectively, one can view the colonization project through the lens of concessionary politics. The line can been drawn up to our day, where the model of concessionary politics can also be applied to the humanitarian industry. This will be further discussed in Chapter IX.

Grassroots resistance and the road to independence

Figure 46 Detail drawing 'Congo 1960–1965'
Sapin Makengele (2017)

As a reaction to colonial rule, and also to the forced administrative porterage (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1972, 199), the local population revolted. Such was the case of the Mandja revolt between 1902 and 1905 in the Oubangui-Chari, or the revolt of Luluabourg from 1895 until 1908 in the Congo Free State. The first violent responses to the colonial state were later refined and replaced by messianic movements. The best known is perhaps the revivalist movement launched by Simon Kimbangu in the early 1920s in Belgian Congo. Even though he never opposed the colonial authorities, the popularity of this charismatic religious leader was misinterpreted by them. Kimbangu was arrested in 1921 and sentenced first to death and later to life imprisonment. Nkamba, the place of worship of the Kimbanguist movement, was destroyed, its followers deported, and the movement forced to go underground (Gondola 2002, 94–95). On the other side of the Congo River, the messianic movement of André Matswa came to embody opposition to the colonial regime in the late 1920s. Here again, Matswa was deported to Chad in 1930, where he died in prison about a decade later (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1972, 506). The Matswanist movement also went underground (Goede 2017). Also in the Haute-Sangha region of the Oubangui-Chari, in present-day north-west CAR, a resistance/messianic movement led by the charismatic Karnu came into being in the late 1920s. It entered the history records as the Kongo-Wara insurrection by the Gbaya in 1928–1931 (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1972, 201–12; Burnham and Christensen 1983; O'Toole 1984; Nzabakomada-Yakoma 1986).

All these messianic movements, however, lacked a nationalistic project. Education, both Western and religious, seems to have played a pivotal role in the political awakening of the people in Central Africa. Gradually, a social and intellectual elite was born in the colonies, who, after WWII, started to question and contest the legitimacy of the colonial project in Africa. Inspired by a culture of resistance, some of these new elite members—in Belgian Congo they were called the *évolués*—went beyond a discourse of changing the colonial regime; they sought to eradicate it. The two most noteworthy, but certainly not the only, figures in the region were Barthélémy Boganda in the Oubangui-Chari and Patrice Lumumba in the Belgian Congo. Even if they did not meet, in fact they can be considered as competitors to one another, and their speeches and thoughts carried the same message.[185] In the above drawing (see Figure 46), Sapin Makengele represents some of the symbolic figures of the Congolese independence. The *évolués*, most of whom are wearing Belgian-flagged shoes, include Kasa-Vubu, the first president, and Mobutu (who is holding a newspaper). Two of the

[185] Personal communication with Karine Ramondy on 24 December 2018. She worked on political assassinations in Central Africa, most notably Boganda's and Lumumba's, and wrote a PhD thesis entitled: '*1958–1961 : l'assassinat des leaders africains, un "moment" de construction nationale et de régulation des relations internationales (étude comparée en Afrique centrale)*' (Ramondy 2018).

dozen *évolués* are barefoot; they are Simon Kimbangu, who has a padlock on his mouth, and Lumumba. Their barefootedness stands for their free-mindedness. While all the shoed *évolués* were ideologically sold to the colonial regime, the two barefoot men really fought against it. Kabasele, the musician who wrote the famous *Independance Cha Cha,* and the photographer Jean de Para, an icon of popular photography, are also depicted.

It is interesting to note that the countries discussed in this thesis became independent in a span of a month and a half: first the Belgian Congo on 30 June 1960, followed by Chad on 11 August, the Central African Republic on 13 August, and finally, a couple of days later, on 15 August 1960, the French Congo. Boganda had led the MESAN[186] political movement in his country, of which he was voted president. The purpose of this movement was to prepare for independence. Boganda tragically died in a plane crash a year before independence; he never saw the birth of the Central African Republic. His motto, Z*o kwe Zo*,[187] is still heard on the lips of all the inhabitants of CAR, especially since the divisive 2013 conflict. Lumumba, on the other hand, did see the independence of his country. In fact, the speech he gave in front of the Belgian notables, the Belgian King included, in Leopoldville on 30 June 1960 is remembered as one of the greatest speeches in history (and is today a popular telephone ringtone in Congo). Lumumba was assassinated less than seven months after independence, a topic that is still hotly debated. The parallels between the circumstances surrounding the death of these two politically engaged individuals turned them both into heroes yet severely hampered the path to the real independence of their countries. That their words are still so present is not without reason and will continue not to be so until the people of the two countries can reverse dispossession, to use Ceriana Mayneri's wording, until they find a way to re-possess their pasts and through this to find a much-needed redemption (De Goede 2015b).

[186] The Mouvement pour l'évolution sociale de l'Afrique noire had been established in 1949.

[187] Lit. Every man is a man—meaning that all Centrafricains should be equal under the law.

Part Two

The CAR refugee-students in Kinshasa

Chapter V. On moving and being stuck

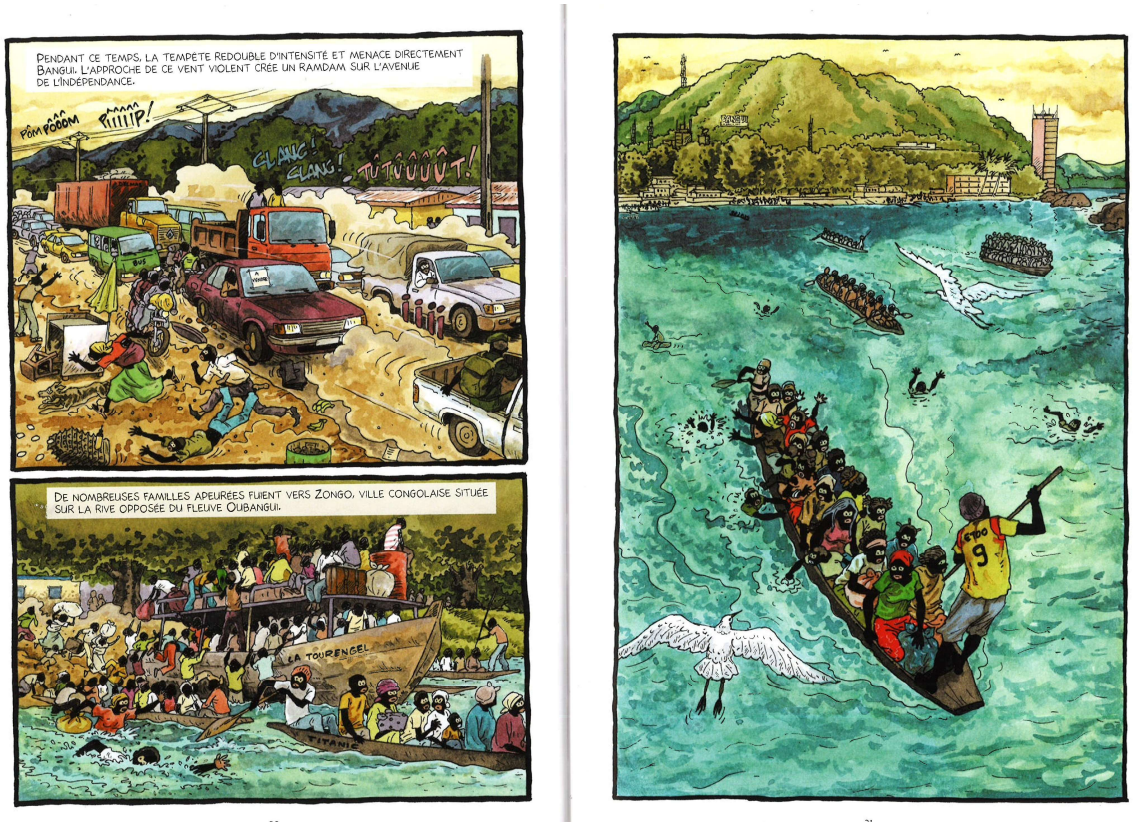

Figure 47 Excerpt 'Tempête sur Bangui'
The images illustrate how people fled Bangui on 22 March 2013, two days before the Seleka coup, by crossing the Ubangi River. Many sought refuge in DR Congo. The captions translate as follows: (Top left) 'Meanwhile, the storm intensifies and directly threatens Bangui. The approaching strong wind creates a rush on Avenue de l'Indépendance.' (Bottom left) 'Many frightened families flee to Zongo, a Congolese town on the opposite bank of the Oubangui River.' (D. Kassaï 2015, 1:30–31)

1) Introduction

This chapter is about moving and stopping, staggering at times, fleeing, going away and coming back, travelling back and forth, moving in the city and envisaging new destinations. It is a chapter about mobility and immobility, but also about stuckedness (Hage 2009) and being stuck in a social moratorium (Vigh 2006a). I describe movement and non-movement, both spatially and temporally, basing myself on the stories of five refugee-students who fled Bangui after the Seleka took power. These students desperately moved away to seek security in the first place, but they also hoped their decision to move would lead them to new horizons while in refuge.

This chapter is the first of Part Two, the empirical section of this thesis. In it, I will start by discussing some of the reasons that led the students to make the decision to flee their country. I will then describe their journey from Bangui to Kinshasa, touching where necessary upon their experiences in

refugee camps. I will then continue by illustrating their amazement as they arrived in the megapolis of Kinshasa, as well as the challenges this new environment posed to them. Even though until this point the travelling stories are not uniform, large parallels among them can be drawn. However, as the refugee-students take different decisions along their paths, their paths also diverge. While some students decided to stay in Kinshasa, others tried their luck in yet another location; and yet others decided to move back voluntarily to Bangui. The last two sections will be devoted to these divergent paths: moving on to Brazzaville and returning—albeit changed through the experiences of refuge—to Bangui.

2) The coup's aftermath

a) To flee or not to flee

In Chapter II we have seen that even though the Banguissois celebrated the arrival of the Seleka, they did so apprehensively. Whereas the violence, looting, and chaos have been presented before, in this chapter I will focus on how the decision to flee came about on a more personal level—that is, looking beyond the coup as the sole explanation. In fact, there is never one reason for fleeing. Such a vital conjuncture is informed by centrifugal and centripetal factors, by politics, personal rivalries, and jealousy, but also by adventure, the desire to grow, and even by love.

Different people reacted differently to the Seleka coup. Since it was not the first time that Bangui underwent a coup, its inhabitants had become somewhat resilient, and giving up one's life in Bangui was certainly not the most logical decision to take. Next to those who decided to flee across CAR's borders, and those who fled within its borders, others decided to hide their weapons or were mobilized and later joined the Anti-Balaka.[188] Many others just stayed put and observed the evolution of things (Both, Mouguia, and Wilson in preparation). One of the many examples of those who stayed, only leaving briefly, is Espérance (introduced previously). Being the breadwinner of her family, she seemed more worried about losing her job than about the looming crisis. This is not to say the crisis did not affect her family—on the contrary. But her response underlines the argument I wish to make: different people act differently in a situation of crisis.

[188] I remember that during my first visit in Bangui (August 2013), Boy-Rabe, the fief of Bozizé, was a no-go area because of the quantity of weapons that, as it was rumoured, circulated there. At the time, PK5 and the *troisième arrondissement* were still accessible. This would change after the attack of the Anti-Balaka later that year.

Yet others tried to turn the crisis into an opportunity (Iwilade 2013b). Such is the case of Émile (previously introduced). After venturing into several dead-end private enterprises, Émile did not lose heart. His zealousness surprised me. In fact, I first met Émile in Zongo before crossing to Bangui. At the time he had changed sides, as he explained it, by joining an NGO that set up water facilities in the refugee camps. This was the first time that Émile had set foot in his natal country (DR Congo) since he had left in 1998. He felt useful putting his double identity into practice: being a refugee himself, Émile felt empathy and was happy to help other refugees. Being Congolese helped him navigate through the administration, while at the same time he had no problem understanding the Sango spoken by those who were crossing from CAR. This was just at the beginning of the humanitarian avalanche that would flood Bangui and the north-western corner of the DRC in the months to come (and which will be dealt with in Chapter IX). For Émile, crisis turned into opportunity within the humanitarian field; it enabled him to expand his working field and experience.

Nevertheless, in an atmosphere characterized by overall impunity and social mistrust, many *did* flee. The Banguissois fled in different waves. There were two main waves: the first wave of refugees left within a couple of weeks after the Seleka coup in March 2013, and the second wave left following the entry of the Anti-Balaka in December 2013 and Djotodia's fall from grace in early January 2014. Within these two waves, there were of course 'sub-waves'. In what follows, I will describe the first wave of refugees who fled Bangui to DR Congo after Seleka took power. Among them, the first sub-wave was composed of members close to the presidential family, who were, for obvious reasons, the first ones to flee the country—not least because they had ample means to do so. They fled efficiently and fairly comfortably, oftentimes travelling by plane instead of by boat. They were the first group of refugees to reach Kinshasa. In extension, this sub-wave includes the less affluent sympathizers to the Bozizé regime—for instance, the urban youngsters mobilized in the urban COCORA militias and also the military refugees (or soldiers), the latter settled in a refugee camp of their own, distinct and distant from the civilian camp.[189]

Muslims, albeit not in large numbers at this stage, also fled. Many were those who did not agree with the Seleka's way of doing things. By crossing the border, they avoided being circumscribed by the

[189] The COCORA, or the Coalition Citoyenne d'Opposition aux Rebelles Armés (Citizen Coalition in Opposition to Rebel Armies), also known as the Jeunes patriotes (young patriots), is a group of young, often male, urbanites who received weapons from Bozizé and were motivated to defend their city from foreign invasion. They would set up barricades along the road in order to filter the flow of people by checking people's level of Sango (*kokora* means arrow in Sango).

Seleka on the basis of their common religion. Such was the case of the son of one of Bimbo's imams,[190] who had been motivated by his father to enter DR Congo by swimming across the river. In addition to this group, many of the Congolese who had settled in Bangui over the years also decided to flee, even if at the beginning it was said that their neighbourhood, Lakouanga, was fairly untouched by the conflict. The position of these Congolese was ambivalent at best. As foreigners in CAR, it made sense to leave the country; but once having crossed the border, many presented themselves as CAR citizens and thus as potential refugees entitled to security. As was the case of Émile, in this identity game their greatest advantage was language: they spoke both vernacular languages, Lingala and Sango, fluently.

Yaya Rico is an example of a Congolese living in Bangui. For the second time in his life, he was forced to leave his home despite himself (the first time had been during the civil war in Congo-Brazzaville in 1997, as described in Chapter IV). Yaya Rico enjoyed living in Bangui; he had a decent job that allowed him to take care of his children's studies. But in order to survive the war of others, to use Maindo Monga Ngonga's wording (2001)—a conflict foreign to him (in the sense that Yaya Rico is not a CAR citizen), a conflict that nevertheless shaped his life path—Yaya Rico fled. After fleeing, his family was divided: his first two children, together with the twins, became CAR urban refugees in Kinshasa (and met me with a lot of suspicion, even though I had received their contact details through their father); his wife and youngest daughter fled to their natal rural region not far from Bobito. The splitting up of his family caused Yaya Rico a great deal of distress. As for himself, he had made it only as far as Libenge, where he arrived carrying no more than a '*mo gwe na gara*' bag.[191] Fearing people in Libenge would rob him, he left his suitcase containing his school diploma in Zongo.

The following two groups of conflict mobiles will be discussed in more detail: first, the university students-turned-refugees who, hungry to study, zealously sought to arrive in Kinshasa, despite all the difficulties; the second group consists mainly of Yakoma, who live along the shores of the Ubangi (in the districts of Bimbo, Petevo, and especially Ouango) and who still carry in their memories the scars of former cycles of violence (especially that of 2001). These invisible scars inevitably colour their decisions. My description of this wave of refugees is by no means exhaustive. I do not mention, for instance, the mobile Fulani, who occupy an ambivalent position, as they are persecuted by both the

[190] District of Bangui (see Figure 244)

[191] *Mo gwe na gara* literally means 'You go to the market' in Sango. It is the name colloquially given to a strong woven plastic bag which is often used to carry the fresh groceries bought at the market. This metaphor is reminiscent of the 'Ghana must go' bag used in Nigeria.

Seleka and the Anti-Balaka. Even if they are more present in the north-western region of CAR—meaning that many escaped to Cameroon—they nevertheless trod the border with DR Congo.[192] Their escape routes and waves have been described by others (Amadou 2018a, 2018b; de Vries 2018) . Nor do I touch upon those CAR citizens who had converted to Islam in the years prior to the conflict. Nor do I touch upon the many others. More than an enumeration, the purpose of this division into waves is to underline the fact that there is a considerable variety among refugees. Therefore, they cannot be viewed or treated as a homogeneous group with homogeneous needs—which is, unfortunately, too often the case in humanitarian discourse.

b) The breakdown of the social fabric: Personal feuds

It was during Euloge's and Le Firmin's second year at university that the Seleka besieged Bangui and Michel Djotodia declared himself president of the country. Even though they did not form a direct threat to the students, the new power holders soon viewed the students with suspicion, as a potentially subversive mass.

Figure 48 'Students need electricity in order to study'
(Photograph of a panel on the boulevard along the university campus taken during the 'Grande marche pacifique' held on 2 September 2013 - Courtesy of Hyppolite Donossio)

[192] It is interesting to note, for instance, that as the conflict evolved and meat rose in price, becoming a highly coveted good, new cattle markets came to be established in the city—this time no longer at PK12, but along the shores of the Ubangi, in Petevo for instance, or in SAO (Ouango).

By March 2013, due to the political instability, students in the interior of the country had been prevented from going to class for a couple of months. Genuinely worried, the members of the students' association in Bangui held a peaceful march calling for education as a fundamental right as well as calling for a resumption of classes. Meanwhile, Bozizé and his men had distributed weapons to arm the urban militias. The students differentiated themselves from the militias, whom they claimed to be mainly constituted of youngsters who had been deprived in terms of education and parental supervision and hence easy to manipulate. The Seleka misinterpreted the students' peace marches, which they viewed as support for the Bozizé regime, going so far as to confuse the actions of the students with those of the militias. The students, and in particular their representatives, came to be considered as a potential threat to the new leaders' fragile power. They became a target group and were persecuted.

On another level, mistrust and conflicts among student groups also played a role. As the crisis seeped through the social fabric, the border between the political and the personal faded. Conflict opened up a path to settle personal grudges. Against a background of impunity and a dysfunctional judicial system, settling scores took place outside the law. This is also the case during 'peaceful' times. Lombard and Batianga-Kinzi describe this violence continuum in terms of 'popular punishment' (2015), whereby people take the law into their own hands. Punishment outside the law is not exceptional, but in times of conflict it is exacerbated.

Many were those who made use of this chaotic situation to profit or to settle personal feuds. Neighbours and acquaintances could be considered enemies overnight and were to be distrusted. Many of the CAR refugees I met outside CAR referred to this. Just prior to the conflict, for instance, elections within the student association took place, resulting in one winning coalition. Their victory was proof of the closeness of some of its leaders to the Bozizé clan, at least in the eyes of two losing coalitions. Consequently, the latter brought the Seleka to the university campus. I am not trying to argue for or against the truthfulness of this interpretation, but the fact is that disputes between different 'ideological adversaries', as Euloge calls them, brought the Seleka to the campus. In other words, fellow students were jealous of the newly acquired position of other fellow students, comrades who knew one another well. After his good friend and role model was elected to the head of the student association, Euloge witnessed a change in his friend's attitude, as if the latter had become untouchable. Euloge decided to keep his distance, and automatically he was viewed with suspicion by those who decided to stay close to the student president. Euloge started receiving threatening calls at night; he knew his time to leave had come. It is in the small details of the events

that their lethality is best expressed. People do not simply leave because crisis falls upon the country; they leave because intimate friends, close neighbours, long-time acquaintances betray them.

In addition to jealousy and (political) opportunism, the gains that are to be made from looting also play a role in the breakdown of the social fabric. If threats had chased Euloge from the country, for Le Firmin—who did not depend on his parents for survival but was self-sufficient, as we will see in the next chapter—the last straw was when he saw what happened to a fellow student:

> And the very last event that really touched me was when they visited a student who was well settled. He had computers, he did his things, he had his office—in a word, it worked well for him! He turned it into a cyber, Internet connection, access to e-mails ... Later he even bought taxis. The rebels plotted with some of his friends, who were also students, and they started looting his goods and abusing him; they even wanted to kill him. Fortunately he wasn't in the room [when they came]; he had already fled. (Interview in Kinshasa on 13 February 2015)[193]

This was Le Firmin's last day on campus, after which he took his degrees and crossed the border.

c) Memories and duress

Past experiences of violence colour the decisions individuals make in present time. In other words, duress, the internalization of violence, colours decision-making (De Bruijn and Both 2018). As a young boy, Max left his house during the mutinies; his father was a soldier in the army at that time. Max used to live close to Camp Kassaï, in Ouango, one of the more isolated districts in town.[194] There are two ways out of Ouango: the first, and most common one, is the paved road along the shores of the river—a beautiful scenic route; the other one is through Ndress, a smaller street inland connecting Ouango to Boy-Rabe north of the Gbazoubangui hill in Bangui. When Max fled Patassé's loyalist forces as a child, he walked along Ndress from the seventh to the fourth *arrondissement*. Max writes:

> What a commotion! A huge crowd of displaced people, all from our *arrondissement*, were swarming along the Ndress road that led to the 4th *arrondissement*. We therefore understood

[193] *Et le tout dernier évènement qui m'avait vraiment touché c'est lorsqu'ils sont partis [chez] un étudiant qui s'est bien installé, il a des machines, il fait ses histoire-là, il a son bureautique en un seul mot et ça marche bien ! Il fait de ça un cyber, connexion, consultes boîte ... Il a même acheter des taxis. Ils sont partis avec le complot de certains amis qui sont étudiants aussi, ils commencent à piller et maltraiter, ils voulaient le tuer, heureusement il n'était pas dans la chambre, il avait fui.*

[194] In contrast to other *arrondissements*, or districts, Ouango is the only one to lie towards the east (more precisely south-east) of Bangui's hill (see Figure 244).

> that we were not the only ones leaving to seek shelter from violence. Among us were women, children, and a few old people. Adult men could not pass that way because they would simply be arrested. Friends formed into groups along the route. In this way, we reunited with some of the families with whom our parents had been acquainted (M.-L. Kassaï in preparation).

Almost twenty years later, when Max fled the Seleka in 2013, he took exactly the same road. It doubtlessly activated his childhood memories:

> And when I grew up, the same path comes back, the same images come back. And there are people falling behind us. And how could that not scare me? And how to remove these images so quickly? When I arrived at Sica [neighbourhood in Bangui], I was given food, I couldn't eat. An object would fall behind me, I'd be startled, because things are still there, in my eyes. (Interview in Bangui on 18 May 2018)[195]

Esatis' and Oscar's decision to flee was also coloured by their memories of previous conflicts. I met Oscar in May 2013 in Kinshasa, where he resided as a refugee until February 2015. A year later, in August 2016, I met Oscar again, this time in Bangui. Fed up with Kinshasa, he had decided to return voluntarily to his home country. He showed me around his neighbourhood in the seventh *arrondissement*. We stood next to a destroyed house, and Oscar explained to me that this used to be his parental home, destroyed during the *événements* and looted by the neighbours. As I started filming, I assumed he was referring to the last events, those of 2013. To my surprise, I soon realized I had it wrong. His house had not been destroyed in 2013 but more than ten years before that, when Patassé's loyalist forces entered Ouango chasing the Yakoma in 2001. Being the son of Kolingba's personal accountant, Oscar fled and spent two years in the Mole refugee camp in DR Congo. Oscar spoke with so much emotion about these events that I mistook them for what had happened in 2013. Yet memory follows its own logic of time. In Oscar's memory the consequences of the mutinies weighed more heavily than those of the more recent Seleka crisis. The May 2001 failed coup by Kolingba and its aftermath influenced greatly the way in which the CAR students in Kinshasa—with whom I worked and who happened to be, in the majority, of Yakoma origin—experienced conflicts after 2001.

[195] *Et quand j'ai grandi, le même chemin revient, les mêmes images reviennent. Et là c'est des gens qui tombent derrière nous. Et comment ça ne me pouvait pas faire peur? Et comment enlever si vite ces images-là? Quand je suis arrivé à SICA, on m'a donné à manger, je ne pouvais pas. Un objet tombe, je sursaute, parce que les choses sont encore là, dans mes yeux.*

Figure 49 Destroyed and looted house in Ouango
during the mutinies in the late 1990s and their aftermath (Bangui 11 August 2016)

Thus, when the Seleka entered Bangui, it was not so much their direct threat but rather the memories it activated that informed Oscar's decision to leave. Just like Oscar, Esatis, who will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter VIII, was a young boy when the 2001 coup took place. He bitterly remembers:

> We had taken refuge in the DRC. I suffered under the way we were treated at the Mole refugee camp, and I even have bad memories ... We didn't study well. Even though they offered primary education, we didn't study well because diseases prevented us from doing so ... We were thwarted in our education. The refugee camp wasn't well maintained and finding good food was very hard. There were even people who would die every day. So all this has prevented us from studying. During the two years I spent at the site, I couldn't study during those two years; I lost those two years. (Interview Esatis, Kinshasa, 26 August 2014)[196]

Both Oscar and Esatis remember the lack of food, the lack of opportunities, the difficulty to study and the insalubrious environment in which they lived for two years. When asked why he preferred not to stay in a camp, this time Esatis answered:

[196] *On s'était réfugié en RDC. J'avais subi comment on était traité sur le site de Mole et j'ai même des mauvais souvenirs … Comme on n'avait pas bien étudié, malgré qu'il y avait des études primaires, mais on n'avait pas bien étudié parce qu'on était empêché par les maladies.[…] On était contrarié pour étudier, le site n'était pas bien entretenu et à manger très très difficile, il y a même des personnes qui meurent à chaque jour, donc tout ça nous a empêché d'étudier. Malgré les deux années que j'avais fait au site, je n'ai pas pu étudier ces deux années, j'ai perdu ces deux années.*

> The reason for being a Central African refugee in Kinshasa, for me, is that, in the refugee camps they say that there is care in the camps, there is medical care, all that. They tell you things, but the reality is not what they say. (Esatis, Focus group, Kinshasa, 31 January 2015)[197]

Moreover, their past experience of living in a camp not only shaped Oscar's and Esatis' decision to flee in 2013; it also shaped, in particular, the location of their refuge: neither went back to the Mole camp but both opted this time for Kinshasa instead.

3) Crossing the Ubangi

> Terror invaded the city, and many people fled the massacres and took refuge in Congo and Cameroon. (M.-L. Kassaï in preparation)

As the Seleka had come from the north-east of the country, one of the most logical paths to leave the country was across the river into the DR Congo. By July 2013, there were 75,000 registered refugees from CAR in the neighbouring countries, and of these, 48,500 were registered in DR Congo only (UNHCR 2013, 5). By May 2014, at the time I met the CAR refugees in Kinshasa, there were 360,763 CAR refugees in the neighbouring countries, of whom 57,167 were registered in DR Congo. While in July 2013, DR Congo received most of the CAR refugees, the refugee waves that left after January 2014 flooded into Cameroon and Chad. In May 2014, the former had triple the number of refugees of DR Congo, while the latter had double (UNHCR 2014).[198]

Many refugees took the pirogue to cross the Ubangi River. Others swam to the other shore. There was even a group of fishermen, among whom was a cousin of Esatis, who settled on an island in the middle of the Ubangi River for a couple of months. The conditions on the island were difficult; there was no food, no potable water, no electricity. 'It was like going back to the times of our forefathers,' the fisherman told me, 'we would drink water from the river and exchange fish for cassava meal, plantains, and palm oil with the inhabitants of the Congolese riverbank.' As the armed groups in Bangui did not know how to cross the water, the community of fishermen felt safe. Retaining bad

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[197] *La raison d'être un réfugié Centrafricain à Kinshasa, pour moi c'est que, dans les sites eux ils disent qu'il y a des prises en charge dans les sites, il y a des soins médicaux, des tout ça, ils vous racontent des choses, mais la réalité n'est pas ce qu'ils disent.*

[198] Out of the 360,763 registered CAR refugees in the Central African region, Cameroon received 185,977 refugees, Chad 100,320, and DR Congo 57,167 refugees. Just as a comparison, to show that the number of refugees keeps on changing, depending on the waves of flight, and considering no official repatriation had taken place, in December 2018 there were 171,966 CAR refugees in DR Congo only (UNHCR 2018b).

memories of the refugee camp during childhood—Esatis' cousin had also spent two years in Mole—he preferred the island to the camp.

Euloge traversed the Ubangi River on a quiet Sunday morning at dawn. He was frightened half to death. It had never crossed his mind to visit the other riverbank before, nor to embark on such a small vessel to do so. Euloge is frightened of water and very wary of sorcery. Stories abound about *talimbi*[199] drowning their victims in the river. For Euloge, the river was part of a 'complicated world, between life and death'.[200] During the conflict, bloated corpses were often seen floating downstream. As he stepped into the pirogue, Euloge played a song of Alain Moloto, a famous Congolese gospel musician,[201] on his mobile phone and closed his eyes in prayer, looking from time to time up at the sky. Oar stroke by oar stroke the piroguier brought him to the Congolese side of the river, oar stroke by oar stroke Euloge left his country behind.

a) Escaping encampment

For the international political order, ideally refugees are housed in refugee camps. This was not, however, always the case (Grayson 2017). Yet it is part of today's refugee policy of encampment (Bakewell 2014). A UNHCR senior protection officer explained:

> It is extremely expensive to support one refugee in Kinshasa, whereas, you know, a whole family can be supported and given shelter and fed in Équateur [province]. And we've tried in a number of sessions to explain to people it is like housekeeping. You know, if you have a hundred dollars and you have to support yourself for months, you know you have to count the money and you can't support a hundred people on that amount of money; you really have to see how you can get the most value for that money. So, what we're doing is everyone who can stay in Équateur or Province Orientale and get assistance, they are encouraged to stay there. (interview in Kinshasa, 9 February 2015)

Refugees in camps are easy to provide for, easy to count, and easier to deal with. Refugees outside camps form a far more complex category, and in many cases they fall outside, rather than inside, the safety net of the UNHCR (Sommers 2001a; 2001b; Dryden-Peterson 2006; Clark-Kazak 2011; S. Turner 2015). Refugees are not encouraged to leave the camps. As of 2014, there were five large refugee camps for CAR citizens in northern Congo: Boyabu, Mole, and Inke, followed later by the

[199] Water spirits and sorcerers; see the work by Cimpric 2008; 2010.

[200] Interview in Kinshasa, 16 February 2015

[201] Alain Moloto died in 2013. The country mourned him. He was said to be critical of Kabila's regime.

camps of Bili and Mboti.[202] I visited Boyabu and Mole, and thus the description hereunder is based on these two camps. Some of the camps' characteristics, however, comply with UNHCR policy and can be applied to other camps in DR Congo and Africa generally.

Mole and Boyabu are situated, more or less, at a one-day walking distance from the international border and from Zongo and Libenge. Mole is situated on a crossroads about 35 km south of Zongo. Here the road splits, running southwards towards Libenge (and Gemena) and eastwards towards Bosobolo and Gbadolite. The Libenge axis is especially coveted as it is the main route to the provincial capital Gemena. Boyabu is also situated on a crossroads, 19 km east of Libenge on the Zongo–Gemena axis.

Figure 50 Entrance to the Mole refugee camp
(4 August 2013)

[202] As the conflict moved towards the south-east, most notably to the CAR towns of Bangassou and Bakouma

Figure 51 Boyabu crossroads
(16 July 2013)

It is important to underline the proximity of the camps to these two towns in order to nuance the image of camp refugee versus urban refugee, as put forward, among others, by Malkki in her book *Purity and Exile* (1995). Within the category of refugees who live outside the camp, one can make several distinctions, informed by the refugees' nationality, location, and degree of mobility. Camp refugees, likewise, do not limit themselves to the confinements of the camp either. There are important multilateral connections between camp and town. Refugees can be, for instance, economically active in the market of the town—that is, both those refugees officially registered inside the camp and those living outside it. This is particularly obvious on the days that the cash grant[203] is paid: the motorbike circulation to and from the camp is many times busier compared with that of other days. The two towns, moreover, house most of the rotating NGO staff who work in the camp, as well as the CNR,[204] or the regional representation of the Ministry of Interior. The hospitals care for the ill refugees that need treatment beyond primary care. Regionally, Zongo and Libenge have also become magnets for unemployed individuals from the region looking for petty jobs—such as those of gardeners, security agents, cooks, and cleaners—brought along with the humanitarian caravan.

Refugees who live in Mole and Boyabu first passed through transitory camps. In contrast to the long-term camps, the former are situated along the shores of the Ubangi River. In the case of Mole, refugees were first registered in Orobé, and later also in Zongo. In the case of Boyabu, refugees had been registered in Monzombo, just south of Libenge centre town, and Batanga, previously ONATRA's port for Libenge, which lies 10 km north of town and is situated opposite Zinga (in CAR), visible across

[203] Monthly money allowance supplied to the refugees by the WFP. The cash grant was introduced in the second half of 2014 and replaced the monotonous monthly food distribution, allowing the refugees to choose and diversify their daily menu (Schmitt 2014), which had consisted mainly of peas for month after month. The cash grant was $13 per person. One-person households found it challenging to survive on this amount.

[204] Commission Nationale pour les Réfugiés

the river. Mole, moreover, is a recycled camp. In the past, it had already received thousands of refugees after the violence that followed the May 2001 coup. In contrast to Boyabu (and probably the other camps), the refugees in Mole are mainly Banguissois, meaning they are urbanites who have different needs from the mainly rural population of Boyabu's camp. It was known, among the humanitarian staff for instance, that the population of Mole was not afraid of claiming their rights. Both in August 2013 and in June 2014, they held hunger strikes as a means to protest the monotony of the food distributed by the World Food Program (WFP).

Some of the refugees whom I met in Kinshasa had lived in Mole for a couple of months in 2013/2014, while others had been there as a child. Francis (whom I will discuss in Chapter VIII) and Max and Tezman fall under the former category; they experienced the camp as young adults. After crossing the Ubangi River, Max and Tezman were first placed in the Orobé transitory camp for a couple of weeks before being moved to Mole. Despite its supposed proximity to the city, Mole differed from Bangui like night from day. Mole is disconnected from the city. Placed in a small village, the rural calm surrounding the camp stood in stark contrast to the bustling atmosphere of the capital city, with the latter's urban amenities and heterogeneous population. During the early stages of the crisis in 2013, Mole did not even have potable water, and in mid-2014 there was still no mobile phone coverage and only sporadic electricity. News would travel through battery-fuelled radios or would be carried by travellers frequenting the road.

Boredom reigned in Mole. Max summarizes the available activities in the camp as eating (badly), sleeping (badly), having banal conversations, and sexual relations. Boredom fostered promiscuity and gave birth to disputes and fights among the locals and the refugees (M.-L. Kassaï 2017). Another refugee, Guy, a man in his mid-forties and father to three children, corroborates the lack of activities. Even though he did not manage to finish secondary school, Guy sees himself as a man of the world, with a heightened passion for travelling and reading and speaking eloquent French. Comparing Bangui with Mole, he explained:

> We are city dwellers. Sometimes we go to the Alliance Française [the French cultural centre] to do our research, to study, but in Mole there is nothing, no documentation [written material].

> There's only the screen; every night we follow the information, that's all. (Interview in Zongo on 15 June 2014, carried out with Mirjam de Bruijn)[205]

However, not all Guy describes is necessarily negative. He had, for instance, welcomed the installation of the Club RFI[206] in the camp and was to be found every evening among the audience in front of the screen on which news was projected.[207] There are other accounts, published on the UNHCR website in particular, that underscore miscellaneous activities and positive developments. Some youngsters, for instance, turned themselves into social leaders (Schmitt 2015). The camp knew a successful, albeit short-lived, capoeira initiative that inspired and gave hope to youngsters who continued to dance capoeira even after their return to Bangui. As Grayson-Lune (2017) indicates, refugee camps are connected to the world. In their dreams, refugees travel to the world, but the world would also travel to the camp. Francis recounts the visit of different representatives from Geneva, the United States, even China. He insisted on showing me the photos on his phone as if to prove it. But as nothing concrete follows these worldly connections, at least in the eyes of the refugees, they end up being an even greater source of frustration. Likewise the Internet: it fails to open up the world equally to all individuals, exacerbating the refugees' feelings of missing out and pushing them further into marginalization (Grayson 2017; Ferguson 2006).

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[205] *Nous sommes des citadins, parfois nous allons dans l'alliance française pour faire nos recherches, pour faire nos études, mais à Mole là-bas, il n'y a rien, pas de documentations. Il n'y a que l'écran, chaque soir nous allons suivre les informations, c'est tout.*

[206] *Compétitions, organisations, ce sont les loisirs*

[207] During the FIFA World Cup in Brazil 2014

Figure 52 World Cup programme
Photograph taken in Mole, not far from the entrance to the refugee camp (13 June 2014, Mirjam de Bruijn)

With regard to higher education, Mole did not offer any real opportunities. In August 2014, a cybercafé opened its doors. It was a promising initiative by the local UNHCR head of office. His colleagues in the capital boasted about the project. The cybercafé was to facilitate students so that they could follow online courses. Refugees who had lived in the camp told me there were about 500 students, including senior school pupils, in Mole. A separate house with cement walls and corrugated-iron roof was built for the cybercafé. In it ten computers were installed—ten. Even if I would like to be as excited as the UNHCR staff about the possibilities of the online courses, I could not but be sceptical, considering the discrepancy in numbers, about the project initiative. Let us admit that 500 students is an exaggeration; let us say there were perhaps fewer, around 300 university students and thus potential users of the cybercafé. Would it be then possible to fairly share ten computers among 300 people? When I asked Francis this question, he replied:

> Impossible ... If you take 300 to 400 students. How are they going to plan how for all these people manage their time on the computers? The ten computers there? It is insufficient, very, very, very insufficient. Let's suppose he takes the correspondence course: is he going to take 30 minutes, 40 minutes, less than an hour? For a correspondence course? But it doesn't work, it

> doesn't even work! ... It's going to become yet another fight between the refugees on that computer. Do you see what it would look like? (Interview Francis, Kinshasa, 1 September 2014)[208]

Francis concluded that ten computers would bring more trouble than installing none. A logical analysis. In February 2015, I spoke to a friend who was working in the refugee camp, and I enquired about the cybercafé. He explained to me that five computers were destined for online courses, four others for the Internet. He mentioned thus nine and not ten computers. Then he added that the cybercafé did not run 24/7, but from Monday to Friday from 9 a.m. until 1 p.m. and from 2 p.m. until 3.30 p.m. in the afternoon, which substantially reduces the availability per person. Then again, he said that in recent days there had been fuel problems. In Mole there is no electricity, and the cybercafé was completely dependent on power generators fuelled by petrol. I must admit that I did not follow the project any further, nor in any detail. More data would be required, but I feel it was doomed to fail in its operation from the beginning. In any case, the CAR refugee-students in Kinshasa were very sceptical about it.

A much feared *année blanche* appeared on the horizon, and student urbanites sought to escape encampment at all costs. Some had hoped to reach the provincial capitals of the area, Gemena or perhaps Mbandaka, in order to continue studying. Others, such as Max and Tezman, looked further afield:

> We had nurtured plans for the future, such as following our higher education; and the Congolese city that would allow us to realize this dream was Kinshasa—concerning which Congolese friends spoke very highly. (M.-L. Kassaï in preparation)

Influenced by stories about Kinshasa, and the paternalistic treatment by the UNHCR in terms of raising false hopes, students envisaged going to Kinshasa (others even to Libreville). Yet for many the trip ahead presented a real challenge : it would be not only arduous but also expensive. Some chose to return to Bangui instead. During a visit to Mole (the town that is, not the camp), I remember a man walking in the direction of Zongo wearing a hand-made backpack of tarpaulin, on which he had

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[208] *Impossible … Tu vas prendre 300 à 400 étudiants. Ils vont planifier comment que tous ces gens-là vont gérer leur temps sur les machines? Les dix machines-là? C'est insuffisant, très très insuffisant. Parce qu'un étudiant, supposons qu'il prend le cours par correspondance, est-ce qu'il va aller prendre 30 minutes, 40 minutes, moins d'une heure? Pour un cours par correspondance? Mais ça ne colle pas, ça ne colle même pas! … ça ça va devenir encore une autre embrouille entre les réfugiés sur cette machine. Tu vois un peu ceux que ça donne?*

written '*Retour à Bangui*'. By walking away, this man was proudly making a statement: the camp was a place to leave behind.

The camp thus formed a first layer of stuckedness. Stuckedness refers not only to the lack of activities or of opportunities to study; stuckedness amounts to an existential immobility in terms of personal growth (Hage 2009). Guy's story illustrates this with painful clarity. Guy fled Bangui in April 2013 after a bomb fell on his compound, destroying his house. Prior to the 2013 coup, Guy had been working as a security guard. He did not specify where or with whom, and I sensed this was a delicate topic. On the other hand, he did speak about the many youngsters who had hoped to be recruited into the army after the coup. In CAR, the army is one of the few jobs that promises a stable income, especially for those who did not study. The recruitment never took place and led to frustration. Perhaps Guy was a victim of this non-recruitment, or of the looting that followed. In any case, he was firm in his decision about not being able to go back.

I first met Guy in August 2013 at the Zongo hospital run by an Italian congregation of Catholic sisters, where I was sojourning. Even if distant, Guy was always up for a chat. In those days he wore grey jeans, a black t-shirt, and a red Nike cap. A couple of weeks after our first meeting, Guy and his family returned to the camp, where I tried to look them[209] up and ended up seeing only his wife and a friend, whom I also knew from Zongo. The second time I met Guy, serendipitously, was in June 2014, almost a year later, again at the hospital in Zongo. Guy was wearing the same grey pants and black t-shirt, but this time inside out. I took photos of him on both occasions and placed them one next to the other.[210] It is difficult to express what I feel when I think of the fact that he was wearing the very same clothes. In 2014, Guy was definitely less cheerful, looked worried, had lost weight, and suffered from insomnia and chronic hunger. Guy compared Mole to a concentration camp. He had never chosen to stay at a refugee camp, and being a refugee constituted a choiceless decision (Coulter 2008). He felt tortured—and who could prove him wrong?

b) A tedious and never-ending journey

Once in Zongo, Euloge and his younger brother did not seek refuge in a refugee camp but planned to go to Kinshasa instead. Being from a well-to-do family, Euloge's journey started fairly comfortably; in

[209] Outside the camp, that is; someone went to call them inside and I waited in a little restaurant along the road.

[210] Due to confidentiality reasons and in order to protect the anonymity of Guy, I have chosen not to present the photographs.

Zongo and Gemena, for instance, he found comfortable accommodation. The roads in north-western Congo are in poor condition for all its travellers. During the rainy season, trucks get stuck in the mud over and over again. Gemena is only 260 km from Zongo, but many times that distance in terms of travelling hours. It took Euloge four days to travel from Zongo to Gemena. Next to the poor infrastructure, administrative encounters with the Congolese authorities posed a whole series of problems. In Gemena, rumours had preceded Euloge; the authorities knew that a *petit* with money was on his way. The ANR[211] made use of this knowledge to extort money from him. Euloge ended up paying officers for a document that would supposedly help him to arrive in Kinshasa.

From Gemena onwards, Euloge travelled on muddy and bumpy roads to Akula, a town on the shores of the Mongala river (an affluent of the Congo River), which serves as Gemena's harbour. In Akula, he had planned to take a vessel towards Kinshasa, but he fell prey to a spider web of small-scale corruption, from which—as an affluent foreigner unable to speak the local vernacular—it was difficult to escape. The ANR of Akula contested the document issued by the ANR of Gemena, and Euloge was sent back to Gemena. After spending some time in Gemena again, he tried out an alternative route. Euloge left, in his own words, 'clandestinely' to Mogalo (a locality on the shores of the Lua, an affluent of the Ubangui River); here he was stopped by the DGM[212] and sent back to Gemena.

However, Euloge managed to close a deal with the driver of the motorbike that was transporting him back, and he never made it to Gemena but managed to take a whale boat to Dongo. Dongo lies on the shores of the Ubangi River facing the Republic of Congo. Here again, Euloge was harassed, but, nevertheless, managed to cross over the Ubangi River and travel to Impfondo in the Republic of Congo. With monetary contributions from his family abroad,[213] Euloge managed to pay in Impfondo for a *laissez-passer*[214] that allowed him to travel downriver. He arrived in Maluku (one of Kinshasa's largest harbours, about 70 km upstream from the city centre) in only four days. All in all, the trip from Bangui to Kinshasa proved arduous and much longer than expected:

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[211] Agence Nationale de Renseignement, the Congolese information service.

[212] Direction Générale de Migration

[213] Being from a large family, Euloge has family members in different countries. At the time of research, they were scattered in the United States, France, Equatorial Guinea, Congo-Brazzaville, Cameroon, and Morocco. His younger brother, who accompanied him during this trip, later moved to Ghana in order to study.

[214] Being in part the CEMAC zone, there should be no need for this type of document. However, and especially in times of crisis, borders seem to change. The same applied to Gabon.

CW : *So, how many days were you on the road?*

E: If I count well, I spent at least a month and a half, a month and a half of travelling. I flew from repatriation to repatriation, from difficulty to difficulty.

CW: *Can you give me examples of the difficulties you encountered during the trip?*

E: The first difficulty was the transport. The road conditions were really bad; we moved kilometre by kilometre; we walked at times. When we arrived at the port to catch the boat, we were blocked for a week without assistance and all that. We lived by the grace of God. Some were forced to sell their clothes, their shoes in order to survive that. (Interview held on 25 May 2014 in Kinshasa) [215]

Even if Le Firmin also headed straight to Kinshasa, without passing through a refugee camp, together with a friend, his journey was slightly different from Euloge's. In contrast to the latter, Le Firmin made it to Akula, where he managed to travel on a pirogue in the direction of the Congo River. Once on the main river, the pirogue berthed with a large boat travelling from Kisangani in the direction of Kinshasa. Le Firmin had to change vessels during movement, as it is commonly done. During the ten days they travelled downriver, Le Firmin and his friend were both assisted by some and betrayed by other fellow travellers. They were fed, they were given tips, they were guided; yet they were also robbed. In both cases, people expressed curiosity towards these foreigners. Le Firmin recounts, for instance, that it was partly due to his long hair (he had not been able to have a decent haircut since leaving Bangui) that one of the ladies on the boat took pity on him and even made sure that he ate every day. Le Firmin astutely made use of her protection while politely fending off her advances. He had a goal in mind, arriving in Kinshasa, and could not afford to be distracted.

[215] CW: *Alors, tu as fait combien de jours en route?*

E: *Si je totalise bien, j'ai passé au moins un mois et demi, un mois et demi de voyage, je volais de rapatriement en rapatriement, de difficulté en difficulté.*

CW: *Tu peux me donner des exemples des difficultés que tu as trouvé pendant le voyage?*

E: *La première difficulté c'était le transport, l'état de la route était vraiment grave, on évoluait chaque kilomètre, on marchait à pied des fois. Quand nous étions arrivés au port pour attraper le bateau, on nous avait bloqués pendant une semaine sans assistance et tout ça. Et on vivait par la grâce de Dieu. Certains étaient obligés de vendre leurs habits, leurs chaussures pour pouvoir ne fusse que survivre quoi.*

During my own travelling in the north-west corner of the DRC, I encountered similar 'administrative' challenges: ad hoc roadblocks, dubious contributions to the DGM. In a fieldwork notes' entry, under a sub-heading 'The road as a means of income', I wrote:

> Along the road the police stopped us twice at Mbari […] It is known that you have to contribute for the police's beer (*masanga*) and marihuana (*likaya*). It is also known that big fish eat big money and little fish eat little money. It is a game of power and prestige maybe. Finally we paid 1,500 FC, just less than $2. At the exit of town we were stopped again, this time by the DGM. […] I was led to the office, a two-metre square room with a low roof, two chairs, a table on which the yellow flag of the PPRD (Kabila's party) served as cloth. Little fish eat little money. After the formalities, they wanted to see my passport; they wrote down all the details, checked the visa, etc. … They couldn't really find any infraction, but nevertheless they asked for 1000 FC. […] Can you really be angry knowing that their salary does not even reach $50/month? Can you judge them because they use it mainly for beer and marihuana?[216]

This excerpt points out different issues at play. Experiencing the road places me, the researcher, in a position to better grasp Euloge's and Le Firmin's journeys, its arduousness and its frustrations included (as discussed in Chapter III). In addition to this, I could relate to the Centrafricains in terms of foreignness. As foreigners we were both victims of 'official' harassment along the road. Herein, attitude and a knowledge of Lingala play an important role. On numerous occasions I was able to bargain my way through roadblocks because I spoke the local language. When the Centrafricains fled, many of them could not speak Lingala and were an easy prey, over and over, to wily Congolese officials, both on the journey to Kinshasa and later also in Kinshasa (Wilson Janssens 2018a). Consider Euloge's remarks:

> Well, when I arrived [in Kinshasa], I didn't know Lingala. The first question that I was asked, I was asked in Lingala, I was unable to give an answer. They took me. Well, I had some expenses. They let me go; I arrived. (Interview, Kinshasa, 25 May 2014)[217]

Elsewhere, I have explained how the Congolese 'Yankee' makes use of language in order to impose himself. The Yankee is a type of person, a street-smart character in the Congolese society, who relies on ingenuity and resourcefulness in order to survive and earn the respect of

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[216] Fieldwork notes: 'Little fish eat little money and big fish eat big money', 17 July 2013

[217] *Bon quand je suis arrivé [à Kinshasa], je ne connaissais pas la langue Lingala, la première question qui m'a était posée c'était en Lingala, j'étais incapable de donné ne fusse une réponse. Ils m'ont pris, bon, j'ai fait un peu de dépenses, il m'ont libéré je suis arrivé.*

others. One of the ways of imposing himself is by 'placing' as many words as possible before his opponent has the chance to do so (Wilson 2012, 176). The same logic applies here, and this not only in number of words, but also in terms of the language used. By crossing the border, the Centrafricain refugees lost their tongues. French could definitely help them in terms of communication; but it would hamper their ability to bargain, which has to take place in Lingala. And thus, on many occasions, they found themselves at a loss, with no counter arguments. Without words, they became defenceless; or, at least, they were forced to use another device in order to protect themselves: money.

By shedding light on how certain orders are maintained to benefit the lucky few, the above excerpt tells us something about politics in Africa. Little fish eat little money, and Congolese officials in the hinterland are not the ones really benefiting. They have no choice but to play along with the rules of the game. On the other hand, big fish eat big money, and they do benefit—the bountiful, happy few—to the cost of millions of others. In this sense, both the average Centrafricain refugee and the average Congolese clerk are both victims of a predatory system.

It would be naïve to think, however, that despite our shared foreignness, language is the only difference. In the excerpt above, I explained how the DGM officers were unable to come up with an infraction on my part—I had all the official papers, meaning that I could *pay* for them. Travelling the very same roads the Centrafricain refugees travelled, but in opposite directions, has also made me aware of the differences that exist between my informants and myself. These differences not only expose the different level of comfort while travelling and the choices we could make (using the motorbike, for instance, instead of the less reliant and slower trucks), but also point towards existing hierarchies and mobility regimes (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). Coming from the Netherlands, and backed up by a recognized institution such as Leiden University, I *was* able to arrange and pay for all my papers (visas and permits) in order to be able to cross borders legally. After all, it was *my choice* to go to the area. Fleeing war is an entirely different story, and I think it is important to keep these inequalities in mind to better comprehend how others view us as researchers and to better appreciate the relationships we build up with people (as discussed in Chapter III).

Finally, while borders in Central Africa are porous, they are selectively so. Rebellions are transborder engagements, whereby other, regional and global, regimes often support militias in neighbouring countries, or whereby foreign militias are often called in to do the dirty work.

Examples in Central Africa abound—Chad–Sudan/Darfur (Debos 2016)—or the case of the Banyamulenge described in Chapter IV. Likewise, natural resources from conflict areas are 'laundered' when crossing the border—for instance, clandestine CAR diamonds (Rousseau 2017, 41–43), and also illegal logging from CAR to Uganda (Cakaj 2015). People that live on both sides of the border cunningly play with borders too. The rest pay. While politicians and humanitarians (and also researchers) seem to have less trouble in paying, refugees, (illegal) migrants, and petty traders need to be good hagglers. Transnational borders are not singular and unitary but are designed to encourage some kinds of mobility (investors, businessmen, tourists, students and the like are welcome) and discourage others (illegal immigrants and refugees are not welcome) (Salazar and Smart 2011, iv).

4) Urban jungle

a) Arriving in Kinshasa

Many of the CAR refugees expressed a feeling of being overwhelmed when first arriving in Kinshasa:

> It was the time when we didn't know what to do to get by in Kinshasa. Even going out on the boulevard frightened you, considering the tension in Kinshasa. (Focus Group Le Firmin, Kinshasa, 31 January 2015)[218]

When one is used to a one-million capital city in a country with less than five million inhabitants, Kinshasa—the second-largest Sub-Saharan city, with 10–12 million inhabitants—is indeed scary. Population-wise, Kinshasa alone is more than twice the size of the whole of CAR. In terms of size, Bangui counts eight districts and spreads over an area of 67 km²; Kinshasa has 24 districts, and its urban area amounts to 583 km². Moving from one point to another in Kinshasa is not only more fatiguing and expensive than in Bangui; it is also more chaotic, as the regulations regarding public transportation in the former are less marked than in the latter.[219]

Kinshasa is a difficult city for everyone, and the 'mostly pauperised urban population lives a precarious existence characterised by daily struggle' (International Crisis Group 2016, 4). Yet, the

[218] *C'était l'époque où on ne savait pas quoi faire pour vivre à Kinshasa, même sortir sur le boulevard ça te donne déjà la peur vu la tension de Kinshasa.*

[219] In Bangui, taxis are recognizable because they are yellow, and buses are green. In Kinshasa, any car and van is transformed into a vehicle for public transportation, with all the consequences this entails. As from 2018, taxis and buses were painted yellow and thus became recognizable. This was not necessarily the case in 2013–2015 during my fieldwork.

refugees find themselves in an even more vulnerable position than the locals. The newly arrived need to learn to find their way in this urban jungle. Immigrants to the city, whether from the interior of the country or foreigners, are an easy prey to the survival logic whereby everyone is forced to take advantage of the other (Wilson 2012). Foreigners, such as Euloge and Le Firmin, are particularly susceptible, because they do not have any family ties, nor do they master the local language, Lingala. Uncountable times Euloge was stopped by the traffic police while riding his motorbike. His lack of knowledge of Lingala and lack of social capital in the local network turned out, time and again, to be disadvantageous.

> However, he let us know straightaway that Kinshasa 'is another reality and that no one here takes care of anyone else'. It is 'every man for himself, and God for all'. It was here that our hell began. (M.-L. Kassaï in preparation)

Kinshasa is not only huge in terms of size, but it works according to its own rules. It is a space where the urban and the rural, the centre and the periphery, dissolve into one another. Kinshasa is also a 'space of the forest […] potentially dangerous, frontier-like margin' and inhabited by the 'hunter' (De Boeck and Plissart 2004, 41). In the urban jungle, the Kinois is turned into a hunter that looks for opportunities (Wilson 2012).

b) Challenge of housing: Being moved around

When Euloge arrived in Kinshasa, he presented himself on the doorstep of the CNR, the organization in charge of registering refugees. He first spent a couple of nights at the Lingwala commune, an office turned into a dormitory at night,[220] after which the ERUKIN[221] relocated him to the nearby 'Maison de la Bible'. In July 2013, together with about twenty countrymen, and two countrywomen, Euloge was then relocated to Kimbanseke, a less well-to-do peripheral, and at times rural-like, district of Kinshasa (see Figure 26).

[220] When I first met Euloge in May 2014, he took me to see the Central African refugees sleeping at the Lingwala commune. The premises of the commune served for administrative purposes during the day and were transformed into a dormitory for refugees at night. The refugees (14 at the time, among whom were a couple of women) would sleep on cardboard boxes that served as improvised mattresses on a cement floor. This was known and tolerated by the CNR, which was based only a couple of blocks away.

[221] L'équipe d'encadrement des réfugiés urbains de Kinshasa. A Congolese NGO that works with urban refugees in Kinshasa and which had a partnership with the UNHCR at the time of research.

The refugees seemed to be well received by the local community. But, as had occurred during the boat trip, they were both taken care of and tricked. Little by little, they became part of their surroundings, assisted religious services at a nearby Pentecostal church and built up good relationships with their neighbours. On a Sunday in May, Euloge took me to visit this compound, even if he did not live there anymore. We had to take a bus to its terminal station, and from there on we continued on foot. Euloge was greeted all along the way, and we often stopped to shake hands. During a second visit, about a week later, Euloge's fellow refugee mates were hosting a visitor who had brought them *pondu*.[222] It was said that at the beginning, when the refugees had just moved in, the girls in the neighbourhood would parade in front of the young men's compound, on their way to fetch water, in their Sunday best to flirt with these attractive foreigners. Two of these girls later moved in and had children with two of the refugees.

Even if the house was relatively comfortable and the compound walled and secured, its location was a problem: it lay far away from the institutions (e.g. the UNHCR , CNR, CAR embassy). Students felt, in a way, 'stuck in the compound' (Hansen 2005, 13). In order to go to the centre of town, the refugees were forced to take several minibuses and spent a relatively large amount of money on transportation, or, alternatively, walked for long hours. The situation changed rapidly in October 2013, when the UNHCR/CNR posted a notification that stated, in bold letters, the decision to stop refugee assistance in Kinshasa and that

> An important consequence of this decision is that the Central African refugees in Kinshasa have to take care of their housing, which will not be provided any longer by the UNHCR/ERUKIN.[223]

The young Central African refugees were requested, in other words, to leave the house by the end of the month. The UNHCR was unable to provide for them outside of the refugee camps, it was said, and if they wanted assistance they would have to be repatriated to the Inke, Mole, or Boyabu refugee camps in the north of the country. Few accepted the offer at that time. There was an alternative, however, in the form of a contestation letter in which the refugee could explain his or her grievance in order to be considered for what was known as '*le cas particulier ou individual*'. Each

[222] Cassava leaves, a national dish in different Central African countries. *Pondu* (in Lingala) is a Congolese dish that consists of pounded cassava leaves cooked in palm oil. It is eaten on a daily basis. Even if prepared differently (often with peanut butter), the cassava leaves are also on the daily menu in CAR, where they are named *ngundja* in Sango.

[223] Information pour les réfugiés centrafricains nouvellement arrivés à Kinshasa. Kinshasa, 11 October 2013. UNHCR & CNR.

individual case would then be analysed; and if the arguments supporting it were valid, in the eyes of the UNHCR, they would give the refugee a chance to stay legally in the city as a urban refugee *without* assistance. The final addition of the accepted '*cas particulier*' would give birth to the 'list of fifty' (see Chapter VII).

The abrupt decision to oust the refugees from Kimbanseke—which in refugees' opinion was amateurish, since it lacked any official stamp and/or signature—nevertheless turned their lives upside down. While Euloge moved to another part of town, Le Firmin decided to try his luck in Brazzaville; others remained, despite harassment, for as long as possible, until they were moved to '*La maison blanche*' in Kingabwa (see Chapter VIII). When I first met Le Firmin and Euloge in early May 2014, they were renting a two-room studio in Kingabwa, an industrial area of the city. Le Firmin had just returned from Brazzaville. Heavy trucks would rumble by the house, the train grind by a couple of times a day, but these were not nearly as disturbing as the Pentecostal church next door, with which they shared a wall and which held noisy services at all hours of the day—and night.

c) Moving in the city

A couple of weeks after I met Le Firmin and Euloge, they decided to move again; the noise of the church was unbearable and the rent too high. Together with their other two roommates, Le Firmin and Euloge moved to a simpler house with no water or electricity in a more remote area of the city, Kingabwa. Kingabwa's remoteness does not necessarily relate to its physical distance from other neighbourhoods—it is fairly central—but rather to its setting. This is particularly the case during the rainy season.[224] Because there is a need for new housing and there is no urban planning, the inhabitants of Kingabwa have built houses in wetlands. During the rainy season, water floods the lower parts of Kingabwa. On bad days, people are prisoners in their own compounds, and if they go out, they need to literally take a canoe to cross some sections of the road. Stagnant pools of water create a lethal mix that combines sewage and exposed electricity cables. This part of Kingabwa illustrates the tangible manifestation of 'infrastructural violence' and lack of urbanization at its worst (Rodgers and O'Neill 2012).

When I returned to Kinshasa in July 2014, Euloge was one of the first people to drop by my house for a visit; he had come on his newly acquired motorbike. For health reasons, Euloge was among the refugees retained in Kinshasa (see Chapter VII). He was supported by the UNHCR on two fronts; he

[224] The Kinois colloquially refer to Kingabwa as 'Venice'.

received a *garantie locative,*[225] on the one hand, and later on a motorbike, as part of the UNHCR's IGA (Income-Generating Activities) programme, on the other. With his motorbike, Euloge was no longer dependent on third parties or on public transport to move around the city. He could now visit fellow refugees and attend meetings more efficiently, provided that he had enough money for petrol.

In their article 'Surviving through movement', Langevang and Gough explain how youngsters in Accra spent much of their time

> visiting friends, sexual partners, family members, (potential) patrons, or ill acquaintances; going to social events such as funerals, weddings, football matches, or drinking in bars; attending church services or prayers in the mosque; delivering goods or money, and exchanging information with a range of people both within and outside the neighbourhood' (Langevang and Gough 2009, 748).

The enumeration of these activities fits very well the daily occupations of Euloge. He was present at official meetings with the CNR or the embassy, at funerals, at the matches of the CAR team during the handball cup; he would, moreover, take money to the sick and distribute clothes among the refugees. During the rainy season, the bike even helped him, literally, to navigate through puddles, especially after moving to the swampy Kingabwa neighbourhood. I accompanied him on his motorbike on his chores as he helped me out on mine. The motorbike became a mobile yet intimate location of research, echoing the drive-along method (discussed in Chapter III), where we would have many conversations while on our way to the members of the community in the four corners of the city.

Up until the end of July 2014, the motorbike made Euloge considerably more mobile. Thereafter, due to supposed attacks on the military by men on motorbikes,[226] Euloge had to learn to be careful and picky about which routes to take and which to avoid. Circumventing traffic police officers formed another challenge. These were particularly hungry at the beginning of the school year, but also on

[225] Advance of money needed to secure a house in Kinshasa.

[226] In July 2014, during the supposed attacks on camp Tshatshi, the assailants were said to have come by motorbike, after which, due to security concerns as it were, motorbikes were forbidden to travel after dusk. This safety measure soon grew to be hated, as it deprived many people of their daily income. The measure was (temporarily) lifted in February 2015, when after a week of riots, the government sought to assuage the anger of the population.

weekends. On a Saturday morning in August 2014, I remember, Euloge had come to pick me up and together we left to visit the CAR ambassador in Kinshasa. At the busy Bongolo-Gambela crossroads, a police officer stepped out in front of us by surprise and deftly removed the keys from the motor. Euloge's inability to defend himself properly in Lingala, added to my foreign appearance, rendered us vulnerable to *tracasseries* (hassles, harassment). Nevertheless, the traffic policeman's case was solid: we were not wearing helmets. After much arguing, Euloge followed the officer to the blue-and-yellow container that housed the police office. He came out some minutes later with the keys of his motorbike: he had paid a fine. It was the beginning of the weekend, and he paid like any Kinois would have been forced to do. The difference, however, is that Euloge, not knowing how to defend himself properly in Kinois Lingala and not having mastered the appropriate attitude, did not pay in Congolese francs, but in American dollars. Despite the challenges and the expensiveness, the improvement of Euloge's physical mobility led, thanks to his motorbike, to other types of mobility. In Chapter VI, the motorbike as a means of livelihood, and thus of socio-economic mobility, will be discussed. In that chapter, I will also deal with the *esprit Kinois*—that is, the right attitude to take in order not to be tricked on every occasion. In Chapter VII, I will discuss the differences Euloge felt between riding a motorbike in Bangui and Kinshasa, which ultimately leads to our looking at Euloge's motorbike as a metaphor of symbolic mobility.

d) Food and stuckedness

Even when the refugees moved with more ease outside their neighbourhood, the peripheral location of the compounds where they lived still highlighted the distance felt between their daily hardships and their dreams and aspirations: the daily reality of idle waiting and the aspiration to study and become somebody. Because mobility was limited *to* Kinshasa, and not beyond, mobility and immobility patterns in the city indeed echoed the sentiment of being stuck (Vigh 2009a, 105). Just as in the camp, the refugees felt existentially immobile. And even if they had come far, as Le Firmin would have it, they felt they were going nowhere.

Slowly but surely, the scarcity of opportunities turned the urban jungle into a social moratorium—characterized by 'a state of massive marginalisation, abject poverty, impairment of social being' (Vigh 2006b, 45)—for the refugees, and even more so given the handicap of their foreign-ness. When, in January 2015, after almost two years of refuge, the CAR students had not received any positive answer to their grievances, their frustration only deepened. In a very emotional discussion, Le Firmin expressed himself as follows:

> Almost two years we have not had any professional training, don't even talk about university ... So we ask ourselves the question, if we have to go home today because [becomes emotional] there is no better place than home—that is, I tell you that even if we don't want to go home, one day we will go back because it's our home. Because in our country, you see, the people here ... there are some who sleep in their homes; there are some who are already responsible back in the country. But today you go out in the morning, the only problem is about eating—meaning, just find something to eat, well, you have saved your day. (Focus Group Le Firmin, Kinshasa, 31 January 2015)[227]

From not being able to study, Le Firmin moves to a comparison between how the CAR refugees saw themselves in Bangui and how they see themselves in Kinshasa, and he concludes by making reference to the lack of food. With time, the frustration seeped in deeper and deeper, touching the refugees' self-perception. Many had escaped Bangui hoping to find, after a short period of hardship, better horizons and new opportunities. But in Kinshasa, many refugees felt their situation to be more dire than the one back home, where they were at least '*responsable*'—meaning, they could take care of themselves and their families. In Kinshasa, their status declined markedly: from being responsible they had become dependent.

In a way, they had swapped one social moratorium, that of Bangui, for another, that of Kinshasa. Constraint upon constraint impacted profoundly their individual sense of dignity and self-worth. It is precisely this feeling, and all the layers that go to constitute it, that is understood under the term 'duress' (De Bruijn and Both 2018). The longer the refugees stayed in Kinshasa, the more urgent their need for food became. Food, the quality and quantity of food, eating and not eating, reminiscing about how good and cheap the food in Bangui was while complaining about the food in Kinshasa, and especially about being satiated[228]—all were topics we discussed on a daily basis. The CAR refugees would often joke about how birds leave Kinshasa in the early morning, cross the river in

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[227] *Deux ans presque on n'a aucune formation professionnelle, l'étude universitaire n'en parlons plus… Alors on se pose la question, s'il faut aujourd'hui rentrer parce que [becomes emotional] on n'est mieux que chez soi, c'est-à-dire, je vous dirais qu'on veuille ou pas un jour nous allons rentrer chez parce que c'est chez nous. Parce que chez nous tu vois, les personnes ici … il y a certains qui dorment dans leur maison, il y a certain qui sont déjà des responsables au pays. Mais aujourd'hui tu sors le matin, le seul soucis se résume sur le manger. C'est-à-dire ne fusse que tu trouves à manger, eh bein en tout cas, ta journée est sauvée.*

[228] Or in the local terminology: *être rassasié*, *manger à sa faim*, *kotonda* (Lingala: the state of being full), *li ti mbi a si awé* (Sango: my belly has arrived)

order to look for food in Brazzaville, only to come back in the evening. But they do come back. In any case, food turned out to be an important measure of duress and a metaphor for dignity.

It should be highlighted that the inability to eat one's fill was not unique to the refugees; the inhabitants of the urban jungle also struggle to make ends meet. The price of food in Kinshasa is exorbitant and the quality poor. Most of the Kinois do not eat three meals a day—but two, sometimes one, sometimes even one every other day. Kinshasa is not unique in this sense; Vigh has described a similar situation in Bissau, where it is a case of 'one shot of food a day—if lucky' (Vigh 2006b, 45). As the Central African refugees have become part of Kinois society, they too suffer from these high prices and lack of nutritious food.

However, the feeling of being reduced to something one is not was new to this group of refugees. Anecdotes about (not) eating illustrate painfully the unexpected hardships refugees in Kinshasa had to endure. Le Firmin and Euloge would repeatedly express how they had lost many kilos since they fled Bangui. Max and Tezman complained they could not even think about playing basketball or dancing hip hop, as they had done in Bangui, because that would require eating well after returning home. They could not afford to needlessly lose energy. This loss of strength is not only physical but also, and especially, metaphorical. Being reduced to looking for food for survival, Le Firmin and Euloge felt they had been deprived not only of the chance to study, but of a piece of their human dignity as well. In his book, for instance, Max compares himself to the street children in Kinshasa, who could also not fend for themselves:

> We encountered the Compassion Church of Pastor Marcelo, where there was 'Le Restaurant du Cœur' for street children and the poor. We mixed in with them and went regularly to this restaurant to eat. (M.-L. Kassaï in preparation)

Food thus becomes a painful metaphor, one that reduces an individual looking for study opportunities to a modern hunter-gatherer in the urban jungle. One that reduces an individual to her or his simplest expression: survival.

Max expresses in several passages in his book his disdain towards the inedible food available in Mole. Francis and Guy echo this sentiment. Food was insufficient, monotonous, and sometimes even either unavailable or beyond its shelf-life and rotten. They often mentioned the infamous peas. Francis, for instance, , used to go out of the camp every so often in order to get supplies in Zongo, because he

simply could not eat peas 'from the first to the thirtieth of each month'.[229] Likewise, Guy felt underfed and worried about his children, who ate peas at 'breakfast, lunch, and dinner' and did not even have sugar—meaning calories—in the mornings.[230] I met him in Zongo. He was taking care of his ill wife, who had been hospitalized, and explained:

> Catherina, it's really very, very painful. Three kilos of peas a month, to get to the hospital [his voice changes, as if he is crying]. Even the ill do not have enough to eat. I'm going to bring you what they'll give my wife, so you'll really know the conditions we're living in here in the Congo. The truth is that we are suffering. (Interview with Guy in Zongo, 15 June 2014)[231]

Just like the refugees in Kinshasa, Guy had the feeling of merely getting by. Peas were not eaten to live; they were eaten to survive. Papa Afrique, a senior refugee from Brazzaville—senior in the sense that in 2014 he had been a refugee for over 15 years—also reflected upon the situation through a discourse of eating, but takes it a step further:

> Today, even eating is a refugee's concern [with emphasis] EATING! Elsewhere eating has ceased to be a concern. They are thinking about how to transform tomorrow's society. But not what will I eat, and will it be enough? But if we are already thinking how will I eat tomorrow? Will it be enough? But it's dangerous! (Interview Papa Afrique, Kinshasa, 31 January 2015)[232]

This is, in fact, a political statement. By comparing the worries of the refugees in DR Congo with the worries of refugees elsewhere, Papa Afrique concludes that their thoughts have been reduced from changing the society, to thoughts limiting themselves to physical survival. The potential of political change remains unrealized and is even neutralized. Without being conspiracy-minded, it is difficult to believe this is mere coincidence. I will pick up this political reading in chapters VII and VIII.

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[229] Interview in Kinshasa, 1 September 2014

[230] Interview in Zongo, 15 June 2014

[231] *Catherina c'est vraiment très très douloureux. Trois kilo de petits pois par mois, pour se déplacer pour aller à l'hôpital [his voice changes, as if he is crying]. Même les malades ne mangent pas à leur faim. Je vais te présenter ce qu'on va donner à ma femme, comme ça tu sauras vraiment dans l'état dans lequel nous vivons ici au Congo. La vérité c'est que nous souffrons.*

[232] *Aujourd'hui même manger est une préoccupation du réfugié [with emphasis] MANGER! Ailleurs manger a cessé d'être une préoccupation. On réfléchit comment transformer la société demain. Mais pas qu'est-ce que je vais manger et si je vais me rassasier? Mais déjà si on va dire demain comment je vais manger? Qu'est-ce que je vais manger? Est-ce que je me rassasierai? Mais c'est dangereux!*

5) Moving on

Each CAR refugee I met during my fieldwork had taken different decisions when confronted with vital conjunctures in his or her path. The trajectory of each one of them had been unique and individual. Whereas each Banguissois had decided differently on whether to stay in Bangui or to flee the city after the coup, and whereas, once having crossed the border, each refugee had chosen within the limits of the possible the setting of their refuge, in camps, in rural areas or small towns, or in Kinshasa—so had each student within the group of refugees I met in Kinshasa acted differently upon encountering blocked opportunities and feelings of stuckedness. In this and the following section, I will deal with those refugees who no longer felt at ease in Kinshasa and therefore decided to leave the city on their own initiative (these are thus not the refugees who felt forced to return to the camps). Others decided to return to Bangui instead of awaiting fleeting horizons and official repatriations—the latter will be dealt with in the next section.

Despite its similarities, and thus the closeness to home, there were disadvantages for CAR citizens in Brazzaville. The most noteworthy was that while in Kinshasa the Banguissois could pass unnoticed and mingle among the mass of people, in Brazzaville it was more difficult to do so. Sango is often heard on street corners. CAR refugees were easily identified in Brazzaville, and thus also more easily stigmatized and even denigratingly referred to as '*kigwenabangui*' (Wilson 2014).

Many refugees crossed from Kinshasa to Brazzaville after the Mbata ya Bakolo operation (see Chapter II). Among the refugees who crossed to Brazzaville were Le Firmin and Tezman. I base my observations of the city mainly on their stories and experiences, which I subsequently complement with observations made and interviews with other refugees in Brazzaville—some of whom I knew from Kinshasa, others whom I met in Brazzaville. Let me now turn to the stories.

a) Being a refugee in Brazzaville

As we have already seen, Le Firmin, expelled from Kimbanseke, handed in a contestation letter to the UNHCR (see Appendix I), gave the proof of reception to Euloge, whom he asked to follow his file, and then decided to cross the river to Brazzaville in December 2013 in order to try out his luck there while waiting for an official reply from the UNHCR in DR Congo. By contracting possibilities on both sides of the river (and beyond), Le Firmin was expanding his chances and multiplying the possibility of a positive response. Traversing to Brazzaville was a first step in the direction of an envisaged trip to Gabon, where there was a good friend of his and, supposedly, a country where people live decent

lives. But Le Firmin needed a passport to enter Gabon, which he did not have and could not get, as it is issued only in Bangui and not in the embassies outside the country.[233]

Le Firmin ended up staying in Maman Françoise's house, an acquaintance he had met while working as a security guard in Bangui.[234] She must have been impressed by Le Firmin's diligence, since he combined working and studying, and thus decided to take him under her wing. She registered Le Firmin at the Marien Ngouabi University in order to continue his studies in law and even paid for his fees. Meanwhile, Le Firmin had found a job selling mobile phone credit, through which he was able to get by and even put money aside, considering that he was not paying rent. But in February 2014, Le Firmin's name appeared on the list for eligibility for assistance by the UNHCR and, given that he did not feel comfortable at Maman Françoise's house—he had to share a room with one of her sons and slept badly—he decided to return to Kinshasa, planning to collect the money (*garantie locative*) the UNHCR was to provide him and to return with it immediately to Brazzaville in order to go to university, which would begin by mid-February. He wanted to use this money to rent his own studio in Brazzaville, in order not to depend any longer on Maman Françoise.

But, as life often goes, things turned out differently. While Le Firmin was eligible, it took over three months to receive the money. By May 2014 the courses at university had started long before, and Le Firmin would not have been able to catch up with them. He understood that it would not make sense to go back to Brazzaville and decided to stay in Kinshasa, to wait for the other half of the promised UNHCR money—which, a year later in February 2015 he had still not received. When I told Le Firmin I would visit Brazzaville, he urged me to look for Maman Françoise (he gave me the address, as he had lost her telephone number), tell her he was doing well (he insisted I should tell her that he was studying!), and come back with his French dictionary (which I did). An intelligent and intuitive

[233] Le Firmin obtained a *laisser-passer*, which was sufficient to cross the border from DR Congo to Congo-Brazzaville but insufficient to enter Gabon. This is quite a paradox, considering that Gabon is part of the CEMAC, meaning there should be free movement of goods and people between its countries—and thus also between CAR, Congo-Brazzaville, and Gabon. Because of their more advantageous economic position, both Gabon and Equatorial Guinea opposed themselves to this principle, especially since the oil boom. Lately, however, Gabon has softened its policies and now welcomes CEMAC members to its territory. Equatorial Guinea's borders are still hermetically closed.

[234] Maman Françoise is Congolese (Brazzaville). She works as a *douanier* (customs officer) at the customs and resided in Bangui during most of 2012 in order to follow a course with other *douanier* colleagues from the different CEMAC countries. Le Firmin and Maman Françoise met because the former used to work as a security guard in the compound where she was staying (see Chapter VI).

woman, Maman Françoise understood my visit very well, and without beating around the bush, she told me that Le Firmin did not dare to confront her because he was ashamed of having lost the opportunity. He had even left his clothes in the house and was now paying the price for taking the wrong decision. During our interview much later, in February 2015, he admitted regretting leaving Brazzaville, but he underlined that he was happy not to be dependent on others; he simply could not go on putting more weight on their shoulders.

In August 2014, after travelling together and going through the refugee experience as a team, Max and Tezman separated. Max decided to go back to Bangui, while Tezman opted for Brazzaville. With a *laisser-passer* and some money in hand, we accompanied Tezman to Beach Ngobila, where he took a speedboat that would take him across the border into Brazzaville. His sister lived there and would receive him. Three months later, during my visit to Brazzaville, I looked up Tezman and, despite his busy schedule, we met up on several occasions, and it was he who showed me around town. In Brazzaville, Tezman managed that which in Kinshasa had seemed impossible: to find a job. He worked as a room boy in a hotel run by Lebanese in Ouenzé. The job gave him a sense of belonging, purpose, and especially financial independence and stability. When I met him there, Tezman looked good, in control, and felt responsible. He had left his sister and rented a well-equipped room, which he shared with a CAR friend, close to his job.

b) Freedom

It was puzzling for the refugees to assess which of the two mirror cities brought about more opportunities than the other. Brazzaville's familiarity and its more realistic job and study openings seemed to be eclipsed by the CAR refugees vulnerability, expressed not only in the form of xenophobia but also through the control the state exerted on undocumented mobile people. Le Firmin, Tezman, and others stressed the importance of being documented at all times—even if you are just going to buy bread around the corner, so to speak. For the refugees, being documented meant carrying the plasticized refugee card issued by the UNHCR. The contrast between the efforts undertaken by the refugees in Kinshasa, on the one hand, to get such a card—often to no avail, meaning they had no choice but to wander around without it—and the rigidity of having to carry one in Brazzaville, on the other, is striking.

There were too many arbitrary arrests taking place in the city, many by the military. One of Tezman's friends told me, for instance, he had been arrested together with other CAR refugees, without trial, for not carrying his ID with him, and thrown into prison for over a month. The prison conditions were deplorable, and one of the refugees became seriously ill. Paradoxically, it was the news about this

man's illness that ended up getting them out of prison. A couple of days after arrival, Tezman also had been imprisoned; he was lucky to have his sister pay the bail for him and was released after a couple of hours. This experience encouraged him to get his refugee ID as soon as possible, which, in contrast to Kinshasa, was valid for five years.

Despite the practical advantages of Brazzaville, there was something both Le Firmin and Tezman appreciated in Kinshasa : freedom. Freedom was also expressed in terms of hospitality, which then again contrasted with the xenophobia experienced in Brazzaville. Because movement in Kinshasa was not (as) controlled as in Brazzaville, Le Firmin compared the former with the United States, and this more than once :

> They say that when you are in the United States, you feel a little free; certainly there are police and other controls, but there is still freedom. It's like living in Kinshasa: since I've been in Kinshasa, never has a policeman come to ask me randomly for the papers. But that's what's different in Brazza, what's contrary to Brazza. (Interview, Kinshasa, 13 February 2015)[235]

As we have discussed, familiarity and visibility, while advantageous in the city, had a price too. But besides the intervention of Brazzavillois soldiers, there is another level in which the CAR refugees felt their freedom limited in Brazzaville. As the CAR community in Brazzaville was more important, many refugees had family members and acquaintances who lived in the city and thus who could keep a controlling eye (as Maman Françoise for Le Firmin). In Kinshasa, Le Firmin, and especially Euloge, did not have a controlling parent, and thus they could break loose from family ties in their search for personal freedom. This type of freedom will be discussed further in Chapter VIII.

In other words, it seems that Brazzaville's clarity and familiar order hampered, in a certain way, certain refugees from becoming who they wanted to become. Kinshasa, on the other hand, as big, overwhelming, and chaotic as it is, offered the refugees another type of opportunity. It is a city where the stakes are high, where the extremes (in terms of, for instance, extreme wealth and extreme poverty) are very pronounced; a city where big dreams can be realized, but where big failures seem to be more commonplace—reminiscent of Steinberg's man of good hope, where the chances taken are risky and he sets out for all or nothing. Curiously, however, it is also in Kinshasa that the hope for resettlement, to a third country, often in the global North, is more easily shattered.

[235] *On dit que quand tu es aux Etats-Unis tu te sens un peu libre, certes il y a des contrôles policières et autres, mais il y a quand même une liberté. C'est comme on est en train de vivre à Kinshasa, depuis que je suis à Kinshasa, jamais un jour comme ça un policier se présente devant moi pour demander les papiers. Hors c'est ce qui est différent à Brazza, ce qui est contraire à Brazza.*

For a couple of individuals, moving to Brazzaville was not a bad start at all, as they were resettled in Canada. It is difficult to know in advance where luck will first strike. Luck feeds hope, and hope is mobile. It moved from Bangui to Kinshasa, from Kinshasa to Brazzaville and, as we will see hereunder, it moved back to Bangui. Hope can move elsewhere too. It never dies out 'but migrates—ahead of migrants that follow it' (Vigh 2009a, 105).

6) Moving back and the fear of losing face

a) Enduring

In migration literature, there seems to be a tension between stories of hope, on the one hand, and shame on the other. Those who have left the country constitute a diaspora, which is admired (and consulted for important decisions), but which equally carries a heavy weight on its shoulders. Many studies underline the importance of the remittances migrant communities send back home and the economic dependence on these by the communities that stay behind (Lindley 2009; S. Turner and Kleist 2013). Despite its hardships, in many case migration is equated with hope and abundance. The anthropologist Michael Jackson has labelled this the 'logic of sacrifice', for which 'by giving up the life to which one was born, one stood to gain, through a kind of rebirth, a greater or more abundant life elsewhere and at some future time' (M. Jackson 2008, 60). Bredeloup, also, writes of the adventurer as a recurrent symbol in migratory politics, whereby the migratory adventure is a path of self-fulfilment, of emancipation through movement, turning the adventurer into a person to be respected (2008) and the allure of a journey far away from home into a coveted asset that should not be given up that easily.

The logic of the migrant and the adventurer also applies to the CAR refugees in Kinshasa. In the sense that if the urban refugee is not able to realize an 'abundant life', or at least a self-fulfilling quest during his or her experience of refuge, the reverse is true: the experience turns into a failure. Not thriving abroad is worse than being immobile at home (Bredeloup 2008, 301–2). Returning home empty-handed is shameful and is to 'be avoided at all costs' (Kleist 2017). The fear of failure (Sommers 2012) is a subtle form of socially informed violence that is intimately linked to the socio-cultural environment in which the CAR refugees grew up. This fear of losing face is thus violence carried within, moulded by upbringing, and linked to personal ambitions and socially informed expectations.

This tension, between success and failure, extends into a tension between returning home empty-handed, on the one hand, or continuing to endure hardship in exile, on the other. As we will see,

different refugees have dealt differently with this tension. When asked if he was ready to return to Bangui, Euloge, for instance, replied:

> I plan to go home if there is peace. I arrived as a refugee, I fled the war. I enter like this [opens his hands]—there is nothing, not even a diploma, not even some money—how will I go back? (Interview, Kinshasa, 16 February 2015)[236]

When the students fled CAR, they had hoped to find greener pastures across the border, especially in terms of study opportunities (this will be discussed in more detail in Chapter VI). The first prerequisite for a return to Bangui is peace. As long as the situation is not considered stable—by the international community, for instance—the official repatriation of the CAR refuges cannot take place. This is still true at the time of writing in 2019. If one is to look more closely, for Euloge peace is not the only criterion: as long as Euloge feels he has nothing to go back with—in terms of a degree, knowledge, and life experience, or, more concretely, some capital or a running business—it is difficult for him to step out of refuge.

Euloge does not refuse to return to his country; on the contrary, he is very much aware that the future of his country is in the hands of young Centrafricains like himself, and that he needs and wants to 'contribute to the development of his country'. But in order to do so he needs to study; and while in Kinshasa, he has no access to education:

> It has been a year-and-a-half since I last studied, and little by little I lose the [chemistry] formulas; I lose and lose everything! I don't reject the idea of going back to my country ... but I cannot go back like this! I lost everything; how can I go back without having learned something? And if I went back [like this], I would be zero [nothing]. (Interview with Euloge and Le Firmin, Kinshasa, 30 January 2015)[237]

While in the first quotation above, Euloge touches upon a tangible form of empty-handedness, the potential sense of failure in the second quotation runs deeper and touches him in his personhood. It is no more about going back without something in his hands; it is about going back in a certain state.

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[236] *Je compte rentrer s'il y a la paix. Je suis arrivé en tant que réfugié, j'ai fuis la guerre, je rentre dans cet état [ouvre les mains] il n'y a rien, même pas un diplôme, même pas un moyen, comment je vais rentrer?*

[237] *Ça fait aujourd'hui pratiquement un an et demi que je n'ai pas étudié et au fur à mesure je perds les formules [chimiques], je perds et je perds tout! … je ne refuse pas le retour dans mon pays, … mais je ne peux pas rentrer dans cet état! J'ai tout perdu et je suis arrivé sans apprendre, comment je vais rentrer? Et si je rentre ça sera encore eh, je serai encore eh … Le contraire, sera zéro.*

Reminiscent of the above-discussed reduction to hunting for food, Euloge speaks of the risk of being nullified: migration without fruit can turn a person to zero.

b) Going back to Bangui

In contrast to Euloge, Max does take the decision to go back to Bangui; Tezman, too, will eventually follow him. Staying in Kinshasa amounted, for Max, to an 'imminent death'—not so much a 'physical' but certainly a 'social death' (Vigh 2006b, 45). Rather than leading to new opportunities, escaping Bangui had led to an 'existential impasse' (Vigh 2009a, 104); and even if he 'moved spatially' within the city, he found himself to be 'stuck socially' (Vigh 2009a, 105).

In August 2014, both Max and Tezman left Kinshasa. Tezman, as we saw above, crossed over to Brazzaville, while Max registered for the formal procedure of voluntary repatriation to the refugee camps. As such, Max could make use of the infrastructure set up by the UNHCR: flying to Libenge, taking the transportation provided for refugees up to Mole, and from there on travelling by his own means to Bangui, first by motorbike to Zongo and then crossing the river by pirogue. Upon his return, and coming back empty-handed, Max confronted the enquiring eyes of family and friends. It has been argued that it is those who lack courage who go back (Bredeloup 2008, 297); however, dealing with shame equally constitutes an act of courage. He did not waste any time, looked for a job, and ended up working at different places: as a journalist for the journal for which he used to work before fleeing, in the NGO sector installing latrines in the numerous IDP camps around the city, and as a high school teacher. But the general low salary, nepotism, and unfavourable conditions soon wore him down, so he turned to blogging and farming his grandmother's land (see Chapter VIII).

After working for almost two years in Brazzaville, Tezman grew tired of the city. When the Lebanese management team at the hotel were replaced by a local Congolese team, the atmosphere at work changed. There was an incident where the CAR workers took some beer to celebrate the New Year, an action which was, perhaps not unjustly so, viewed as theft. Tezman and his friends were imprisoned for about a week and were able to get out only after paying bail. Another incident took place a couple of months later with a petrol boat travelling upriver from Brazzaville to Bangui. The passengers on the boat—who are not permitted to travel on a potentially inflammable vessel, but whose presence on boats travelling on this river is generally tolerated despite the risks—were stopped in DR Congo and sent back to Brazzaville. Sassou, it was said, agreed to arrange a plane to help these stranded travellers. As there was spare room on the plane, some of the urban refugees decided to occupy the empty seats and to return to their country. The flight took place mid-2016, and at that time an official repatriation from Brazzaville (and elsewhere in Republic of Congo) had

not yet taken place.[238] So when I visited Tezman in August that year, he had freshly arrived from three years of exile and still carried the above-mentioned allure of someone just returned from a successful journey of migration. Because their sentiments towards the journey differed—but probably also due to the fact that Tezman was still fresh in Bangui—the 'auras' of both young men stood in stark contrast, even if they had started the journey together. The lessons learned, as well as Tezman's aura of success, will be further discussed in the next chapter.

As we had been in contact through social media, I knew Max, Tezman, and Oscar travelled back to their home city. Yet, they were not the only voluntarily repatriated returnee-refugees I met back in Bangui during my short fieldwork trip in 2016. I actually stumbled upon at least three other people whom I knew from Kinshasa (two young men and one young lady) and who, for different reasons, had decided to return. On the other hand, I was informed, albeit not in detail, of Euloge's, Le Firmin's, and Esatis' (among others) continuing battle in Kinshasa.

The numerous and varied paths the CAR refugees have taken are perplexing. They are stories that cannot lead to one-size-fits-all solutions. Trying to understand how, confronted by a similar situation, different individuals make different decisions is puzzling. I often wondered, for instance, why, if it was so difficult to live in Kinshasa, some stayed against all odds, while others succumbed. Even stuckedness is not uniformly experienced and felt. The above-mentioned girl, whom I met coincidentally in Bangui, had even travelled twice back and forth between Bangui and Kinshasa. The security situation in CAR certainly influenced decision-making; but it needs to be underlined, first, that security is not read equally by everyone; and secondly, that it is not the only element to take into account at a moment of decision-making. Just as taking the decision to flee Bangui does, taking the decision to go back also forms a vital conjuncture. Perhaps we should not see these two critical moments as two separate vital conjunctures, but rather as constitutive moments of an extended period of vital conjuncture (Langevang 2008, 2046) and thus also a continuous process of personal becoming. It is along these lines that the discussion will be continued in chapters VI and VII.

[238] In the last year, there have been a couple of voluntarily repatriations from Republic of Congo to CAR. In April 2018, for instance, hundreds of refugees were voluntarily repatriated from the camp near Betou to the Lobaye region (Moungoumba) (Jeune Afrique and AFP 2018). Likewise, in September 2018, hundreds of CAR refugees were preparing to leave Betou and to return to Lobaye. There were also over a hundred urban refugees repatriated by air from Brazzaville to Bangui (UNHCR 2018a).

Chapter VI. Quest of becoming: The refugee-student and the school of life

1) Introduction

In previous chapters, education has been an important thread. In Chapter IV, for instance, the quest for education and becoming motivated Yaya Rico, Espérance, and Émile to cross borders. Education seems to be intrinsically linked to mobility. In the new wave of mobility unleashed by the Seleka coup in 2013, students escaping open violence also left Bangui to look for study opportunities. I have discussed this in Chapter V; many were forced to leave their academic year unfinished. Education, or rather the hunger for education, turned into another main instigator in their decision-making, particularly in choosing the location of refuge—that is, a city which offers study opportunities, in this case Kinshasa, instead of an isolated (Mole) refugee camp.

This chapter deals with the education of the conflict mobiles we follow, in its literal sense—that is, in terms of schooling and studying. However, the main purpose is to adopt a focus on education in a broader sense. First, this chapter deals with education in terms of upbringing and coming of age in Bangui, as well as with schooling: primary, secondary, and tertiary education. Second, it deals with the promises and aspirations of education, which include getting a job, becoming someone, emancipation, 'having a life', and turning into a responsible and independent individual—promises which, in the current context of Central Africa, seem more and more difficult to be realized and which end up leading to frustration. Notwithstanding, Euloge and Le Firmin continue asserting themselves as intellectuals, on the one hand, but also as refugee-students in the hope of making a claim on the 'right to have rights' (Isin in Innes 2016, 266) at the doorstep of an international organization, the UNCHR.

By the time I rounded up my fieldwork in Kinshasa in February 2015, none of the students had managed to enrol at any institution or university in Kinshasa,[239] and their frustration weighed heavily on their shoulders. The envisaged access to university did not materialize and Kinshasa became a city of closed doors. But, as the saying goes, when a door closes, a window always opens. Frustration was only one side of the coin, dreaming the other. Because hope is never lost, education, or rather becoming, did present itself in at least two ways. The first one is very practical: learning to get by and

[239] Nowadays (2109), Esatis is enrolled at university, mainly because of his own efforts and personal contacts. Le Firmin followed a '*formation informatique*' in 2017–2018, a mere shadow of what he had envisaged for himself, but nevertheless a first step.

survive in a hostile city, colloquially known as *la débrouille*. The second path propels the refugees to dream of and aspire to better futures, and this runs parallel with Oldenburg's approach to education, which

> embraces a multitude of perspectives and mirrors the regional conflict dynamics, offers knowledge and networks, is a space of freedom, articulation and experimentation, a platform of pleasure with peers, of solidarity and love and it contains the potential for political activism. (Oldenburg 2016, 2)

The creativity and concrete aspirations that follow this logic of thought will be discussed in chapters VII and VIII.

Last but not least, there is the hunger for becoming that motivates the refugee-students to undertake a life journey. Beyond finding work and stability, the quest for becoming here described is linked to a universal and existential hunger for personal growth, which is expressed in terms of adulthood. During refuge, the students entered a liminal zone, reminiscent of Van Gennep's *Les Rites de passage* (1909) and Turner's 'liminal periods' (1967), which transformed them. The question remains whether after this 'ritual' they are able to return to their societies as adult men.

2) Coming of age in CAR

a) Euloge

Euloge is the eleventh of 15 children and the eldest of his father's third wife. Euloge's father was a civil servant who worked as a director in the national communication office under president Kolingba.[240] He was often posted in different localities throughout the country and thus travelled a great deal. Euloge's mother was also well educated and used to provide religious workshops in different parts of the country. Sometimes, when his parents were outside the capital, he stayed behind with his siblings in Bangui to attend school. Yet at other times, especially on weekends and holidays, Euloge would travel along with his father or mother. That is how he saw much of the country: Kembe, Bangassou, Mbaiki, Mongoumba, Bozoum, Bouar, and other places. As an adolescent, moreover, Euloge studied for a year in the respected Cécile Digo's Lycée, a school set up by the former president Kolingba in Kembe, a town that lies 600 km to the east of Bangui. All these elements—his father's position, his mother's religiousness, and the travelling of both his parents—formed Euloge to be the man he has become today, as he often expressed it himself.

[240] And partly also under President Patassé

The year he was to graduate from high school, Euloge's father passed away after an inexplicable one-week coma. He was said to have been poisoned. Euloge was preparing for his final exams, and his father's death left a deep void in his life. Despite the emotional difficulties, however, Euloge passed his baccalaureate exams in Mbaiki; he graduated in 2008 but fell ill soon afterwards. It was only after a year-and-a-half after receiving his diploma that Euloge started studying at university. Having such a long time lapse between one's graduation and university is not uncommon in Bangui. At university Euloge enrolled in chemistry, which he complemented with a course at a private institute on banking, micro-financing, and insurance. Next to his studies, as we have seen before and as we will see later, Euloge was very much active in one of the university's student associations. It is here where he became friends with Le Firmin.

b) Le Firmin

Le Firmin grew to become one of Euloge's closest friends in Kinshasa. I often met them together. Even though they are both from the same ethnic group, they were not as close in Bangui, and their lives had followed, up until 2013, different trajectories. Whereas Euloge was the son of a respected civil servant, Le Firmin came from a more humble background. His father was a schoolteacher and his mother a tradeswoman. It is from his father that Le Firmin says he inherited his love and discipline for study, and from his mother her courage. Both Euloge's and Le Firmin's fathers passed away; however, when the latter's father died, Le Firmin was only a child. In the context of a less wealthy family than Euloge's, the death of Le Firmin's father was even more deeply felt. The family, headed by a single mother from then on, lost their house, which was inherited by Le Firmin's family members (i.e. his uncles and cousins) on his father's side. Nevertheless, his mother managed to provide for her children through efforts in petty trade. The children also learned to contribute to the household, and Le Firmin used to sell petrol after school. Unfortunately, a couple of years after his father's death, Le Firmin's mother also passed away, and Le Firmin became an orphan at the age of only 13 years. As his siblings could not take care of him, Le Firmin soon learned to fend for himself. Taking into account that he was a studious young boy, a maternal aunt had sent notice to town that she would take care of her nephew. This was frowned upon by Le Firmin's father's side of the family, but the young boy managed to leave Bangui stealthily and joined his aunt in Kembe, where he enrolled at the Cécile Digo Lycée, the same school as Euloge. Le Firmin was very impressed by the atmosphere at the Lycée, where discipline was omnipresent and the pupils did not idle away their time chatting as they did in Bangui:

> So you see the little moments, the school breaks, the landscape is beautiful; you see every pupil is under the mango tree reading his notebook. (Interview with Le Firmin, Kinshasa, 13 February 2015)[241]

Misfortune struck again and Le Firmin's aunt passed away. Her house and land were sold and Le Firmin saw himself homeless for a second time. He met a hunter who taught him and his two friends how to bake bricks out of red mud. The boys built a one-room shack with their own hands. During the day, the boys would study; during the evenings, they would sell petrol in order to get by, as Le Firmin had done in the past. After nightfall, they cooked and studied by candlelight. Aside from meat, food in Kembe was cheap; with 300 FCFA[242] Le Firmin would have enough to fill his stomach for a day. He recalls this period of his life as one of extreme hardship, yet he reminisces about living on large juicy mangoes during the mango season and about his palm-oil-stained notebooks.

As time passed, the neighbours took pity on the three boys. When they heard that Le Firmin was among the best students in his year, they decided to take the boys in; and thus the three of them lived with this family until they graduated from school. Le Firmin managed to pass his baccalaureate at the first attempt,[243] and this was a due recognition for all his efforts. With a diploma under his arm, Le Firmin travelled back to Bangui. His siblings had wanted him to become a schoolteacher, like his father worked as a civil servant clerk, with a more or less stable income for the rest of his life. But Le Firmin's horizons had expanded and his ambitions grown, so he enrolled in the Faculty of Law at the University of Bangui.

Le Firmin had come a long way; he had made it to university, while none of his siblings finished secondary school. He was the pride of his family. When I visited his older brother on the outskirts of Bangui in 2016, I was surprised by their rudimentary house and lifestyle. I then understood that Le Firmin is a prodigal son, the one on whom the family had placed their hopes and savings, but who ended up leaving them behind (at least for the time being).

Like Euloge, Le Firmin was also admitted to rent a room on campus. Having both studied in Kembe, they came to frequent the same circles. Like Euloge, Le Firmin became involved in the student's association. Sweeping and cleaning made him visible. Having to provide for himself, Le Firmin divided

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[241] *Donc tu vois les petits moments de recréation de pause-là, le paysage est bon, tu vois chaque élève est sous le manguier en train de lire son cours.*

[242] About $0.50

[243] A rare occurrence. Le Firmin explains that only two other pupils out of 78 passed.

time between work and study. At night, he worked as a security guard for a private security firm. Through this job he met Maman Françoise, who would later host him in her house in Brazzaville. In addition to this job, and considering that the campus had a fairly stable electricity supply, Le Firmin owned a freezer, which he 'rented' out to keep water cool, which would then be sold by a Congolese petty trader during the day. But then, lightning struck …

3) Promises of education

> We had intellectual work to do, but when we don't have light, we don't have the Internet, we don't have means to communicate, well, we had to leave from there (Max, interview, Kinshasa, 3 May 2014)[244]

> We said to ourselves that our objective was to get to Kinshasa in the hope that in Kinshasa we can study. (Le Firmin, interview, Kinshasa, 13 February 2015)[245]

> And here we wish to have access to studies; that's our only concern: just access to education (Euloge, interview, Kinshasa 3 February 2015)[246]

The quotations above point to education as one of the main (yet not the only) motivations for the CAR students to move to Kinshasa. Fleeing came to be attached to a purpose, that of growing personally (Bredeloup 2008); and in Bangui in 2013 a logical way to realize this growth was by combining higher education with refuge. Therefore, it was not so much fleeing, but especially the destination of the flight, that became determinant for one's growth. The CAR urban refugees in Kinshasa considered this choice to be their right:

> A refugee has the right to put himself where he feels comfortable. (W. Focus group, *La maison blanche*, Kinshasa, 31 January 2015)[247]

Kinshasa was synonymous with growth through education. Education as a supposed path to emancipation and self-growth: this notion does not come as a surprise to anyone, anywhere around the globe. Yet it is interesting to look at how this desire takes shape among the CAR refugee community in Kinshasa.

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[244] *On avait les travaux intellectuels à faire mais quand on n'a pas de la lumière, on n'a pas de l'internet, on n'a pas les moyens de communication, ben, il fallait qu'on puisse partir de là.*

[245] *On s'est dit notre objectif est d'arriver à Kinshasa dans l'espoir que c'est à Kinshasa que nous pouvons avoir peut-être l'occasion d'étudier.*

[246] *Et voilà nous souhaitons vraiment avoir accès aux études, c'est ça notre seul préoccupation, ne fusse que accès aux etudes.*

[247] *Le réfugié a droit de se mettre là où il se sent à l'aise.*

In a very interesting article, Oldenburg explores the relationship between education, war, and youths' aspirations in eastern Congo. Moving away from descriptions of youth in 'waithood' or youth as being 'stuck', Oldenburg looks at the ways youth manages to create or at least to dream of, despite protracted war, opportunities for themselves. In order to do so, she dissects the comment once made by one of her informants: 'I am an intellectual.' She writes that being an intellectual epitomizes many things at once:

> 'I am an intellectual' […] It demonstrates first the agency of youths to position and label themselves strategically in a way that might help them to approach the powerful and the rich in order to enter beneficial networks with local Big Men or international organisations. Second, it brings on an elitist rhetoric which constructs a sharp division between the self and the other, a 'civilized urban' and a 'traditional rural' identity. Third, it carries on the one hand the nostalgic glimpse of past privileges and powers while on the other hand it alludes to generational tensions, demonstrating the students' claim to become part of the national elite and replace the old one. Fourth, it embraces an often neglected, yet very important issue, namely the belief in one's own mental capacities, therewith providing self-worth and preserving social value in times when nothing seems to be certain. (Oldenburg 2016, 3–4)

There are several parallels between the context of Congolese students in Goma and that of the CAR refugee-students in Kinshasa; hence, for analytical purposes, I will base my reasoning on Oldenburg's analysis of 'I am an intellectual'—not least because it is a phrase I often heard from the mouths of the refugee-students themselves. The idea of education as a way out, a passport towards modernity (Richards 1996), is not new and did not pop up with the besieging of Bangui in 2013. I will first look at the long history that links life chances to education. This idea undoubtedly accompanied Euloge, Le Firmin, and others along their life paths, but it goes well beyond the lives of these refugee-students to colonial times and the establishment of the universities in CAR and DR Congo.

Inspired by the above quotation, I will then turn to the alternative networks students need to establish during their time at university, networks which are often based on patrimonial relationships. Because the notion of education as a path of self-fulfilment has been nurtured since a young age, being a student influences the ways in which an individual self-identifies and positions her- and himself socially. Having access to education allows the students to differentiate themselves from those who have not studied and influences their personal status tremendously. Oldenburg contrasts the 'civilized urban' with the 'traditional rural', and we will see how in times of crisis this dichotomy can be transposed to CAR. It is interesting to note that even though education is not what it used to be, and especially does not lead to the same opportunities as it did in the past (but more

often to unemployment and underemployment), obtaining a diploma still carries an 'aura', 'allure', 'mystique' (Honwana 2012, 45). The reference to generational conflicts will be dealt with in Chapter VIII, while the belief in one's own mental capacities are brought to light in the section wherein the tactics of survival of the refugees are described. There is one addition to be made, however. While the Congolese students in Goma are citizens of the country in which they study, we cannot say the same about the CAR refugee-students in Kinshasa. Therefore, I need to add another layer to Oldenburg's analysis: that of refugee-ness and the ways in which being a refugee facilitates and obstructs, at the same time, the claim to the right to study.

a) Higher education and patrimonial networks

During colonial times, formal education was primarily in hands of Christian missionaries. In DR Congo, it was even part of the colonial tripartite system, as discussed in Chapter IV. However, the role of education was not so much that of forming real leaders or 'cadres'. These posts would be kept for the white *colons*—not for the politically awakened subject but rather to form an educated African class (*évolués*) that could assist these 'cadres' in administration. In fact, when the independence wave passed through Central Africa, the new colonies were unprepared to take over the tasks, one of the reasons being that they did not have sufficient numbers of educated people to steer the country.

Lovanium was the first university founded in Belgian Congo in 1954. Having undergone many changes (it first became UNIZA and then UNIKIN), it is still the only active state university (with different campuses around the country) until today. But there are many more universities in Congo, which testifies to a hunger for studies, knowledge, and diplomas. In Kinshasa alone, moreover, there are two state universities and many more private ones. In contrast, there is only one university in CAR: the Université de Bangui, which was established in 1969 by Bokassa. In the first years after the opening of the university, enrolling at university was synonymous with gaining a government state job after graduation. However, things have since changed, and a diploma does not lead necessarily to a job—on the contrary. Today things seem to be more politicized with regard to accessing jobs (Lombard 2016). Student associations play an important role in the politicization of the university. Le Firmin, for instance, explains that working with an important public figure, whose name I will not mention here, was a secure way to obtain a job in the humanitarian world after university. The condition was that you had to graduate with a distinction.[248] The university is thus also a breeding ground for politics and new connections.

[248] Interview Le Firmin, Kinshasa, 13 February 2015

Even though education rates seem to be improving in Central Africa—there are, for instance, more girls going to school now than in the past and literacy rates are generally on the rise—the quality of education has not improved (Honwana 2012, 40). Higher education, in particular, has suffered a lot in the past decades. Not only has the quality of the education gone down, but also the universities are faced by numerous infrastructural problems: old buildings, over-attended classes, unpaid staff, harassed students—to name just a few. Honwana argues that the problem lies, among other causes, within the low quality of teaching, the absence of skills-oriented curricula and, in particular, 'the unavailability of jobs' (Honwana 2012)—which together leads to both unemployment and underemployment. In Kinshasa, for instance, many university graduates, unable to find a job, end up entering the informal economy.

Considering, therefore, the fact that education often does not lead to a job and does not guarantee the locals a better life (Oldenburg 2016, 17), different scholars have asked themselves why it is that young Africans still perceive education 'as the only possible way to a "successful" future' (Tsakala Munikengi and Bongo-Pasi Moke Sangol 2004; Langevang 2008; Honwana 2012; Martin, Ungruhe, and Häberlein 2016; Oldenburg 2016).[249] The dream of accessing a state job (and thus secure income) with a university degree is enduring but does not concur with reality, not if the graduated student in question does not have good connections. The answer to the question of how to make a living, then, is a combination of factors: being able to access patronal and other relational systems (politics, militia leaders, NGOs and other paths of access to the outside world), obtaining personal status, and building up social capital. Yet this answer is not satisfactory, I suppose not even for the students themselves, who are forced to walk different paths at the same time—a practice that Johnson-Hanks has called 'judicious opportunism' (Johnson-Hanks 2005): looking beyond the jobs a diploma can offer one and forced to enter the, oftentimes unpromising, informal economy, as we will see in Section 4.

The intellectual

Being able to present and differentiate oneself as an intellectual, however, should not be underestimated. Obtaining a diploma in Central Africa seems to be a symbolic mechanism of social distinction by education à la Bourdieu; it involves social capital. To know that one belongs to the privileged few provides a basis for self-worth and pride but also involves symbolic power. Education is still seen as a powerful tool for emancipation. Even if education might not guarantee students a

[249] See Esson for a counter argument; he says that many youth in Ghana prefer to leave school and start a career in soccer instead (Esson 2013).

better life, it bolsters their imagination of a better future and provides the belief that, in any case, with a diploma in hand, opportunities to find work are better than without one (Oldenburg 2016, 17).

A diploma is an important asset in a society that publicly acclaims the social and cultural capital attached to school degrees (Pype 2015). As such, individuals who consider themselves intellectuals, such as the refugee-students, will try to obtain symbols by which they can self-label themselves as being intellectuals. One of these symbols is the knowledge of the official language; in the case of Central Africa, this is French. Language vehiculizes symbolic capital. What better way to make this capital visible than by the presence of a heavy Larousse dictionary? This is what Le Firmin did when I informed him I would be travelling to Brazzaville; he urged me to recover his dictionary and bring it back across the border. I felt as if I was transporting knowledge, visibly so. The mere act of asking for his dictionary, among all things, can be read as an act of self-identification with the intellectual. Who else would care about a dictionary to such an extent?

The use of French among peers stands in contrast with the use of other vernacular and youth languages. Urban youth language also involves symbolic capital, yet one of a different kind: the language of an anti-culture capital that is useful to get by in the informal sector, which encompasses the urban jungle, as will be discussed below (Kiessling and Mous 2004; Nassenstein and Hollington 2015).[250] In times of conflict, however, being able to self-identify as educated is a strong marker of differentiation from those who are not intellectuals, and in many cases (rightly or wrongly) from the easily manipulated youth in the countryside. On repeated occasions, Euloge and Le Firmin shared their astonishment at the fact that the Seleka rebels looted computers thinking they were televisions, pointing to the fact that because of their lack of education, but probably also of experience, they could not differentiate between a computer and a television. Were they (the rebels) to rule the country? And perhaps more worrying, as Euloge mentioned: is rebellion setting an example for the most certain way to access power in Central Africa?

b) The refugee

There is a fierce and tenacious belief that the UNHCR should take care of the refugees' studies (Clark-Kazak 2011). It is partly because of this belief that the students in Kinshasa undertake 'acts of refugee-ness' (to make a parallel with Isin's wording: 'acts of citizenship' 2009)—in other words, acts that help them to present themselves as being refugees, so as to make a claim on the 'right to have rights' (Isin in Innes 2016, 266).

[250] In Kinshasa, however, Langila is a slang used by artists and young intellectuals (Nassenstein 2015) .

Several of the Central African refugees in Kinshasa shared the common struggle for access to education. The right to education and, more concretely, their inability to access education in Kinshasa, became a topic in most of our conversations—being myself a junior researcher attached to a European university, I cannot contend this was a mere coincidence. When speaking about this right, Le Firmin and others repeatedly based themselves on the Refugee Convention (the 'Bible' of the refugees as they called it) to underline their belief to entitlement:

> It is also stated somewhere in the convention that a refugee has the right to education, and these rights also include the right to higher education, primary and secondary education. (Interview Le Firmin, Kinshasa, 4 June 2014)[251]

Here, Le Firmin makes reference to—while at the same time stretching the content of—art. 22 para. 2 in Chapter IV of the Refugee Convention and Protocol, which states:

> The Contracting States shall accord to refugees treatment as favourable as possible, and, in any event, not less favourable than that accorded to aliens generally in the same circumstances, with respect to education other than elementary education and, in particular, as regards access to studies, the recognition of foreign school certificates, diplomas and degrees, the remission of fees and charges and the award of scholarships. (UNHCR 2010)

De jure, the text holds a promise for the students. It is an argument on which they can base their claims at the doorstep of the contracting state, in this case DR Congo, supported by the UNHCR. In order to be able to make this claim, however, Le Firmin, Euloge, and others need to present themselves as refugees in the first place. The Central African students become refugees by performing like refugees, by employing artefacts that are related to refugees, and by referring to themselves as refugees (for a more detailed examination of this identification process, see Wilson Janssens 2018a). By 'becoming' refugees, they want to claim the rights that come with this status.

Utas challenges dominant discourses that focus on women as merely victims. He coined the term 'victimcy' in order to define this 'agency of self-staging as victim of war' (Utas 2005, 406 and 408). Clark-Kazak underlines that refugees engage cleverly with vulnerability discourses in ways that stand in stark contrast with the rigid categories and labels used by the UNHCR. For both authors, individuals present 'themselves in different ways at different times, to fit—or not—within particular

[251] *Il est dit aussi quelque part dans la convention qu'un réfugié a le droit à l'éducation et parmi ces droits figurent aussi le droit à l'étude supérieur, l'étude primaire, secondaire.*

“vulnerables” categories’ (Clark-Kazak 2011, 69) and in order to establish themselves as ‘legitimate recipients’ of humanitarian aid (Utas 2005, 409).

The categorization approach to vulnerability is politically useful for the Central African students, as it permits them to leverage decision-making (Clark-Kazak 2011, 77). Within a mobility regime dominated by the UNHCR logic and discourse, the association with refugee status has for Euloge and Le Firmin a specific purpose: it gives them an advantage. In the social context of Kinshasa, the students’ best chance to enrol at university is by making claims on the doorstep of the UNHCR. Making this claim enables the possibility of an opportunity. Thereby, the Central African students subject themselves to chance (Steinberg 2016, 140). Their subjection is performed by self-identification. ‘Seek[ing] ways of assimilating and of inhabiting’ the refugee (Malkki 1995, 3) empowers the students. Being refugees entitles the students, in their own minds, to a right to place the Congolese government and the UNHCR under the moral obligation to respect this right. As such, they maximize their ‘political opportunities by self-identifying in different ways at different times’ and are, as such, able ‘to access particular resources’ (Clark-Kazak 2011, 89). The Central African students position themselves as—and partly become—refugees in order to appeal to the obligation of the other and leverage their own need for assistance. Self-identification with the refugee is, thus, deployed as a tactic (de Certeau 1988, 37; Utas 2005, 408). The process of identification turns a seemingly desperate resort into a weapon of the weak (Scott 1985), one that makes sense in the navigation of opportunities in Kinshasa.

In order to reinforce their claim, the Central African students in Kinshasa make use of a past example that has resonance in Central Africa. Clark-Kazak, who worked among Congolese refugees in Kampala (Uganda), worded it in terms of the ‘historic support for Rwandese refugees’ (2011, 14; 148). As elsewhere, education turned out to be an aspiration of the majority of the urban refugees in Kinshasa (Clark-Kazak 2011, 25), who compared their situation to that of the Rwandese refugees in Bangui in the late 1990s. At the time, thousands of Rwandese fled the genocide and its aftermath. A couple of years later, when Zairians started fleeing during Mobutu’s fall, CAR, and in particular Bangui, received several refugees from both countries. Urban myth had it that, at the time, many of them had benefited from their refugee status and managed to enrol in higher education and finish their studies in Bangui. Even though it did not happen automatically, this myth seems to be partly confirmed by Émile’s experiences in the early 2000s (whose story has been discussed in Chapter IV). He managed to enrol at the University of Bangui and study geology.

> The biggest difficulty was to reconcile study and refugee status. There were no laws that guaranteed that. What I was able to discover during this refugee stage was that there was a certain solidarity. We came, for example, from the former Zaire/DRC at the time, we formed a team, we organized ourselves. There were Congolese (from Brazzaville), Angolan, Ivorian, Liberian, Rwandan, Burundian, and even Ugandan refugees. I have known some, some Angolans, yes, some. So it [solidarity among the refugees from different countries] allowed us to express ourselves, to be approached by the authorities. I remember the first few years that I was practically missing class because it was necessary to follow the files, CNR, HCR ... you had to try to negotiate to receive a little financial support, let's call it a scholarship ... (Émile, Bangui 15 August 2016)[252]

In the eyes of many Banguissois, and thus also in the eyes of the CAR refugees in Kinshasa, the UNHCR in Bangui at the time—and thus by extension the Central African government—had taken care of the studies of the refugees. Following the UN convention, one could argue that refugee-students had the right to student housing and scholarships. The stories that go round, such as the one of Émile, are in the eyes of the Banguissois evidence of this aid. Comparing their situation to that of the Rwandese refugees in Bangui in the late 1990s, the CAR refugee-students in Kinshasa hoped for a similar treatment. Thus, when Euloge, Le Firmin, and the others decided to flee to Kinshasa, their decision was coloured by their reading of this episode in the history of their country and the interpretation of what they had witnessed and heard about when they were young boys. Whether this image is real or not did not matter *per se*; it was real for them because it was felt as being real (Godelier 2015). Moreover, it had real consequences: fleeing and becoming a refugee. Euloge, Le Firmin, and others had hoped to transform their flight and refuge into an opportunity.

Unfortunately, there is a discrepancy between, on the one hand, the expectations and, on the other, the reality of formal education in refugee contexts (Clark-Kazak 2011, 151). *De jure*, the refugees felt entitled to education. Reality was another story. The UN convention places the responsibility for the refugees at the level of the 'contracting state'. The UNCHR assists the state (financially) in dealing

[252] *La plus grande difficulté c'était concilier étude-statut. Il n'y avait pas des lois qui nous garantissaient. Ce que j'ai pu découvrir pendant ce stade de réfugié c'est, on a trouvé une certaine solidarité. Nous venions, par exemple, de l'ex-Zaïre/RDC actuellement, on se constituait en équipe, on s'organisait. Il y avait des réfugiés Congolais-Brazza, Angolais, Ivoiriens, Libériens, Rwandais, Burundais, même Ougandais. J'en ai connu quelques, quelques, Angolais, oui quelques. Donc ça nous a permis de s'exprimer, de se faire approcher des autorités. Je me rappelle les premières années que je séchais pratiquement le cours car il fallait suivre le dossier, CNR, HCR… il fallait essayer de négocier pour avoir ne fus que, appelons ça bourse…*

with the refugees, but cannot take any decisions. But what happens when the contracting state, in this case DR Congo, is 'bankrupt' and unable to take care of its own students, let alone the refugee-students? The responsibility, then, at least in terms of finance, falls back on the UNHCR. But the latter seems to be equally unable to help these urban refugees, not because the UNHCR are unwilling, but because they repeatedly claim to have a lack of funding.

The UNHCR has to make do with 7 per cent of the envisioned budget. In order to better serve as many as refugees as possible, they choose to invest this meagre 7 per cent in the refugee camps, where they can reach more people (Wilson Janssens 2018b, 222). In fact, because of the lack of funding on both ends, financing the studies of the urban refugees turns out to be no one's responsibility. Should there arise any doubt vis-à-vis the UNHCR, their ineptness is certainly not intentional; rather, it is the result of a lack of funding, and the responsibility lies not on their shoulders, but on a 'world order' which is not preoccupied with urban refugee-students (Malkki 1995). In this way, humanitarian agencies and host governments alike are exempted from any responsibility. In a very interesting book, Theodore Trefon has described this play between the state and its humanitarian partners as a 'masquerade', where everyone knows what the other is doing, and not doing, without stating it openly (Trefon 2011; see also Lombard 2016). In any case, knowing about it does not help the refugees to reach their objectives; on the contrary, it only adds to their frustration and their experience of duress.

Access to education and literacy for all is the goal of many humanitarian agencies. What comes afterwards, however—that is, the access to the labour market or rather the inability to access that formal labour market—seems to be a growing concern. Those who do not have the right surname or useful connections ('*le bras long*') have serious difficulties obtaining a job, in the public sector in particular. The large majority of students cannot find a job as a civil servant after finishing their studies, which is true for both Bangui and Kinshasa (Nzeza Bilakila 2004; Lombard 2016, 122). They have to learn to fend for themselves in the fluid informal economy. In Kinshasa, for instance, many *diplomés*, as they are called, end up opening their *cabine* in order to sell mobile phone credit. They come to be part of the *société maboko pamba* (lit. the empty-handed society), a colloquial phrase to describe those who after studying cannot find a job, or those who have studied without gaining any knowledge owing to the poor quality of education.

Improvising a living in the informal market requires imagination and creativity, both of which have rightly been studied and acclaimed by an array of scholars. Education alone does not close the inequality gap. The present-day African city, Barber writes, is a place where luxury and excess are

juxtaposed with dire need. While Barber regrets the physical waste, on the one hand, and the abject poverty that accompanies it, what she really regrets is the tragic waste of human potential and human talent among the poor (Barber 2018, 137).

How is it, then, still possible that despite the limited opportunities after graduating, students continue to attach value to their diplomas? It seems that even if education might not guarantee the Central African youth, both in CAR and Congo, access to a better life, it still continues to bolster their imagination of a better future. Does it still hold that having a diploma in hand is better than having none? I will now turn to this imagined and at times dreamlike future—as well as to its corollaries of frustration, fending for oneself, and self-emancipation despite all odds.

4) Kinshasa, a school

> For me it is a training school. I am being trained by nature. What I didn't experience, I experience today. So, for me it's a school. (Interview Euloge with Sjoerd, Kinshasa, Kinshasa, 2–3 February 2015)[253]

When the initial feeling of being overwhelmed died down, the CAR refugee-students turned to interpreting their experience of refuge and in particular of Kinshasa through the metaphor of the school of life. I remember well the first time Tezman made reference to this, in May 2014, as we were strolling along the train tracks of Limete Industriel. He emphasized that what he was enduring in Kinshasa had transformed him into a man.

In line with Oldenburg, I look at education from an emic perspective and extend it beyond the formal context of school, college, and university. From this perspective, future employment, corruption, conflict and hopelessness, but also peace, hopefulness and 'modernity', and in particular a process of becoming—all find their place (Oldenburg 2016, 4). Going through the school of exile pushed Tezman and others to find alternative and diverse ways to fend for themselves, as we will see hereunder; but, at the same time, and perhaps more importantly, it turned them into men. Living in Kinshasa turned out to be a 'hidden path' into adulthood (Johnson-Hanks 2002, 868).

a) Duress

Elsewhere, I have described the different layers of violence the refugee-students have to deal with as the *palimpsest of violence* (Wilson Janssens 2018b). These layers include the structural violence, with its *longue durée* perspective (Farmer 2004a), that characterizes both the CAR and Congolese

[253] *Pour moi c'est une école de formation. Je suis en train d'être formé par la nature. Ce que je ne vivais pas, je vis aujourd'hui. Donc, pour moi c'est une école.*

societies: the social and everyday violence that flows out of this structural violence (Scheper-Hughes 1993; Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004b; Bouju and De Bruijn 2008; Lombard and Batianga-Kinzi 2015), as well as the recurrent conflicts through which even open violence, at times, seems to be normalized and becomes the everyday context rather than an exception (Vigh 2008). Added to this are the personal experiences of flight and separation, the travelling in difficult conditions and arriving in unwelcoming and foreign urban jungles where the law of the survival of the fittest applies (see Chapter V). And there are also the countless moments of aborted hope and frustration endured on the doorstep of the UNHCR, an institutional violence the refugee-students had not previously taken into account and which they felt as a block to their personal growth. The internalization of layer upon layer of enduring hardship becomes, then, duress (De Bruijn and Both 2018)—in other words, the personal experience of the palimpsest of violence which, conversely, colours the way in which the students look at the world and the individual decisions they make while navigating that world. Fear of losing face and not living up to their expectations and those of their society, for instance, influence decisions about whether to stay in refuge or to go back home, as we saw in Chapter V.

The palimpsest of violence is transposed onto the body of the refugee; distress is worn on the shoulders. The failure of the refugee-students to find assistance in the challenging Kinois environment fed Euloge's and Le Firmin's sentiments of duress. CAR refugees in Kinshasa repeatedly expressed their frustration and worry with regard to the future:

> I'm seeing my future drown in front of me; it's a big concern. I like to work and evolve like the others. (Kinshasa, Euloge 25 May 2014)[254]

> That's why we wanted to be in the DRC: to benefit from this moment, to do other trainings as well; and if there will be peace in our country tomorrow, we can also go home and change our country. (Focus Group Esatis, Kinshasa, 31 January 2015)[255]

The refugee-students joined forces to write an official letter, dated 20 August 2014, which they printed in threefold and handed personally to the UNHCR first, on August 25, and to the CNR and ERUKIN the day after (see Appendix II). Their letter, with the subject heading '*Grievances*', stated their joint worries about not having studied for two years and urged the UNCHR to enrol them at university in order to go back to their country with a degree in hand and to be of use in rebuilding

[254] *Je suis en train de voir mon avenir noyer comme ça mais, c'est un grand soucis pour moi. J'aime bien travaillé et évolué comme les autres.*

[255] *C'est pourquoi on voulait être en RDC pour profiter de ce moment, faire aussi d'autres formations, et s'il y aura demain la paix chez nous on peut rentrer aussi pour changer le pays.*

CAR. Their ambitions seemed to go beyond the personal and point towards a collective quest for well-being.

But the day on which I could really feel, almost touch, the students' frustration was when Le Firmin agreed, for the first time, to be interviewed. He explained:

> What will be the future of our country if we don't have the opportunity to study? Our future is already in jeopardy. During other crises, on the contrary, when people found refuge outside of their country, they were granted conventional scholarships in order to study and secure their future. This was not the case for us, and we live only in uncertainty, frustration, and anxiety. (Le Firmin 4 June 2014)[256]

As I transcribed the interview I was struck by how Le Firmin reiterated, almost word by word, Bouju and De Bruijn's definition of psychological suffering and social violence: 'anxiety, anguish, despair and fear' (Bouju and De Bruijn 2008, 5). In addition to the layers of violence described above, this psychological suffering impeded him from furthering his studies. Le Firmin claims that his future was '*déjà hypothéqué*' or already in jeopardy, a rather despairing statement that speaks of deep resignation, as if he really had given up (Wilson Janssens 2018b, 223).

Papa Afrique, an older Congolese refugee and who will be discussed in more detail in Chapter VII, equally expresses frustration, disillusionment, and a sense of a year-long, deep-rooted pain.

> Papa Afrique: Stress, on a daily basis, is, what we call it, decrepitude, moral, psychological decay.
> Euloge: Moral ulcers.
> Papa Afrique: And a life of absence of dignity and honour. (Interview with Papa Afrique and Euloge, 31 January 2015, Kinshasa)[257]

Given the eloquent bitterness of Papa Afrique's words and the fact that he had been living in Kinshasa for almost twenty years in 2015, this casts refuge in a rather worrying light. It seems that in Kinshasa, the refugees have not only left their homes and lost the opportunity of studying—with all the consequent feelings of temporal and spatial stuckedness that this involves—but they have also

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[256] *Tant qu'on n'a pas cette opportunité d'étudier, quel sera l'avenir de notre pays ? […] Notre avenir est déjà hypothéqué […] Hors quand hier il y a eu des crises et les réfugiés se réfugient sur un autre territoire, on pouvait quand même leur octroyer des bourses conventionnelles pour sécuriser leur avenir. Tel n'a pas été notre cas, et nous on vit que des inquiétudes, des frustrations, des angoisses…*

[257] Papa Afrique: *Le stress, au quotidien c'est, comment on appelle ça, la décrépitude, la déchéance morale, psychologique.* Euloge: *les ulcère morales.* Papa Afrique: *Et une vie d'absence de dignité, et d'honneur.*

lost their sense of human value, dignity, and personal honour. Perhaps this is what Euloge means when he makes reference to 'moral ulcers'. In order to better understand this loss, food is an interesting case in point.

Dreams and nightmares

> I never dreamed Kinshasa, it happened; I find myself in Kinshasa today, I never dreamed about Kinshasa. (Euloge, Kinshasa, 5 June 2014)[258]

I was very surprised when, during a stroll, Le Firmin compared Kinshasa to the United States—an African version of the United States. In Kinshasa everything seems possible, he said. Le Firmin was looking for his 'African dream', one related to social becoming. Kinshasa is indeed a city where the stakes are high and where big dreams can be achieved, but the extremes (of wealth and poverty) are very pronounced, and big failures are more commonplace than big successes. Euloge and Le Firmin were looking for the 'African dream', pursuing their studies, and social becoming, a (perhaps unattainable) dream they could 'wear with flair' (Porter et al. 2010, 803). Papa Afrique explains the meaning of being a refugee in Kinshasa in the following words:

> In Kinshasa being a refugee is ... [calculates his words] it is really living inside ... dreams, we are dreaming. The life of a refugee in Kinshasa is a person who builds his future on dreams. He only envisions the reality in terms of dreams. That is, he doesn't do anything he really wants to do. He does what he doesn't want to do. (Interview, Kinshasa, 31 January 2015)[259]

Then, after some reflection, Papa Afrique added:

> One cannot live basing one's projects on others ... And thus the life of a refugee turns into a nightmare ... So here everything is about dreams, or nightmares. But it develops certain skills, like courage, but one that is based on dreams. (Interview, Kinshasa, 31 January 2015)[260]

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[258] *Je n'ai jamais rêvais Kinshasa, c'est une situation qui est arrivée, je me retrouve aujourd'hui à Kinshasa, je n'ai jamais rêvé Kinshasa.*

[259] *À Kinshasa être un réfugié c'est … c'est vraiment vivre dans … des rêves, on rêve. La vie d'un réfugié à Kinshasa c'est une personne qui fonde son avenir sur des rêves. Le concret il ne l'entrevoit qu'en termes de rêve. C'est-à-dire qu'il ne fait rien qu'il veut faire. Il fait ce qu'il ne veut pas faire.*

[260] *On ne peut pas vivre fondant ses projets sur les autres … Et donc la vie de réfugié, c'est une vie de cauchemar … Donc ici tout c'est des rêves, cauchemars. Mais il y a aussi certaines aptitudes que ça développe, c'est le courage, mais fondé sur quoi, sur des rêves.*

There seems to be a constant tension. Without opportunities for self-growth, without projects on the horizon … the dream soon turns into a nightmare. The Central African students were desperately caught between their expectations and their lived realities—that is, their aspiration to receive an education and other opportunities, on the one hand, and the idle waiting for education, on the other. This schism, already presented in geographical terms in Chapter V, resonates with Vigh's *presentia* (actual being) and *potentia* (possible and desired becoming) (Vigh 2009a, 99), as well as with Oldenburg's 'drop height'—that is, the discrepancy between high expectations and disappointed dreams (Oldenburg 2016, 11).

Nevertheless, the existential mobility and the blockage on personal growth push the refugee-students to look for creative alternatives and teaches them valuable lessons on survival, offering them at times the possibility to dream—even if, more often than not, these dreams turn into nightmares. Hope is never lost (Crapanzano 2003; Kleist and Jansen 2016).

b) *La débrouille*: Surviving the urban jungle

At the beginning, Euloge, Le Firmin, Max, and others did not expect Congo's educational system to be that different from CAR's, especially in terms of scholarships and study fees. In Bangui, they experienced studying as being relatively cheap: there are scholarships available, and students have access to cheap student housing and meals. This is also, probably, why they had expected the UNHCR to take care of their studies. But higher education is one of many public services in DR Congo characterized by the function–dysfunction paradox (Tsakala Munikengi and Bongo-Pasi Moke Sangol 2004, 82). Because salaries are low and often not paid, students and their parents are, in fact, 'the primary source of financing for what officially remains a state-run system' (Tsakala Munikengi and Bongo-Pasi Moke Sangol 2004; Titeca and de Herdt 2011). This becomes an extra burden for the students and turns studying at the state university into a de facto private and very expensive endeavour. Thus, in DR Congo, not even the local students enjoy 'favourable' treatment, let alone the 'aliens'—and therefore the UN convention is rendered meaningless. In the best of cases, the Central African refugee-students will get the same treatment as Congolese students: one through which the state seems to hamper rather than to facilitate the opportunity to study. The burden rests on the refugees' shoulders.

Escaping the social moratorium in Bangui, they arrived to a new version of a social moratorium, one that is alien, but especially one where they had no relatives. As Euloge often explained, in one of his characteristic phrases: 'Le HCR est notre père et notre mère.' When the refugee-students were forced out of the suburbs in November 2013, things started to become dire; yet, it also liberated

them, as they started taking matters into their own hands—not only in terms of education, by looking for opportunities in order to study, but also more generally, as a practice of survival. As this adoptive father and mother seemed unable to take care of its children, in order to survive the city the students learned to obey the infamous 'Article 15: *Débrouillez-vous*'. Article 15 means fending for yourself, and in the case of Congo, it has received wide attention from scholars (De Villers, Jewsiewicki, and Monnier 2002; AbdouMaliq Simone 2004; Trefon 2004; Ayimpam 2014). Le Firmin explains it in its own words:

> We live in a system of self-help initiatives. In other words, for the little we know, we try to apply it to its fullest. In my case, today, I [laughs] never took courses in photography, but today I am a photographer, because I am forced to do something in a new context, so I decided to adapt to it. (Le Firmin, 4 June 2014)[261]

In order to make ends meet, Le Firmin turned himself into a photographer. With money he had saved by selling phone credit, Le Firmin invested in buying a camera and portable photograph printer in Brazzaville, before crossing to Kinshasa. I still remember the day when, just after meeting, he had proudly taken the new printer out of the package to show me. He began strolling around popular sights of the city, taking street portraits of clients and printing them on the spot. Ambulant photography is a popular practice in Kinshasa. Because competition is high and his devices are not particularly sophisticated, Le Firmin needed to be strategic and soon had to adjust his tactics. He thus preferred taking pictures in the popular neighbourhoods close to where he lives, instead of the fancier parts of the city centre, so that his clients would not be too picky about his simple camera. A perhaps unexpected group of clients were Chinese stonemasons, whom Le Firmin photographed at the entrance to their building site early in the mornings, before work.

Those among the refugees who were more dexterous at learning Lingala, for instance, or who had some knowledge of the language before leaving their homes, optimized this advantage. Franchy, for instance, is a handyman who does not sit still. He managed to get a motorbike, personalized it, and found himself a job as a fridge repairer in a local store. I often saw him carrying two gas bottles on his motorbike. Next to fridges, he could repair air-conditioning devices and had knowledge about

[261] *Nous vivons dans un système d'auto-prise en charge, pour le peu de trucs que tu connais, tu essaies de faire beaucoup d'application. Donc, vous voyez, l'exemple en est qu'aujourd'hui, moi, je n'ai jamais appris à faire la photographie eh, aujourd'hui je suis devenu un photographe, parce que je ne peux que faire suite à une situation nouvelle, donc j'ai décidé de s'y adapter.*

electricity. Franchy is the kind of person who has 'strong eyes'. We met several times, but he always seemed busy and never stayed too long when he dropped by at my house. I visited him quickly at his working place once, in the hope of interviewing him, but the opportunity never materialized, despite my repeated requests to do so; he just did not have the time.

The examples are multiple: Another Central African young man I came across repeatedly on my way home, sometimes on a daily basis, worked as a cell phone repairer at a street stand on a fairly busy corner off Limete's Place Commerciale. One of the few refugee girls who had come by herself worked part-time as a street cleaner. Yet another became a motor-taxi driver. There was a pastor and even a self-proclaimed doctor in the very rural outskirts of the city. With a diploma in economics in hand, Ulrich was a small-scale ambulant businessman of second-hand clothing and perfume; he tried to expand this knowledge in Brazzaville. Willy, a very gentle, soft-spoken theatre player, became a busy hairdresser, even though he really wanted to act in a theatre group. Oscar, who will be discussed in more detail in Chapter VII, threaded beads into colourful purses and tapestries, which he tried to sell among his fellow churchgoers or on every occasion some official delegation would pay a visit to the Central African embassy.

His friends repeatedly advised Euloge to hire a driver, in order to use his motorbike as a motor-taxi (colloquially known as *wewa*) and generate income, a recurrent practice in different African countries (Kisaalita and Sentongo-Kibalama 2007; Ogunrinola 2011; Feudjio 2014).[262] Euloge preferred not to do so; and even if he was willing to lend his motorbike from time to time to others—to his younger brother, for instance—he preferred to keep it, stubbornly, for personal use.

La débrouille was more than managing by coping strategies such as those mentioned above; it amounted to an amalgamation of different tactics—a whole way of living. Keeping networks alive was another important element. Thus, in addition to generating one's own income, the refugees needed to look for support by knocking on different doors: the UNCHR; family members in the diaspora (Gabon, Europe, the United States); and patrimonial relationships (embassy). In an environment of extreme uncertainty, diversification is a vital strategy. Students who had already been in Kinshasa before the crisis had also turned to the UNHCR as refugees for help, even though they were already enrolled at university.

[262] Since 2010, the so-called *wewa* have become very popular among the Kinois and are omnipresent. *Wewa* means 'you' in the Luba language. It is believed that when the diamond-digging business declined in the Kasai, where the Luba people originate, many moved to Kinshasa in search of work and opportunities. They ended up driving motorbikes. Potential clients would hail them: 'You!' or '*Wewa!'* This pronoun became a metonym.

However, not all refugees were as needy, and a considerable number out of the 500 came from well-off families. I was repeatedly told that direct family members and other acquaintances of Bozizé were in Kinshasa. On public occasions, such as the Central African handball cup games or when the Central African 'peace' delegation came on an official visit to DR Congo and was received by the Ministry of Interior Affairs, I had the opportunity to meet the more wealthy refugees. There was a particular elder woman I grew very fond of. She had come to Kinshasa to keep an eye on her two grandchildren. The father of these two children was a successful businessman, and their mother was studying at university. The children went to a private school.

Esprit Kinois

Fending for oneself, in terms of livelihood tactics, was not enough to survive the Kinois urban jungle. CAR refugees, who at the beginning were gullible prey to Kinois tricksters, understood well that in order to survive life in the city they had to adopt the Kinois ways, which, as they learned, differed from those in Bangui. Next to studies and food, talking about the *esprit Kinois* became one of our favourite conversation topics. I realized the *esprit Kinois* was of importance when on one occasion Euloge, as we were riding on his newly acquired motorbike on a busy two-lane street, nonchalantly overtook a bus that had stopped in front of us to let down passengers. In a fast and risky bypass, he told me that in order to ride a motorbike in Kinshasa, you need to have the *esprit Kinois*.

In a questionnaire that was handed to about 25 refugees by Le Firmin, we questioned the CAR refugees about the meaning of the *esprit Kinois*. Some of their answers were the following:

	Gender, age and occupation	**What does *esprit Kinois* mean?**
1	M 28 yrs, university student	It is lack of respect, trust, a spirit that motivates the person to do what he wants and without reproach.
2	M 25 yrs, school pupil[263]	crook, adventurer, thief
3	M 49 yrs, carpenter	It is the spirit of injustice.
4	F 33 yrs, trader	Falsehood
5	M 24 yrs, school pupil	It's a spirit to eat off people.
6	M 33 yrs, hairdresser/artist	An example: someone who is recognized by the HCR and housed and then chased out of it with the help of the

[263] Someone who has not yet passed their final school examination and is still attempting to do so, or someone who has abandoned school but does not wish to identify themselves as being unemployed.

		police
7	M 20 yrs, school pupil	It is the Kinois way of acting that is often illogical. Take for instance the school director. At the beginning of the year he accepted 93 pupils into our classroom; three months later, he decided to send away 43 of them, despite their already paid school fees.
8	M 30 yrs, fisherman	The spirit of a Kinois who is alert
9	M 24 yrs, university student	Hard battle to find money

In the above table, I have divided the answers into three categories. Answers 1 to 5 tend towards a negative reading of the *esprit Kinois*. Answer 6 and 7 are equally negative, but are shaped by concrete cases in the daily realities and experiences of the refugees *as* refugees in Kinshasa. Answers 8 and 9 render a more positive interpretation of the *esprit Kinois*. Hence, in the first reading, the *esprit Kinois* is described in the following terms: lack of respect, recklessness, thievery, falsehood, and one that eats on top, read instead, of others. Adapted to experiences that stand close to the CAR refugees, the *esprit Kinois* points to the attitudes of police officers and even of a school director. The third and more positive interpretation sees the *esprit Kinois* in terms of alertness and the daily fight for survival. These, at first sight, contradictory definitions point to the complexity of the *esprit Kinois*: its two-sided power of creativity and of destruction, but also the ways it can be adopted into one's own experience of the city.

> Initially it was, well, we walked like blind people, but this time we see clearly! (Interview Euloge, Kinshasa, 16 February 2015)[264]

Surviving Kinshasa consists in tricking others in order not to be tricked by them. In order to survive in Kinshasa, the Kinois need to be shrewd and cunning—in a word, they need to be 'Yankees' (Wilson 2012). The Congolese Yankees 'are in the know' and they are never afraid, lost, or stunned—or at least will never admit that they are. Beyond street smartness, being a Yankee includes, among other things, dress code, posture, attitude, and language use (Wilson 2015a). Like the Yankees, the refugees need to dress, walk, and speak accordingly in order to embody the *esprit Kinois*. Mastering the local vernacular (Kinois Lingala) is a case in point (Wilson Janssens 2018a), as is developing the

[264] *Au début c'était, bon on partait comme des aveugles, mais cette fois-ci, on voit clair!*

practice of having 'strong eyes', seeing with clarity (as Euloge explains above)—that is, equally seeing opportunities and maintaining a wary attitude towards others.[265]

In the context of a public bar, the *esprit Kinois* was also present among the refugees. Every time Franchy would order a beer, for instance, he would do so by looking at the waitress with one hand covering one eye.

Figure 53 Nkoyi beer label

Esprit Kinois is one of the slogans of the popular *Nkoyi* beer brand (*nkoy* in Lingala means leopard), its bottles bearing a label representing a one-eyed leopard.

> [B]ars, pubs, and other drinking occasions [become] places and times of experiment […] where vernacular modernities are being constructed, defended, undone, where memories are told and retold, hopes and ambitions expressed, and where received categories […] are being evaluated and, in an endless mimetic process, re-invented. (Van Wolputte and Fumanti 2010, 17)

By drinking Nkoyi, Franchy tries to mimic the leopard. In DR Congo the leopard stands for power (think of Mobutu's emblematic leopard-skin cap), but also for agility and astuteness, qualities the refugees need to adopt if they are to survive the urban jungle. Hence, the label connects to the

[265] The antithesis of the Yankee is the Yuma. The Yuma is a country bumpkin, an outsider who does not know the ways of the city and is easily tricked by others. Along the same lines, the Yuma does not know how to dress fashionably, or how to speak properly. In the context of the law of the strongest, everybody wants to be a Yankee of some sort. The Yankee–Yuma division is readily transposed to the insider–outsider, Kinois–Centrafricain reality in which the Centrafricain refugees find themselves in Kinshasa.

strong eyes idiom and to the survival tactics to be applied in Kinshasa. If Kinshasa is the jungle (see Chapter V), the astute and fearless hunter, the leopard, is the Kinois—and, by extension, also the strong-eyed CAR refugee.

Van Wolputte and Fumanti suggest that beer and drinking are a means to access power and knowledge. In this sense, the refugees' drinking habits can be read as a means to acquiring knowledge of the city. Taking it a step further, through beer drinking categories present themselves as transgressible, and their dividing lines turn out to be paradoxical boundaries that open up a space in which to manoeuvre and negotiate (Van Wolputte and Fumanti 2010, 21). As such, the experience of drinking Nkoyi opens up a space for the non-Kinois, in this case the CAR refugees, to manoeuvre and to become (like the) Kinois. Beer, then, ceases to be a mere commodity, a mere marker of identity, and becomes a currency, a means to convert one value into another, a maker (instead of marker) of identity (Van Wolputte and Fumanti 2010, 5). Foreignness is converted into the adaptability to survive in Kinshasa, which consequently opens up potentially new avenues, as discussed above (dreams and nightmares). Another, perhaps less successful, slogan of Nkoyi beer is 'Yes we Kin!' (see picture below). The slogan 'Yes we Kin' makes obvious allusion to Obama's 2008 election victory speech. More than just a play of words, 'Yes we Kin' is a translation of an American dream to the Kinois reality.

Figure 54 YES WE KIN
Bracongo premises on Boulevard 30 Juin (Kinshasa, 28 April 2014)

Slowly but surely the refugee-students became fluent in Lingala and knowledgeable in the ways of the city. They opened their eyes. I was told that some of them even made use of their refugee IDs in order to avoid paying bus fares by quickly waving them at the conductor. What the refugees were

doing was copying a Kinois practice common among civil servants, who are exempted from paying for public transport in Kinshasa. This rule was applicable on state-run public transport during the Mobutu era. In the early 2000s, however, this rule was informalized and extended. Today, even in privately run public transport, civil servants show their cards in the hope of not being charged. Bus drivers may at times accept the cards, at other times they do not. In any case, the latter are not compensated by the state. Having a similar-looking card, clever refugees tried to copy this practice.

It was only after several field visits to Kinshasa, and especially after visiting some of the Central African students who had returned to Bangui, that I understood that daily life in Kinshasa was teaching the CAR refugee-students to be men. In fact, they tried to make the best out of their flight and refuge in Kinshasa; and instead of navigating towards a state of waithood (Honwana 2012) and stagnation, they imagined for themselves a development in the direction of a better future (Martin, Ungruhe, and Häberlein 2016). Not only had the journey from Bangui been a transition from citizen to refugee, but living in Kinshasa turned out to be a journey into adulthood. In this sense, Kinshasa was a site of hoping, of dreaming, and of becoming. It is to the latter that I will now turn.

5) Adulthood

> Moreover, neither the individual nor society are independent of nature, or of the universe, which is also subjected to rhythms that have repercussions on human life. In the universe too, there are stages and moments of passage, forward steps and stages of relative standstill, of suspension. (Van Gennep 1909, 4)[266]

In *Les Rites de passage*, Van Gennep describes how societies all around the globe have important rites to mark the entry into adulthood. For women, this passage is often related to marriage and giving birth. For men, he argues, the *rite de passage* that marks the passage from one 'situation' to another (1909, 4), from the status of youth to that of adulthood, can be subdivided into three stages: rites of separation, *rites de marge* (rites of transition), and rites of re-aggregation or incorporation. Even though one can argue that Gennep's book is outdated, and taking into account that one has to

[266] *En outre, ni l'individu, ni la société ne sont indépendants de la nature, de l'univers, lequel est lui aussi soumis à des rythmes qui ont leur contre-coup sur la vie humaine. Dans l'univers aussi, il y a des étapes et des moments de passage, des marches en avant et des stades d'arrêt relatif, de suspension.*

read it through a lens that is compatible with early 20th-century thinking,[267] some of the arguments Van Gennep made in 1909 continue to be insightful.

Writing about the secret societies from the Congo all up along the Gulf of Guinea, societies which Van Gennep never visited, he explains the stages of the *rites de passage* as follows: In the first stage, the individual is separated from his interior environment and brought to the forest, where he resides cut off from society. The second stage stands for a kind of death, where the food and the language are different from what the individual was previously accustomed to. Finally comes the third stage, the rites of reintegration into the world the individual initially left (Van Gennep 1909, 115–17).

Almost six decades after Van Gennep's book was first published in French, at around the time of the appearance of its English translation, Turner published an article entitled 'Betwixt and between: The liminal period in rites de passage' (V. Turner 1967). Basing himself on Van Gennep, Turner gets to the core of the second phase of Van Gennep's *rites de passage*: liminality. The liminal period is characterized by ambiguity. Turner argues that the individual who exists in this paradoxical category is a not-boy-not-man, but a transitional being who is invisible in his society (V. Turner 1967, 95). Moreover, during liminality, individuals are divested of their previous habits of thought and feeling and are encouraged to think about their society, their cosmos, and the powers that generate and sustain them. Liminality can be described as a stage of reflection (V. Turner 1967, 105).

The idea of death and rebirth characteristic of the *rite de passage* is interesting because it resonates with how the students describe their journey from Bangui to Kinshasa, as well as with the hardships they surmounted as refugees in the city. They had partly died, as citizens of CAR and as children of their households, to integrate into the forest. Van Gennep's description of the forest, where the food and language are different, resonates with Kinshasa's urban jungle, where the food is not the fresh food of Bangui and where the language is not Sango but Lingala. The Central African students 'died' to become refugees in a faraway land. Theirs was a journey into refugee status (Innes 2016). Can we then consider refuge as a liminal period and the refugee as a liminal figure? Just like liminality, refuge is defined by ambiguity and paradoxes. It is indeed a period where the students have to adapt to ways that are foreign to them, such as the street-wise skills needed in order to survive in Kinshasa. It is equally a period of reflection, because frustration often encourages the individual to review his life.

[267] Van Gennep employs the then dominant colonial discourse, whereby different groups are classified on an evolutionary scale. For instance, he writes about the 'semi-civilized' to describe different African groups, differentiates between the German and English Massai, and is fairly belittling towards women.

In the last decade, scholars seem to have picked up again the discussion on liminality (Thomassen 2016). In relation to Africa, important contributions include Honwana's concept of 'waithood' (2012) and Sommers' description of Rwandese youth as being 'stuck' (2012). Both refer to Van Gennep and Turner, and both refer to the period between youth and adulthood and stress the impossibility of entering the latter—in other words, the third stage of the ritual of passage, that of reintegration, is never concluded. I do not wish to argue against these scholars, though I do agree with the criticism that terms such as waithood strongly imply passive waiting, which is often not applicable (Martin, Ungruhe, and Häberlein 2016; Oldenburg 2016).[268]

There is a link between waithood (temporal) and the feeling of being stuck (spatial) that many refugees experienced in Kinshasa and which they acted upon. The trajectory of each student is contingent on the contexts they navigate, the relations they build up, and their personal backgrounds. Each student took different decisions and traced their trajectories in unique ways. In the previous chapter, we saw how some decided to stay in Kinshasa, others returned to their home country, and yet others took their chances elsewhere. It seems therefore that liminality means something different for each one of the students, or rather, that each one of them emerged from liminality in quite different ways.

What is interesting about Van Gennep's period of *marge* and Turner's liminality is the focus on the processual character of the rites of passage: liminality is a transition, not a state—and thus it takes time. Because the process differs per individual, one cannot pretend that all individuals go through these stages in the same manner. These decisions, or periods of choice, are best understood as vital conjunctures, which Johnson-Hanks defines as socially structured zones of possibility that emerge around specific periods of potential transformation in a life (Johnson-Hanks 2002, 871). Major life events are construed as vital conjunctures and are characterized by the 'experience of future orientation, extreme uncertainty, and the potential—but not guarantee—of radical transformation' (ibid.). Thus, vital conjunctures add individuality to liminality. Langevang returns the processual character to the vital conjunctures, as they do not entail so much moments in time but rather periods; she even observes that 'some conjunctures never seem to come to an end' (Langevang 2008, 2046).

[268] A close reading of Honwana's book, however, brings to the fore the fact that waithood does not imply passivity, as in the following passage: 'Amid the myriad difficulties that they confront every day, young Africans find opportunities for creativity as they fend for themselves. They are not sitting at home and crying over their sorrow; they are struggling to survive and even succeed as best they can.' (Honwana 2012, 59)

Transformation or growth 'well expresses how many peoples think of transition rites' (V. Turner 1967, 101). This growth is not necessarily visible; or, as Turner writes:

> The arcane knowledge or '*gnosis*' obtained in the liminal period is felt to change the inmost nature of the neophyte, impressing him, as a seal impresses wax, with the characteristics of his new state. It is not a mere acquisition of knowledge, but a change in being. (V. Turner 1967, 102)

In August 2016, I met Max and Tezman in Bangui. Max had already been back for two years, while Tezman had recently returned from Brazzaville. As we were sitting on the veranda of his house, sharing a meal and memories of Kinshasa and stories of our journeys, Tezman told me he now understood the meaning of work and the importance of earning his own income. He had taken up a job as a security guard in a private firm (two years later he was still working there and had enrolled at a private institute where he was studying management). Before fleeing Bangui, Tezman would thoughtlessly and carelessly depend on his parents, but the journey to Kinshasa, Brazzaville, and back had transformed him. For Tezman, his 'adventure' in Congo carried the aura of an initiation rite (Bredeloup 2008, 298), one through which, by going through the school of exile, he was personally transformed into a responsible man (Newell 2012, 192).

The refugees have managed to turn Kinshasa into a school of life, as they would often say, a site where the rite of passage into manhood takes place. However, it is not arriving in Kinshasa that has propelled Euloge and Le Firmin into adulthood; it is rather the process of navigating refuge and surviving the city that forms an individual rite of passage. 'Rather than a clear trajectory toward adulthood, there are multiple, variable, and often hidden paths' (Johnson-Hanks 2002, 868). Liminality offers

> a certain freedom to juggle with the factors of existence … But this liberty has fairly narrow limits. The neophytes return to secular society with more alert faculties perhaps and enhanced knowledge of how things work, but they have to become once more subject to custom and law. (V. Turner 1967, 106)

Is this why some refugee-students preferred staying away? In order to avoid subjection? In the following two chapters, I will attempt to provide an answer to these two questions.

Chapter VII. Engagement and everyday politics

1) Introduction

This chapter deals with engagement, beyond self-growth, engagement that spreads out to society in general, and in particular the CAR university students in Bangui and the CAR community of refugees in Kinshasa. The engagement of the refugee-students touches upon official structures, the relation refugees have with these, and the ways they deal with them, sometimes embracing these structures, sometimes contouring them. This chapter illustrates political agency and being aware of this agency. In it I present the diverse and plural activities in which Euloge came to be involved, first in Bangui, then in Kinshasa. With time, I understood that the prolongation of Euloge's refuge in Kinshasa had different causes. In fact, he was not only worried about losing face, as discussed in Chapter V, but he was also fulfilling (partially) his personal ambitions with regards to politics and was therefore not ready to return home. Euloge was learning to juggle different balls and was very aware of doing so, and during my stay in Kinshasa I saw him grow politically. Euloge's, but also Le Firmin's, political awareness and engagement with their community did not stop abruptly with the 2013 events; on the contrary, these were adapted to fit a new environment, one in which they would grow.

2) Student leader turns refugee leader

> When I was a kid, you see at school, every year the teacher gives an information sheet to fill in, and there are parts where they ask you if you know who you want to become as a grown-up? Sometimes I filled in president, sometimes I filled in military; so that's the way it is. [smiles] It's weird, I remember it very well. (Euloge, Kinshasa, February 2015)[269]

a) Inspiration

Euloge was born into a wealthy family. His father being the director of the national communication office meant a man with a certain level of education, perhaps the right connections, but in any case a steady income and thus the possibility to maintain three households. Euloge's father was a man of status. Being the eleventh son to his father, but the first to his mother, formed Euloge. On the one hand, he was inspired by his father and may have felt the need to impress him, while on the other, he acted as the responsible older brother vis-à-vis his younger siblings.

[269] *Quand j'étais petit, tu vois à l'école, chaque début d'année le professeur donne une fiche de renseignement, et il y a des parties où on demande savoir vous voulez devenir qui? Des fois je mets président, des fois je mets militaire, donc c'est comme ça. [smiles] C'est bizarre, moi je me souviens très bien.*

Euloge seldom spoke about his mother, but he often spoke about his father. He seemed to have a special bond with him. He admired—and still admires—him. The love was mutual; Euloge was his father's confidante and as an adolescent often accompanied him on his trips. He recounts, for instance, how they used to visit a hunter in Mongoumba[270] on the weekends, from whom they would buy dried bush meat, a delicacy. In Mongoumba, they used to sleep in Bokassa's former riverside villa. The food was delicious, the fish fresh from the river. This is how Euloge discovered many corners of his country and, during the long hours on the road, was introduced to politics.

Euloge's parental house is situated in a closed compound on the border between Sica II and Sica III. It was not spared during the heavy fighting of 2013/2014, with bullet marks now acting as silent witnesses. In the living room hangs a photograph of his late father. Out of all the children, Euloge is the one who most resembles his father, I was told. When I finally visited the house in 2016, the similarity between the two men indeed struck me. It was not only the physical traits; they were said to have a similar personality. Euloge's father was a quiet man, yet he knew how to bring people together to talk. According to Euloge, his father was loved by many, yet not by all—he died suddenly, poisoned, Euloge assured me. He must have had competitors; in politics, jealousy is never far away. Perhaps this is why in Kinshasa, many years later, Euloge would seldom eat outside the house.

After the death of his father and having passed his baccalaureate exams, Euloge fell seriously ill. In order to take better care of him, the family decided that Euloge should live with one of his elder brothers and so he moved to his brother's house in Bimbo, on the southern outskirts of the city. This house was spacious, well-equipped, and walled. In it Euloge had all he needed: a personal bedroom, three meals a day, and peace and quiet. Euloge's brother had also set up a chicken coop and envisaged Euloge taking it over one day.[271]

Even if thankful for the good intentions and the car his brother allowed him to use, living at his brother's house without leaving the compound wore Euloge down. In Bimbo, he felt imprisoned. Enrolling in chemistry at the University of Bangui helped him escape from the fraternal yoke. But, instead of fully moving back to the parental house closer downtown, Euloge moved partly onto the campus, where he had been granted a room that he shared with others. His brother was not

[270] South of Bangui, on the Ubangi river, Mongoumba lies just in front of Libenge.

[271] During the crisis, when leaving the compound posed a problem, the family used to eat chicken every day at first. When the situation turned really dire, they switched to eating the maize they used to feed the chickens with.

impressed by his decision—even less so when Euloge joined and became an active member of the national students' association.

The student association in Bangui advocates, on the one hand, for the intellectual and moral causes of the Central African students, by organizing public demonstrations, for example, while, on the other hand, it takes care of very practical student issues, such as the daily warm meals[272] subsidized by the government. The association consists of an executive board and several faculty boards. In order to take a decision, the former needs to consult the base and secure the approval of the faculty boards. Both Le Firmin and Euloge were members of the association. After being a class delegate for three years, Le Firmin was approached by the members of the association and was enlisted in the board of the Law Faculty. Euloge was the secretary of the executive board. In fact, it was here that Euloge and Le Firmin befriended one another and joined in the fight for a common cause.

When he joined the association, a new world opened in front of Euloge's eyes. He says that it is here that he was introduced to drinking; before that, he would rarely touch a bottle of beer. But drinking does not necessarily imply alcoholism; it can also be linked to access to certain (political) spheres (Van Wolputte and Fumanti 2010), and it is part of the world of the student association, very much like student associations elsewhere in the world. Euloge grew close to the association's president, whom he dearly admired. Like his father, the president was a source of inspiration, a *formateur*. Euloge recounts the sleepless nights they spent together talking about the future of their country, about leadership and CAR society.

As we saw before (Chapter V) and will pick up later, their activities as members of the students' association, how their actions were misinterpreted by the Seleka, and also internal rivalries forced/encouraged Euloge and Le Firmin to flee Bangui. But once in Kinshasa, Euloge did not stop his political engagement; on the contrary, his efforts on this front continued to grow. Euloge met a small, yet eloquent and refined man who went by the name of Afrique. In addition to his father and the president of the student association in Bangui, Papa Afrique became an important model for Euloge.

[272] *mouillé maillot*, a metaphor that stands for the queues students must join in order to receive a cheap meal (for 125 franc CFA, about $0.22) at the university restaurant. One must be on time, but one must also fight for one's place in the queue. The pushing and shoving can become quite physical and cause one to perspire heavily—thus, *mouillé maillot* (wet t-shirt).

Papa Afrique is a Congolais from Brazzaville, a former partisan of the deposed Lissouba regime. During the civil war (1997–1999), Papa Afrique fled his country, crossing the river as many others did, and asked for asylum in Kinshasa, where he has been living as an urban refugee with his wife and children for almost twenty years.[273] Papa Afrique used to be the president of the Congolese refugee community in Kinshasa and, like Euloge, he is until today an important and active spokesperson for his community. Refuge facilitated the first contact of these two men. They first met at the premises of the CNR and soon discovered that despite their differences in age and nationality—Papa Afrique is considerably older than Euloge—they shared a common goal: Euloge called it a '*souci pour la communauté*' (concern for the community). More seasoned and precise in his discourse, with the wisdom that comes with age, Papa Afrique refers to a '*quête d'épanouissement*' or a '*quête de dignité*'—in other words, a quest for personal growth and dignity.

Euloge is drawn to Papa Afrique because of his eloquence, his experience in refugee politics and, more importantly, his knowledge of the texts[274] and his courage to speak out, or rather, to write. When asked about his sources of inspiration, Euloge explained:

> I thought that the refugee had a limit, that he should only write to the UNHCR, to the CNR—period. He [Papa Afrique] sometimes writes to the prime minister; it is a very good example. (Interview Kinshasa, 16 February 2015)[275]

Papa Afrique is like dynamite in a small package, very pro-active. The elegant letters in which he deplores the suffering of the urban refugees are addressed to several representatives within the Congolese government, sometimes even to the president himself, and to the international community, such as the head of the UNHCR in Congo and personnel in the headquarters in Geneva (see for instance his letter 'The trivialization of suffering', which will be discussed under the Health Care section below). The sky is the limit, and such an attitude boosts Euloge's confidence no end. Like

[273] Pascale Lissouba was ousted by Sassou Nguesso, who has been president of the Republic of Congo ever since. In 2016 he was re-elected for a third mandate, after amending the constitution the year before to allow him to present himself yet another time. He won with over 60% of the vote. But there has been brutal repression in the Pool area since.

[274] These texts include the 1951 Refugee Convention and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as other legal texts pertaining to the refugees in DRC.

[275] *Moi, je pensais que le réfugié a une limite, qu'il doit écrire seulement à l'HCR, à la CNR, point barre. Lui il écrit des fois au premier ministre, c'est un très bon exemple.*

Papa Afrique, he wants to air the frustrations of his community, to make their voices heard. Unfortunately, these elegant denunciations and pleadings usually fall on deaf ears.

b) Emplacement

Running away had a paradoxical effect on Euloge's political ambitions: it did not halt but rather strengthened his political endeavour. In Kinshasa, Euloge underwent the stressful living conditions of the CAR refugees in the city. He empathized with their suffering, which was part his as well. As an educated young man with a union past, Euloge was very aware that refugees had rights, as established in the Refugee Convention, and yet that these rights were oftentimes neglected. In his opinion, they needed to constitute themselves as an association in order to be heard. When I enquired how the association of CAR refugees in Kinshasa was born, Euloge replied:

> When I went to the hospital, I saw that my brothers were suffering a lot. And when I went to the sites in Kimbanseke and Kingabwa, I saw my brothers suffering a lot too. I thought, well, the last source of strength of a refugee are the representatives of his community. I thought to myself: we need to set up an 'office' that will defend each refugee if they have a problem. That's when I called for a meeting, I invited everyone around a table; they saw that it was good to send a request to the UNHCR or the CNR, they took note, so this election took place on 25 January. (Interview Euloge, Kinshasa, 23 May 2014)[276]

On 25 January 2014 (Appendix III), the Central African bureau for refugees came into being with the CNR's and HCR's approval. In fact, Euloge had done what his father would have done in the past: he 'reassembled' people, brought them together. Euloge was voted secretary. The president was an older man, who by the time I came to Kinshasa, only a couple of months after the establishment of the bureau, had already been sacked for embezzlement.[277] The vice-president was an older woman,

[276] *Quand je suis allé à l'hôpital, j'ai vu que mes frères souffraient beaucoup. Et quand je suis allé sur les sites à Kimbanseke et à Kingabwa je voyais mes frères souffrir beaucoup. Je me suis dit, bon, la dernière force d'un réfugié c'est le bureau de sa communauté. Je me suis dit, il faut mettre en place un bureau qui va quand même défendre chaque réfugié, s'il a un problème. C'est à partir de là que j'ai convoqué une réunion, j'ai appelé tout le monde au tour d'une table, ils ont vu que c'est bon adresser une demande à l'HCR ou à la CNR, ils ont pris acte, alors cette élection avait eu lieu le 25 janvier dernier.*

[277] He had embezzled money that the new interim president, Mrs Catherine Samba-Panza, had offered to the Central African refugee women and students in Kinshasa.

who suffered from breast cancer and, until the day she passed away, did not receive proper treatment.[278] As a secretary, Euloge became de facto the head of the association.

Euloge (re)created in Kinshasa a position similar to the one he held in Bangui and committed himself more seriously to his cause: the pursuit of the students' well-being became the pursuit of the well-being of his fellow countrymen and countrywomen. Euloge transposed, as such, the morphology of the network in which he had navigated in Bangui and successfully filled it with new people in Kinshasa. New experiences were added to past insights, and Euloge was able to develop his own ideology. In this sense, fleeing is not synonymous with rupture but rather with continuity and even, contrary to Papa Afrique's assertions, self-growth. In Kinshasa, Euloge's political know-how and position in the eyes of the other CAR refugees grew. Following Vigh and Bjarnesen, one could say that, for Euloge, displacement from Bangui resulted in emplacement in Kinshasa. The dialectics of displacement and emplacement are mutually constitutive processes and point to the ways in which people seek to move into place despite being forced out of it (Vigh and Bjarnesen 2016).

The two photographs in Figure 55 illustrate Euloge's emplacement. The left photograph was taken in August 2012, when Euloge was at the student association in Bangui. The right photograph was taken precisely two years later, during a handball game that brought together many CAR supporters, both refugees and migrants, to cheer for their team. In both cases, Euloge stands on the left. Notice the similarity in his pose. Nevertheless, in the 2014 picture he radiates less stiffness and more self-confidence. Without losing any of his elegance, in two years Euloge had become a man of the world and found his own way of doing politics.

[278] She passed away from cancer a couple of months after I left the field in 2015.

Figure 55 Student leader turns refugee leader
(Left) Euloge in Bangui (2012), courtesy of Euloge. (Right) Euloge in Kinshasa (2014), photograph taken by the author

In Chapter VI I discussed how Euloge was granted a motorbike. The motorbike not only facilitated his physical mobility but also brought him symbolic mobility; it turned him into a legitimate agent in his community. The short trips he took around the city turned him into a more effective and present community leader. Moving freely around the city confirmed his position as a leader of the CAR refugee community and thus ultimately helped him to further his political goals. Even if the motorbike was not a precondition for being a secretary of the refugee community, it was an enormous asset towards these ends. And even if it was expensive for him to run, Euloge was never keen on renting his motorbike out for public transportation, as some of his fellow countrymen did and as is often the case in Kinshasa. The motorbike facilitated his own tasks.

3) Souci pour la communauté

> At the moment I have no activities, except for the concerns of the community. So, if there is a case involving a refugee, I go to solve it ... Then, these occupations aside, I am free, because I don't have a job yet. (Interview Euloge, Kinshasa, 2–3 February 2015)[279]

> Intervening when there are misunderstandings between two camps—that is my role. (Interview Euloge, Kinshasa, 16 February 2015)[280]

[279] *Pour le moment je n'exerce aucune activité, sauf les préoccupations de la communauté. Donc, s'il y a un cas pour un réfugié, je me déplace pour aller résoudre. … Alors, en dehors de ces occupations je suis encore libre, car je n'ai pas encore un boulot.*

[280] *Intervenir au moment où il y a des malentendus entre deux camps, c'est ça mon role.*

When I asked Euloge about his work, his role within the community, he responded that except for matters related to the community of CAR refugees, he was not doing any work. He spoke as if his community work was a hobby that sporadically took up part of his time. The image he gave (me), however, stands in stark contrast with the description of a man who has a lot of free time because he is unemployed. In fact, it was oftentimes difficult to get hold on Euloge. He ran errands and paid visits on a daily basis from one side of the city to the other. He knew the refugees' whereabouts, their occupations, and their worries. He listened carefully to their problems and often acted as an intermediary, writing letters to the CNR, pleading for medical treatment and protection. The established CAR refugee board, in which Euloge was the most active member, acted as a voice of the voiceless, to use Firmin's phrase.[281]

Euloge's *souci pour la communauté*, was expressed in Kinshasa through four different pillars. In what follows, each of these pillars will be discussed separately. The first pillar touches upon questions of security and protection. It is related to the implicit and explicit recognition of the refugee status, the issuing of the refugee identity card and the, albeit almost unattainable, coveted refugee travel document (TVC).[282] The second pillar touches upon what Euloge terms 'the social' and is mainly linked to housing problems and the creation of income-generating activities (IGA). The third pillar relates to the health care of refugee-patients. If one of the refugees fell ill, Euloge would visit him or her at the hospital to ensure, when possible, that the patient in question was receiving the right treatment and support from ERUKIN. This pillar will be illustrated through two in-depth study cases of chronically ill refugees, whom Euloge followed closely. However, what touched Euloge most, also on a personal level, was the fact that refugee-students were hampered in their study trajectories. The last pillar, thus, is related to education—in particular, tertiary education. Education has been discussed extensively in the previous chapter and will not be dealt with hereunder.

a) Pillar I : Protection

The opening words (of the introductory note) of the Convention and Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees (UNHCR 2010) reads as follow:

> Grounded in Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of human rights 1948, which recognizes the right of persons to seek asylum from persecution in other countries, the United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, adopted in 1951, is the centrepiece of international refugee protection today.

[281] Interview Le Firmin with Sjoerd

[282] Titre de Voyage Conventionnel

The emphasis of the definition of a refugee lies, first and foremost, on protection of persons from political or other forms of persecution in their own country (UNHCR 2010, 3). UNHCR's main task, therefore, is to act as a source of protection for refugees. This is also clearly represented in their logo: two hands protecting an individual, turning him/her into 'a vulnerable', an individual who is by definition perceived to be in a particularly weak position.

Protection leads to recognition. In other words, in order to receive protection as a refugee, the person in question needs to be defined and categorized as being a refugee—that is, to be officially recognized as a refugee. The 'definition' of a refugee will be discussed in the next chapter (VIII), and this categorization is, as we will see, political (Clark-Kazak 2011, 72). After being defined, recognition then implies operationalization, quantification, and hence a database. NGOs and humanitarian agencies are frequently associated with list-making—lists that potentially lead to a distribution of support in the future (Both et al. unpublished, 44). The creation of this database takes place, ideally, in the camps or, as we have seen in Chapter V, at the border in transitory camps. This was not always the case; in fact, refugee camps are a relatively new phenomenon (Grayson 2017). However, not all of the refugees described in this thesis went through and were 'processed' in such camps. Those who did not have encountered difficulties in being recognized as urban refugees in Kinshasa. There are, nevertheless, always exceptions to the rule—exceptions the refugees base their hopes on.

The refugee ID

Far from being a given, formal recognition and its concrete expression—providing the refugees with refugee attestation IDs—is a hotly debated issue. Being, or rather not being, on a list that potentially leads to a distribution of support is the source of a lot of stress and distress among CAR students and refugees in Kinshasa. At the time of research, many of the urban refugees in Kinshasa were not (yet) formally recognized—that is, they did not possess refugee documents. Others were granted cards, but they worried because these cards would soon expire with no notice of renewal. And there were also refugees holding cards who did not appear in the database.

Such was the case of Mrs D. A mother of two children, and seven months pregnant, she went to the UNHCR premises in Kinshasa in order to ask for voluntary repatriation to the Mole refugee camp. On that day, she was accompanied by Euloge to explain her case. Even though it is the CNR's responsibility to distribute these cards, I was assured by a senior protection officer that they, the UNHCR, physically printed out the cards. I was even shown the printer from which the cards are

issued.[283] This is not surprising; in fact, the CNR often lacked the ink to print their own documents. In any case, the name of Mrs D. did not appear in the UNHCR database. After some surprise and commotion, Euloge and she were taken out by force by two security agents. In the process, Euloge's watch was broken. But more than his watch it was the lack of respect that infuriated him. He wrote a letter to the UNCHR, filing a complaint about their rudeness. In particular, he could not come to terms with a documented refugee who did not appear in the database. What would that mean in terms of protection, he rhetorically asked himself:

> Let's say she's arrested somewhere. We pick up the phone, we call the UNHCR: Do you recognize this name? They go through their database, her name doesn't exist in it. They say no, meanwhile she is a refugee ... It becomes a problem. Let them tell me here that I'm wrong! My question makes sense: someone holds a [refugee] card, but her name does not exist in the database. (Kinshasa, Conversation 5 February 2015)[284]

Figure 56 The refugee card
Mrs D. showing her valid refugee ID at the UNHCR premises in Kinshasa. 3 February 2015, Courtesy of Euloge. (See Appendix IV)

[283] During an interview I held with the protection officer on 9 February 2015

[284] *Admettons qu'elle est arrêtée quelque part, on prend le téléphone, on appelle le HCR, vous reconnaissez tel nom, on vérifie dans la base de données, son nom n'existe pas, on dit 'non', alors qu'elle est réfugiée. … Ça devient un problème. Qu'on me dise ici j'ai tort ! Ma question a un sens, quelqu'un est détenteur d'une carte, mais son nom n'existe pas dans la base de données.*

In the eyes of several urban refugees, protection not only relates to protection in the country of origin but also is extended to protection in the host country. It includes, for instance, protection from xenophobic attacks (such as those experienced in mid-2014 after the Mbata ya Bakolo operation in Congo-Brazzaville, or in January 2015 during the demonstrations in Kinshasa against a backdrop of rising political insecurity), but also protection by, and ironically also from, the Congolese state services. A recurrent example is that of the Congolese traffic policemen who, looking for possible infractions (and a little revenue), often try to extort money from passers-by. Not carrying a valid ID counts as an infraction, as does not wearing a helmet, or riding a motorbike after dusk. This applies to both refugees and Congolese citizens. However, if refugees are caught without documentation, their foreignness places them in a more vulnerable position.

> Regarding myself, I do not see how the UNHCR protects me as such. We were arrested, we had our own discussion, we took out a little money to negotiate with the soldiers, to free ourselves. So finding our own means always, no protection. (JN 31 January 2015)[285]

What would happen if Mrs D., after being stopped for a minor infraction, was not found in the list of names in the refugee database? Would she be protected? CAR refugees in Brazzaville would not even dare to buy bread around the corner without carrying their ID on them, owing to the fear of being imprisoned if they could not show their identity when asked for it.[286] Clark-Kazak describes a similar situation for Congolese refugees in Kampala who, without a refugee ID card, are vulnerable to arrest in random police and revenue service checks (2011, 76).

Protection can also touch upon undesirable situations such as theft:

> ... yesterday a refugee was robbed, everything was taken away, clothes and all that. He sleeps almost 20 kilometres away [from here]. I went to the police yesterday, make inquiries, write complaints. (Interview Euloge, Kinshasa, 5 February 2015)[287]

In the urban jungle, where the rule of the strongest rules, where individuals are supposed to outwit their neighbours, theft from CAR refugees has been reported in several instances—in some cases

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[285] *Je ne vois pas la protection de l'HCR en tant que tel avec moi. On nous a arrêté, nous mêmes on fait les débats, on a sorti un peu de sous pour négocier avec les soldats, pour nous libérer. Donc trouver notre moyen toujours, pas de protection.*

[286] Fieldwork notes

[287] *… hier un réfugié a été victime d'un vol, on lui a tout ramassé, les habits et tout ça. Il dort presque à vingt km, je suis allé hier à la police, faire des démarches, écrire des plaintes*

organized with the collaboration of the police. This was the case in Kimbanseke, described above, but also at *La maison blanche* in Kingabwa, where the refugees were not monitored despite having received threats. They fell prey more than once to petty thieves and *kuluna*. In any case, Euloge considers it as his work to record these types of situations (also visually—see Figure 57) in order to file complaints by writing official letters.

Figure 57 Theft and its leftovers
Kinshasa 4 February 2015, Courtesy of Euloge

The list of fifty

Euloge, Le Firmin, and others often mentioned and referred to an infamous list of the fifty urban refugees eligible for support from the UNHCR. The list came into being after the refugees were forced to leave Kimbanseke. They would repeatedly express their concerns about whose names would get to be on the list, or what would happen with this list (Both et al. unpublished, 44). The fact is that among the urban refugees, there were some who did get support, in the form of the *garantie locative* and income-generating activities (IGA or AGR in French)—such as Euloge and partly Le Firmin—while others did not. A senior UNHCR protection officer underlined that each refugee has very different needs; there is no one-size-fits-all solution, and therefore each case is decided on an individual basis.[288] This is what Euloge and the others would refer to as '*le cas particulier ou individuel*'—a roulette wheel that randomly benefited the lucky few while excluding most refugees from assistance. In order to access the wheel, the refugees needed to write convincing letters

[288] It must be noted that this individual case approach stands in stark contrast to the encampment policy.

pleading for help because of their dire situation (see Appendix I). However, it was never clear to the refugees how the UNHCR would make the decisions with regards to eligibility. The protection officer admitted that, despite their efforts at communication, there were many rumours circulating. When asked about the 'list of fifty'—the one that came about after the refugees were forced to leave the house in Kimbanseke (as we saw in Chapter V)—the protection officer denied the existence of such a list. It seems that, even if unintentional, opacity is omnipresent.

Miscommunication and opacity lead to mistrust. On the one hand, the refugees expected the UNHCR to recognize their sorrow and suffering—Le Firmin often suggested the UNHCR should visit the refugees to see how they lived, what they ate, where they slept, and so on—expectations that the UNHCR did not live up to. On the other hand, urban refugees were particularly apprehensive of sharing information about why they were refugees, fearing being tricked and getting cheated. This mistrust would even colour the relationship I had with many of the CAR refugees, at least in the beginning, as several among them thought I was a spy for the UNHCR. Someone to perhaps double-check contradictory stories? Why would I otherwise ask the same questions (and permission to record and film them) that they were asked by UNHCR/CNR agents upon arrival?

Their mistrust was revelatory of a fear summarized in a phrase I often heard from the refugees' mouths: '*Être réfugié c'est un marché*' (Being a refugee is a business). The rumour went that recorded stories of the CAR refugees were being 'stolen' (and even 'sold') to be used by Congolese employees in order to send their acquaintances abroad, who, with this valuable information in their hands, could present themselves as CAR citizens in the context of resettlement to a third country, often outside Africa. The Kinois, you see, Le Firmin once explained, '*ils aiment trop voyager*' (they like to travel too much).[289] The idea that someone is profiting from you and you are not receiving what is due to you is not uncommon to the region. In the case of northern CAR, Both et al. have observed that occasional visits that do not see any follow-up tend to cause anxiety about diverted aid and about being forgotten, while high expectations seem undiminished (Both et al. unpublished, 44). The same is true for CAR refugees in Kinshasa; they would not criticize the policies of the UNHCR *per se*, but rather its disengagement and lack of *suivi* or follow-up.

Resettling and the TVC

Protection and recognition are linked to questions of the very politicized and coveted practice of resettlement—that is, being sent to a third country for refuge, in many cases a country in the Northern hemisphere. This is not unique to Kinshasa, but has also been noted in other parts of Africa

[289] See fieldwork notes, 3 June 2014.

(Grayson 2017). Some of the refugees awaited resettlement in vain, while others believed resettlement would be facilitated by their contacts in the CAR diaspora. Here again the experience of refugees from other countries in Bangui in the past played an important role in shaping ideas. Such was the case of Francis, who believed he was entitled to a TVC and voluntary resettlement. I met Francis during a handball match in July 2014. The national teams of CAR and DRC were playing against one another, and for this occasion many members of the CAR refugee and expatriate community had gathered around the sports field to support their team.

Francis is a big, tall, jovial and soft man in his early thirties. He has sported long Rastafarian dreadlocks since adolescence. Francis is the son of a *chef de quartier*, and prior to the conflict he was active in Bangui's car business (importing and leasing), going to the Douala harbour[290] in Cameroon to pick up cars and drive them into CAR. Next to cars, Francis was a member, along with his father, of former president François Bozizé's Kwa Na Kwa (KNK) party. In the KNK he met a Muslim woman, whom he was dating when the crisis fell upon the country. Due to his involvement with the KNK, he fled Bangui. Francis fled into DR Congo and first found refuge in the Mole refugee camp, where he stayed for about a year. In the camp he acted as an intermediary between the refugees and the management of the camp. He said he had a particularly good relationship with the staff of the UNHCR office in Zongo, pictures on his mobile phone acting as a proof.

As the crisis endured, the refugees in the Mole camp were, according to Francis, encouraged to find relatives that would be able to support them 'anywhere in the world'. He decided to contact a brother who lives in France and who sent him all the necessary papers (a three-month valid invitation letter, proof of income, proof of housing) in order to start a visa application procedure at the Schengen House in Kinshasa. The only document still missing was the Titre de Voyage Conventionnel (TVC), the blue refugees' passport. Unable to ask for a visa in the north of the country, Francis planned his trip to Kinshasa well. He informed the UNHCR and the CNR about his departure, he said, and even printed out the documents, including the *feuille de route,*[291] at the UNHCR premises in Zongo! When everything was ready, Francis travelled to Gemena, where he took a plane to Kinshasa—not having to endure the long and tedious trip on the river was a relief.

In Kinshasa, Francis stayed in the one-room house of a cousin and his family (wife and two children); his cousin was a jeweller who worked in town every day. In the outside kitchen hung a huge poster of Bob Marley. When I met him, the invitation letter his brother in France sent him had just expired and

[290] Being land-locked countries, CAR and Chad rely on Douala as an international harbour.

[291] An official letter stating he is permitted to leave the refugee camp and travel towards Kinshasa.

he was very frustrated: he smoked a lot, and besides waiting, he felt he had no occupation. He had written letters to the UNHCR and CNR pleading to speed up the procedure, and he had contacted the Voix des Sans Voix (VSV), a local NGO, famous because of its former head the late Floribert Chebeya.[292] It was all to no avail; like other refugees in Kinshasa, Francis felt stuck and his time wasted (Lucht 2012). He had no choice but to resign himself to his fate. The passport, a real *casse-tête* (headache), simply did not work out. A couple of months afterwards, defeated in a way, he crossed into Brazzaville; his cousin and family would soon follow him. I saw him the day before crossing, and since then we have kept in sporadic contact through Facebook. He seems to have found a job as a truck driver between Brazzaville and Pointe Noire—at least he is on the move.

Figure 58 Bob Marley on the outside kitchen wall
The plastic watering can is uncommon in Kinshasa, except perhaps in Muslim environments. In Bangui it is omnipresent, also outside Muslim contexts. (Photograph taken by the author, Kinshasa, 1 September 2014).

[292] A Congolese journalist who was murdered when investigating a politically sensitive case.

b) Pillar II : *Le social*

Figure 59 Funeral in Kitambo cemetery
The deceased was a woman, a member of the CAR refugee community, who had suffered from (untreated) breast cancer. Kinshasa, 29 November 2014 (photograph courtesy of Euloge)

The social aspect of refuge deals mainly with housing concerns (*garantie locative*) and some form of occupation (*IGA*). It can also touch upon social events such as marriages, births, and funerals, as well as the yearly celebration of International Refugee Day (20 June each year). As previously discussed in Chapter V, the first wave of refugees that began arriving in Kinshasa in mid-2013 were housed for a couple of months in a closed compound in the commune of Kimbanseke, on the outskirts of Kinshasa. After receiving a letter in November 2013 that encouraged them to return to the refugee camps in the north, the CAR refugees rejected this option. In the end, a dozen refugees who lived in Kimbanseke, two of them with their respective Congolese girlfriends and their babies, were housed in another walled compound in Kingabwa district. This neighbourhood lies closer to the city centre, but its swampy environment floods during every rainy season and is unnavigable—Kingabwa is colloquially referred to as Kinshasa's Venice. The house where the refugees moved in came to be known as *La maison blanche* (lit. the White House), a place where they would gather to discuss heated issues and arrive at agreements.

After a couple of months, an expulsion notice forcing them to leave the White House fell upon their heads. The refugees found themselves again in limbo, not knowing whether to leave or to wait for the day of expulsion. I often heard from the urban refugees that those on the list of fifty were due to get housing assistance in the form of a *garantie locative*—that is, a sum of money that amounts to eight to ten months of rent. In Kinshasa, potential renters of a house need to pay up to eight to ten

months of rent in advance in order to move in—and oftentimes an additional 10 per cent of that amount to an intermediary or house broker. This sum of money is oftentimes used, by the owners, to invest in business, or just disappears, after which they try to look for a new renter who can come up with a similar amount. This does not lead to durable relationships between owners and renters; on the contrary, for those who do not own a house, constant moving is the order of the day, which adds to the daily allotment of distress that all inhabitants of Kinshasa, Kinois and refugees alike, deal with in life.

Not all refugees had housing problems, however. There were those who could afford to rent comfortable houses; others who had received the *garantie locative* would pool resources in order to rent a more comfortable studio and put a little extra aside for the daily expenses; yet others would move in with family members and acquaintances, as in the case of Francis above; and others just managed by squatting or renting cheap rooms in unfinished houses with no facilities and no windows/doors, or by sleeping in Pentecostal churches when they were not holding services or prayer meetings. There was a group of 17 people—mainly, but not only, young men—who slept for months in the premises of the Lingwala district house, situated on a busy traffic artery leading to downtown, not far from the UNHCR and literally a couple of blocks away from the CNR. This *maison communale* would function during the day, while at night it was transformed into a dormitory in which the refugees laid their cardboard mattresses on a cold cement floor. There was indeed no policy for urban refugees; aside from opacity, improvisation was the order of the day.

Regarding the IGA, Euloge was among the lucky ones. In mid-2014 he was granted a motorbike by the UNHCR. Euloge was not the only one to receive a motorbike at that time; there were eight other CAR refugees who did too. Despite the challenges of not knowing the city well, nor speaking Lingala as a Kinois, most of them used the motorbike as a *wewa,* in order to generate income. As we have seen before, Euloge refused to do so. Le Firmin, too, had filed a request; he wanted equipment in order to improve his photography skills and, of course, to attract more clients by offering more services (see Appendix I). Unfortunately for him, his application was never granted. Roulette-wheel rules apply here again.

c) Pillar III : Health care

The third pillar, health care, touches Euloge personally. Being chronically ill, Euloge was chosen to stay in Kinshasa with support from the UNHCR. Because he often attended the hospital, also for his own care, he soon grew acutely aware of the situation of his fellow patients and countrymen. Central African refugees, both urban and camp refugees, are assigned to be treated in the St. Joseph Hospital

in Limete (see Figure 26). Medical care is taken care of; however, the accompanying assistance in terms of food is often deficient. Health care of Kinshasa's refugees fell, in 2015, under the responsibility of ERUKIN. The implementation of this was, de facto, problematic. Patients are allocated a *per diem*, but these contributions often arrive too late or are incomplete. At times it is unclear where the (rest of) the *per diem*s would go to. Late payments force sick refugees to consume medicine on empty stomachs, which can be detrimental for their recovery. Refugees would often receive the correct medicine, but no money to buy food. How can a sick man take medicine on an empty stomach? Here again, Euloge's task was to document:

> When I visit the sick, it is to collect all their difficulties. If there are no medicines, I call the UNHCR to intervene; if there is no food, I call the UNHCR. And if God gives me at least one peanut, I share it with them. (Sjoerd interviews Euloge, Kinshasa, 5 February 2015)[293]

Case I: '*Prendre le mal en patience, pendant que le mal n'est jamais patient*'

Such was the case of Manou. After being evicted from Kimbanseke, he found a physically demanding job at the Bracongo, one of Kinshasa's breweries. He noticed there was something wrong in July 2014 but did not take care of it until his inguinal hernia became critical in December 2014. Manou then decided to ask for help at the CNR. The CNR sent him to ERUKIN; ERUKIN sent him to the UNHCR; and at the UNCHR he was sent away. A week later he knocked again at the door of the UNHCR. Le Firmin explains that they told Manou:

> ... to wait while he himself had an ailment that has no patience with him. And suddenly he fell in front of them and that's when they understood that the matter had become serious. They took him in the UNHCR vehicle to drive him to the hospital. (Focus Group, Kinshasa, 31 January 2015)[294]

After the surgery, Manou did not improve. Refugee-patients in the St. Joseph Hospital receive an allowance every ten days in order to pay for extra medication and food. This allowance amounts to $50/ten days and is allocated by ERUKIN. Having spent two weeks in hospital, Manou should have received $75, but he received only $20. It was not the only time I heard of such practices: in some

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[293] *Quand je rends visite aux malades c'est pour récolter toutes leur difficultés. S'il n'y a pas les médicaments j'appelle à l'HCR pour intervenir, s'il n'y a pas le manger, j'appelle au HCR. Et si Dieu me donne au moins une graine d'arachide je partage avec eux.*

[294] *… de patienter pendant que lui-même il avait un mal qui n'a pas de patience en lui et brusquement il est tombé devant eux et c'est là qu'ils ont compris que l'affaire est devenu sérieuse, on l'avait pris dans le véhicule de l'HCR pour l'emener dans l'hôpital.*

cases, patients would not be visited regularly; in other cases, they were forced to sign receipts that they had received the financial assistance, even if the amount did not match reality. Manou explains:

> When he [ERUKIN employee] visits people, he does it in a disordered way. Those who do not even have the possibility to sign the paper for themselves, he will take their hand and have it signed by force. (Le Firmin interviews Manou, Kinshasa, 7 February 2015)[295]

Were it not for his wife, Manou would have starved. His fellow housemates, dealing with their own misery, could not come to help. He was released only to return to the hospital the week afterwards. Fortunately for him, he did get better after that, but was asked the impossible task to rest for a period of six months. Being a young father, this worried him a lot. Manou tried to look for assistance several times, but:

> Even by writing, or by calling on the phone—nothing, no answer [on the UNHCR's side]. (Le Firmin interviews Manou, Kinshasa, 7 February 2015)[296]

This is not the only time refugees highlight the way in which the humanitarian staff, supposed to take care of their well-being, were often unavailable. Also Francis, who was discussed above, tried to prove the unavailability of the UNHCR staff by taking out his mobile phone as we sat down to have a drink in a bar during a stroll. It was a Monday in the early afternoon, 2:45 p.m. to be precise, normal office hours. As Francis dialled the number of an UNHCR officer, he explained:

> Wait, wait until it he picks up [phone rings four times]. This man, he's the one who registered me in the Équateur [Province] [phone rings one more time], he was an assistant. [Francis hangs up and starts redialling] That's what I hate about these people. You see they don't take things seriously, you see, they don't take things seriously, [the phone rings again, five times, no response]. When we leave the house again, we'll insist on calling him, always. (Kinshasa, recorded conversation, 1 September 2014)[297]

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[295] *Quand il [assistant de l'Erukin] part pour aller visiter les gens, il fait ce qui est de desordonné. Celui qui n'a même pas la possibilité de signer le papier lui-même, il va prendre la main de celui-là et le fait signer par la force.*

[296] *Même par écrit, même appel telephone, rien pas de réponse*

[297] *Attends, attends que ça décroche [phone rings four times] lui là, c'est même lui qui m'a enregistré à l'Équateur [phone rings one more time] il était adjoint [Francis hangs up and starts redialing] c'est ce que je déteste avec ces gens-là, tu vois ils ne prennent pas trop en importance, tu vois un peu, prennent jamais trop en*

The urban refugees felt, repeatedly, abandoned by the humanitarian agencies and especially by the UNHCR. Le Firmin expressed his disbelief in discussions and in writing[298] when he heard that the refugees were told time and time again by the UNCHR, CNR, and ERUKIN to '*Prendre le mal en patience*' (Bear misfortune with patience). It is one thing to take one's misfortune patiently, but quite another to support the pain of an *untreated* illness, such as Manou's (and his was not the only case), patiently. Le Firmin and other refugees would continuously wonder: How can one '*prendre le mal en patience*' when '*le mal lui-même n'est jamais patient*' (misfortune itself is never patient)?

Case II: *La Maison des malades*

Besides the hospital, there were two houses in Kinshasa where chronically ill and longer-term refugee-patients lived. Most of them had passed through the camps and were referred to Kinshasa for further medical treatment. At the time of research, the houses were run by ERUKIN. One of the two houses is found in the lively and fairly central neighbourhood of Matonge. The house is inhabited by refugees from different communities, including the Central African community. The atmosphere in this house is ambivalent. On the one hand, it is reasonably well-appointed: there is more comfort than in the hospital, it is comfortable and secure, well-located, and so on; on the other hand, in addition to the comforts, the atmosphere is grim. The refugees are not in good health and feel abandoned. Being unable to work makes them even more dependent and hampers their possibility to buy adequate food to follow strict diets.[299]

Ruby (26) came to Kinshasa looking for medical treatment for her four-year-old son Eliezer. Eliezer had a tumour bulging from his eye, could not be cured, and sadly passed away. Annie too was evacuated from Boyabu to Kinshasa for the medical care of her daughter, who suffered from an eye tumour. They were later followed by her husband, who had been poisoned by a friend in the camp.[300] When I met them, the firstborn had passed away, but they still carried a baby girl in their arms; the baby suffered from the same illness as her late sister and was following treatment. Two

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importance [the phone rings again, five times, no response] même si on part à la maison, on va insister de l'appeler toujours.

[298] For instance during the focus group on 31 January 2015, or in his notebook (n.d.) '*C'est malheureux la situation des réfugiés centrafricains à Kinshasa*'

[299] Oscar explained he received $70/month for his personal needs, including food. Unfortunately, this amount in Kinshasa is not enough to follow a healthy diet, especially one with fresh vegetables and fruits. Fresh meat—not the third-quality, deep-frozen meat from around the world that is stored in *chambres froides*—is also beyond the budget of a majority of Kinois.

[300] Visit to the home of the sick, Group interview 31 January 2015

other men, one from CAR and the other from Congo-Brazzaville, were losing their sight. Other patients were cured and sent back to the camps. There was, for instance, an elderly man who was evacuated to have his leg amputated. Patients slowly replaced one another, turning the house of the sick into a place to share stories, exchange points of view, and lament their refugee status and current state of affairs.

Figure 60 Local wheelchair
Gift to one of the CAR refugee-patients. I always wondered if he was able to take it along with him on the small humanitarian porters. Kinshasa, Maison des maladies (Photograph taken by the author on 22 November 2014).

Because of its centrality, the house of Matonge became a meeting point for the refugee community. Paradoxically, the refugees living in it still felt disconnected from the world, despite all the stories shared. They lamented, for instance, not having a TV or a radio. Being surrounded by too much illness, even if treated to a certain extent, must have worn them down, a feeling which was then translated into a feeling of disconnection. Nevertheless, Euloge would visit this house up to four times a week to see his friend Oscar and the others. Oscar suffers from a congenital heart disease; he was a cardiopathic patient before the crisis hit his country. Like Euloge, Oscar fled the Central African Republic in April 2013, leaving his family of a wife and three children behind. He remembers the day he had to run away, after his district had been attacked:

> My disease changed in magnitude after these events, because I was forbidden to carry out physical effort. But during the events I had run more than 12 km and arrived at the riverside, because I couldn't continue, and the rebels were behind us, arrived at the riverside there were no canoes, there was no way for me to cross over, I was forced to dive in the water, I tried to swim and I clung to a rock that was a few metres in the middle of the river. By the time I got there, the rebels were already on the riverbank, they started shooting and they even shot someone who was there with us, we were swimming together, after that I had a fit and I found myself in DR Congo in a centre. (Interview Oscar, Kinshasa, 30 August 2014)[301]

Because of his poor health, Oscar was soon transferred from Zongo to Kinshasa. During his stay in the city, Oscar was hospitalized many times—twelve in total, six of which included resuscitation with oxygen. Whenever he felt a heart attack coming on, he would call EURKIN and ask to be taken to hospital. The vehicle at ERUKIN's disposal was multi-purpose and also served as an ambulance (see Figure 61). If ERUKIN's vehicle was available, he would be picked up at home and dropped off at the hospital; on other occasions he was less lucky and, since he could not afford a taxi, was forced to resort to public transport—managing as best he could, ailing, gasping for air, close to passing out.[302]

[301] *La maladie a changé d'ampleur après ces évènements, parce qu'on m'avait interdit de faire les efforts physiques. Mais pendant les évènements j'avais parcouru plus de 12 km en courant et arrivé au bord du fleuve, parce que je ne pouvais pas continuer, et les rebelles étaient derrière nous, arrivé au bord du fleuve il n'y a vait pas de pirogues, il n'y avait pas de moyen pour moi de traverser, j'étais obligé de me plonger, au fleuve j'ai essayé de nager et je me suis accroché d'une roche qui était à quelques mètres au milieu du fleuve. Au moment où j'étais arrivé là, les rebelles étaient déjà sur le bord du fleuve, ils commencèrent à tirer et ils ont même tirer sur qui étaient avec nous, qu'on nageait ensemble, c'est au-delà que j'ai piqué un crise et je me suis retrouvé en RDC dans un centre.*

[302] Interview with Oscar, 30 August 2014

Figure 61 UNHCR vehicle
'PROPRIETE HCR SOUS USAGE DE ERUKIN' Kinshasa, 29 November 2014, Courtesy of Euloge

The physical pain the ill refugees had to endure was exacerbated by institutional neglect, as pointed out and reported over and over again by the refugee leaders. There are dozens of pictures in Euloge's smartphone that can attest to this, as well as letters and reports written by the refugees. The report written by the Collective of urban refugees in Kinshasa (i.e. by the representatives of the different refugee communities, such as CAR, Congo-Brazzaville, Uganda, Rwanda, and others) is a case in point. The report dates from 11 November 2014 and is entitled:

Medical insecurity among the urban refugees in Kinshasa

resulting from the trivialization of the suffering of illness

EXPLANATORY NOTE TO

THE REGIONAL REPRESENTATIVE OF THE UNHCR

Regarding the '*véhicule ambulance*', for instance, the report states that refugee-patients often miss their doctors' appointments and laboratory tests, as they are scheduled to take place in the mornings

from 9 a.m. to 11 a.m., yet the ambulance leaves the ERUKIN premises only at 10 a.m. and hence does not arrive on time. In other cases, the vehicle is not always used for ambulance purposes and is at times not available at all.

Because the UNHCR/ERUKIN support would not provide Oscar with all his needs, he had to learn to fend for himself. During one of his hospitalizations, a Congolese lady taught Oscar how to thread beads and he became very dexterous at this. Soon he started making purses, keyrings, and tablecloths with welcoming texts for official visits at the CAR embassy or the UNHCR. One of his favourite patterns was his country's five-coloured flag.

Figure 62 Threading colours
Oscar threading a handbag in the colours of the CAR flag. Kinshasa, 30 August 2014, photograph taken by the author

Oscar would sell purses to fellow churchgoers and offer tablecloths to members of international delegations paying visits to the refugee community in Kinshasa, in the hope of attracting attention to the suffering of the refugees. But he could not hope to eke out a living from this activity. Life in Kinshasa was hard, even though Oscar seemed to manage and spoke fluent Lingala. He had hoped for heart surgery outside Africa, but all he received were sedatives and, in his eyes, inadequate medical care. He could not tolerate the agencies' inconsistency and neglect, as well as the doubts the humanitarian staff had about his 'supposed' illness. They did not believe Oscar. I wonder if it is

possible to feign hospitalization, not once but 12 times? Or resuscitation up to six times? Can one feign one's heart beating?

The daily experiences and complaints of the ill refugees stand in stark contrast with the medical treatment expatriates and, in this case, UNHCR staff have access to. The first time I entered the UNHCR premises in Kinshasa, I briefly met the head for Gender Violation Issues who had recently had a car accident with one of the many *esprit de mort.*[303] I must have seen her for a couple of seconds, enough to exchange some words, to thank her for putting me in contact with the communication office.[304] She seemed a nice lady, pretty, energetic, my age; she was wearing one of those thick white cushion bands people wear to protect their necks. She told me she was travelling to Europe for treatment. I do not know who paid for it, perhaps her own insurance, or perhaps it falls under UNHCR's terms of risk coverage—being flown back in case of calamity. I cannot help but compare her case with Oscar's. On the one hand, there is the immediate response to her accident, the swiftness of the decision taken (she needs good treatment asap) as well as the ease with which she flies across borders, almost neglecting them (implying possession of the right type of passport). On the other hand, there is the tedious and endless waiting Oscar has to endure (for more than a year) in order to get the medical care that could save his life.

My purpose is not to criticize the humanitarian staff but, in line with Louisa Lombard, rather to point at the 'foundation of immense inequality' on which humanitarian practices rest (2016, 168). In her book Lombard writes about DDR, underlining the difference in money allocations. She writes:

> Moreover, there is a gross difference between what DDR participants would receive and what DDR staffers and leaders would receive, with the latter claiming the vast majority. This might seem like a cheap point. After all, it simply is the way of the world that expatriate staffers make orders of magnitude more money than 'local' or 'national' staff, who in turn make more than people benefiting from the projects [for whom these projects are designed in the first place—*my addition*]. (Lombard 2016, 168)

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[303] This is how the most common means of transport, the unregulated blue-and-yellow refurbished-to-fit-local-purposes 207 Mercedes buses, were called. *Esprit de mort* refers to their reckless drivers and the countless accidents they had. Kimbuta, the governor of Kinshasa, introduced his own transport enterprise—regulated, new, clean, and one had to pay upfront and was given a ticket instead of waiting for the *receveur* to collect. The buses were colloquially known as the *esprit de vie*.

[304] In fact, she was very surprised that I was carrying out research on refugees, which she considered impossible without my having contacted the UNHCR. She expressed her disbelief in a personally addressed e-mail.

Researchers, too, do not escape these inequalities. In fact, they are in a position to enjoy the best of both worlds: authenticity, (some) comfort, and financial security. I did a large part of my research with a growing belly, but chose to return home (to Europe) for the birth of my son—pregnant CAR refugees in Kinshasa do not have that choice. Oscar could not be operated on in Kinshasa, as the hospitals were not equipped for this type of operation; neither could he be operated on outside the country, as there was no budget (and perhaps no willingness) to send him abroad.

These inequalities are exacerbated in a context such as that of the urban refugees in Kinshasa, which Catherine-Lune Grayson describes in her book on Somalian refugees in the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya. In a chapter entitled 'A World in Movement', she argues that refugees in refugee camps are not static, but that, on the contrary, refugees who had never left the camp were rather atypical. In fact, she continues, it is not only the camp that visits the world (to different degrees, from Nairobi to cities in the United States), but also the world that comes to the camp, through Internet and media, and through the presence of humanitarian staff and the occasional visit from dignitaries from all over the globe (Grayson 2017, 116).

Thus, while the world is accessible through others and the media, mobility is not necessarily higher for everyone. The refugees in Kinshasa have to deal with this inequality. Imagined paths reach far, but real movement is limited. Access to information and interaction with people from across the globe increases the refugees' awareness of their own conditions and are a source of deep frustration and discontent (Grayson 2017, 117). Discouraged, Oscar reflected:

> We have been through difficult times; we thought that the UNHCR here could boost our morale, but it is moral torture that we are undergoing here. (Interview with Oscar, Kinshasa, 30 August 2014)[305]

Physical pain added to moral torture became too much for Oscar. When he heard that his son in Bangui was not well, he opted for voluntary repatriation and returned to Bangui in spring 2015. He had already lost his first daughter during the conflict, after he fled, and was unwilling to lose yet another child. Oscar went back to his family and his two children. I visited him a year later in Bangui in August 2016. He was happy to show me his neighbourhood and house. Oscar seemed in good health, surrounded by his family; he commended his decision to return to his home country,

[305] *Nous avons traversé des moments difficiles, nous pensions que l'HCR ici pouvait nous ramener le morale, mais c'est la torture moral qu'on est en train de souffrir ici.*

because, as I heard repeatedly from almost every refugee, '*on n'est mieux que chez soi'* (there is no better place than home).

4) Formal and everyday politics

a) CAR Minister of Reconciliation's official visit to Kinshasa

In the last days of January 2015 a remarkable visit took place. An official CAR delegation, headed by the Minister of Reconciliation, travelled to Kinshasa to meet the Congolese Minister of the Interior.[306] During this trip, an official encounter with the refugees was held in the amphitheatre of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The main purpose of this encounter, at least in the eyes of the refugees, was to express their grievances—to let their voices be heard.

The ceremony was attended by a considerable number of CAR refugees,[307] both women and men of all ages. There were even a couple of children present. I knew many of the refugees, but certainly not all; in any case, it felt very familiar to be in this surrounding, and no one denied me access. The CAR refugees spread out in the amphitheatre; families sat upstairs, and the refugees' representatives, Euloge and the more well-spoken refugees, such as Le Firmin and Francis, chose seats in the front row. Le Firmin had given himself the task to control the door and hence the passage of who could walk in and out of the amphitheatre.

On the other side, on the elevated podium and behind a long wooden table, sat the official delegation, which consisted of the CAR Minister of Reconciliation and Political Dialogue; two Congolese vice-ministers (of Interior and Security, and of Congolese Foreigners); the CAR ambassador to DR Congo; the regional adjoint representative of the UNHCR; and a representative of the CNR.[308] The purpose of the ceremony was stated as follows: 'A meeting between the Minister of Reconciliation and the CAR refugees living in Kinshasa in the presence of members of the Congolese government and the representative of the UNHCR.' After this introduction, the ceremony began with a song written by two hands, one Congolese and one CAR artist, and performed by Esatis. He was

[306] The Ministry of Interior is responsible for all refugee matters.

[307] There were about 130 refugees present, a number that does not come close to the alleged 500 urban refugees in Kinshasa at the time. Of course, those who were ill or hospitalized were not present. Many children were probably also missing.

[308] *Excellence, Madame la Ministre Reconciliation nationale de dialogue politique et de la promotion de la culture Siriri de la RCA; Excellence, Madame la vice-ministre de l'intérieur et Sécurité de la RDC; Excellence, Monsieur le vice-ministre des Congolais étrangers de la RDC; Excellence, Monsieur l'ambassadeur de la RCA; Monsieur le Représentant regional adjoint de l'HCR; Madame, secretaire de la CNR.*

holding a microphone in one hand and a little laptop in the other hand for the rhythm which could impossibly fill the room. The song was entitled '*Plaidoyer du people Centrafricain*' (Plea of the CAR People) (Esatis Le Bon 2015).[309]

Ala ma nga toto, ba ngoule ti è si ma

Ala ba nga passi so eyeke ba nga si ma

Ala ngbounga li na ndo Beafrica si ma

Ala pensèe nga na acentrafricain si ma

I yeke ba ala

I yeke ma ala

I yeke kou ala

I yeke hounda ala na siriri

Listen to our cries, at least look at our tears

Consider at least our suffering

Think at least about the future of CAR

Think at least of the people in CAR

We are looking at you

We are listening to you

We are waiting for you

We are asking you for peace

[309] Fieldwork notes, 29 January 2015. It is interesting to note that as I asked Esatis to translate the song for me, he added a phrase in brackets to the fourth verse: 'Think at least of the people in CAR (who you swear to always protect).' By this small addition, Esatis voices his expectations: he expects the international community to listen to his pleas; yet he also voices his criticism, with a touch of disdain (through the use of 'always'), of the international community, the latter failing to think about CAR—at least in the eyes of Esatis.

After the opening, the Congolese vice-Minister of Interior spoke, followed by the CAR Minister of Reconciliation (both women). All in all, both ladies talked for about 15 minutes. The Congolese minister underlined the hospitable nature of her country, which has opened its doors to its neighbours in times of trouble. After expressing the pain she felt talking to her compatriots in terms of refugees instead of citizens, the CAR minister underlined that the purpose of her mission was to enforce the second phase of the three-phased project that leads to the true reconciliation of the country. The three phases are as follows :

1) The dissemination of the agreement on the cessation of hostilities, signed by the political-military groups
2) Grassroots popular consultation throughout the country and also in neighbouring countries, to gather the concerns and expectations of all CAR citizens as well as possible solutions for a genuine social cohesion and reconciliation
3) Identification of the representatives of the different entities outside the country

After her speech, the Reconciliation Minister stood up and presented the sum of one million Congolese francs to be distributed to the 500 urban refugees (including myself, as my name appeared on the attendance list—I kindly declined; the number also includes the refugees who were not physically present), urging the refugees to take it as a sign of love and solidarity on behalf of the president. One million among 500 people amounts to 2,000 FC per person, just over $2. The minister was well aware that it would help the refugees for just one day. What she might not have considered is that the 2,000 FC barely covered the transportation costs from the *cité* to the Ministry of Exterior downtown and back.

To the surprise of many, however, after speaking, bringing out the money, and receiving the undeserved applause of the refugee public, the minister abruptly excused herself and together with the other representatives, Congolese vice-Ministers, HCR and CNR representatives included, left the hall. She had an important invitation to attend to and could not afford to arrive late. As they walked out of the amphitheatre, the atmosphere of the meeting changed. A team of three people was left with the refugees to note down the grievances and concerns. The language also changed from the more formal French to the informal Sango. Unfortunately, this team could not offer the refugees any answers, as many had hoped.

On the one hand, the refugees were satisfied with their audience with such important people and the fact that an official representation had come all the way from Bangui. On the other hand,

however, they regretted that their voices had not been heard and hoped that the document they had prepared for the occasion would be read. Their satisfaction was less than full. Had the delegation not missed the purpose of their visit, I wondered? Had they not come to consult the people? What appointment could have been more important for the Reconciliation Minister than listening to the grievances of her own people? Le Firmin expressed his frustration in the following terms:

> What I wanted to say in the presence of the Interior Minister, who was present, the Minister of Social Affairs, the UNHCR representative who was also present, and Mrs Berthe (with whom getting an appointment requires a battle, which often also leads to desertion), we wanted to say certain truths in their presence, which, unfortunately, I can say, was an organized disorder, so that we could no longer say certain things. (Focus Group, Kinshasa, 31 January 2015)[310]

If I have taken space to describe this official meeting, it is because it tells us a great deal about how politics works. Formal high-level political processes undeniably shape the context in which the urban refugees in Kinshasa move. However, in line with Christina Clark-Kazak, rather than looking at politics from a conventional point of view—that is, as limited to the formal processes of governments—I am more interested in politics as practised by the decision-making individual (Clark-Kazak 2011, 15). In other words, instead of focusing on Politics with a capital 'P', I try to discover how politics with a lower-case 'p' finds its expression from day to day (Chabal 2009). Through this example, I am not looking at such ceremonies from the Ministry point of view, but rather what it might mean for a politically engaged individual such as Euloge. By doing so, I investigate the links that exist between the two: *Politics* and *politics,* and if and how practices from formal (governmental) politics penetrate into the practices of the informal politics of everyday life.

b) Language use: The power and hollowness of words

One of the first elements, regarding form, that catches one's attention is the use of language. During the ceremony described above, every refugee was aware that the speeches, even if emotional, consisted of hollow words and empty promises. Yet everyone listened carefully to them and genuinely applauded when appropriate. It seems that even devoid of any real meaning, words continue to have a powerful effect on people. I often noticed Euloge employing the same type of

[310] *Ce que je voulais dire en présence du ministre de l'intérieur, qui était présent, du ministre des affaires sociales, du réprésentant de l'HCR qui était aussi présent, et Madame Berthe que pour la voir c'est toujours le parcours d'un combattant, qui aboutit souvent aussi à un abandon-là, on voulait dire certaines vérités dans leur présence, qui malheureusement, je peux dire, c'était un désordre organisé, qu'on ne peut plus dire certaines choses.*

speech: calm, dry, composed of mechanically fixed phrases and sayings. This type of speech contrasted like night and day with the sassy rumours he used to tell me off the record. Hereunder follow several examples of fixed phrases as pronounced by the ministers, in the one column, and by Euloge, in the second:

Ministers (both CAR and Congo)	**Euloge**
The willingness of our Head of State to take all his daughters and sons back to CAR	You're better off at home
Our constant concern to integrate the human dimension into the numbers, because behind all this there is you, dear refugee sisters and brothers	We have our backs to the wall
I would like to present a support to our brothers, I know that it will serve you for ONE day, but it is a sign of love, a sign of solidarity	If God gives me at least ONE peanut, I will share with them
I kindly request you to comply with the texts and the law	I like that the texts are respected
May the fraternity between CAR and DRC live on	Facing challenges with others (neighbouring countries)
We have come to listen to you	I am a peace officer
We care about the other	Moral ulcers

There is certainly a dissonance between the first and the second column. However, this dissonance is in terms of content, not in terms of form. In terms of the latter, there are clear overlaps: take for instance 'ONE day' and 'ONE peanut' to emphasize the willingness to make an effort.

c) Doing politics outside one's country

A second interesting parallel touches on the transnational nature of politics: doing politics across the border outside one's own country. Central African politics, also on a micro level, takes place not only within but especially outside national borders. It is as if crossing an international border fosters and amplifies political processes. Think for instance of all the successful coups d'état that have come from across the border (see Chapter IV).

Despite UNCHR's upheld policy of prohibiting refugees from engaging in political activities (Clark-Kazak 2011, 17), refugees' representatives, such as Euloge, are by definition political. In Kinshasa, he has grown to be well informed about the working of politics in general, and the working of his society in international contexts in particular, which makes him even more dedicated to becoming who he wants to become (De Bruijn and Wilson 2014). Refugee associations with a pronounced political character are not unique to Kinshasa (for other examples see Malkki 1995; Sommers 2001; S. Turner 2010; Clark-Kazak 2011). Euloge not only presents himself as a representative of the refugees, but on occasions such as the ceremony described above, he is treated as such. At the end, he was the one to receive the 1,000,000 FC, and it was he who was responsible for its distribution—a task he carefully documented by taking photos with his smartphone.

Being politically active outside his country expands Euloge's experience and leverage (i.e. base of people), which may become useful in the future. One can say that outside his country, Euloge builds up political capital by expanding his network far beyond the borders of the student community in Bangui, where he had been active before refuge. This capital became particularly palpable in our conversations after the minister's visit. Euloge was convinced he would be chosen to represent the CAR refugee community in Congo in the upcoming Bangui Forum:[311]

> So I don't know what the future holds, but if I had gone back, if I had gone back, I wouldn't have been told today, well, you have to go to the dialogue, for example. If the dialogue takes place today, I will go to the dialogue. So you have to see all this, you have to see all this part. Destiny exists. (Interview Euloge, Kinshasa, 16 February 2015)[312]

Unfortunately for Euloge, he was bypassed and ended up not assisting in the forum; somebody else had been sent. This is not the first time he was excluded from such an opportunity. The year before, the former president of the student's association had wanted to invite him to the 2014 Forum of Brazzaville, which he missed owing to lack of funding. The trip across the river, from Kinshasa to Brazzaville, had proven, ironically, too expensive. Even though Euloge cultivates a political competence and is recognized by many in his community, one should avoid romanticizing his political experience of migration. Political capital and experience do not seem to suffice; in the end, Euloge is part of a web of structural constraints and asymmetric power relationships which, if he wants to

[311] The forum took place in Bangui from 4 to 11 May 2015.

[312] *Donc je ne sais pas ce que l'avenir réserve mais, si je rentrais, si je rentrais on allait pas me dire aujourd'hui, bon tu dois aller au dialogue, par exemple. Si le dialogue aura lieu aujourd'hui, je vais aller au dialogue. Donc il faut voir tout ça, il faut voir toute cette partie, il y a le destin qui existe.*

continue on his political path, he will not be able to avoid (Clark-Kazak 2011, 20). Euloge will have to abide by the rules of the game and play his cards well.

d) Networks : Playing different cards

In his article 'Crisis as Opportunity', Akin Iwilade argues that young people in Africa define themselves by seeking to work within and at the same time around the corrupt system (Iwilade 2013a, 1058). I believe Euloge is part of a new generation of upcoming politicians, who, like him, both reject and embrace the system of patronage that governs their country. Euloge, like many youngsters, is very well aware that the patronage system has eroded his country:

> For a time now CAR has become like a personal garden, an inheritance, a personal business for the members of parliament: 'It's just me with my family and that's it; others are forced to look at me.' That's how CAR works. (Interview, Kinshasa, 2–3 February 2015)[313]

He is also genuinely preoccupied with his community and repeatedly criticizes the fact that in order to become a politician in his country, one needs to either join the patronage game or have walked the path of rebellion. However, on the other hand, Euloge underlines his respect for the elders and subjects himself to existing institutions (such as the CAR embassy or the UNCHR). Moreover, his background and upbringing suggest continuity rather than change. Being the son of a high-ranking civil servant during Kolingba's regime, Euloge was privileged in many ways—most notably in terms of access to education and having a decent living standard. However, despite his deep-felt respect, Euloge grew uncomfortable within his family and tried to gradually break loose. As we will see in the following chapter, fleeing to Kinshasa would be only the last step in that process.

Euloge's acts and zealousness when it comes to the community also tell us something about him. In any case, his political position, first in the students' association at the university in Bangui and later within the CAR refugee community in Kinshasa, is ambivalent. A born diplomat, Euloge learned to 'work within and around the system' (Iwilade 2013a) and to navigate different networks (Chabal 2009). In Kinshasa, he not only navigates within the circle of refugees, but also in the broader community of Central Africans that includes the Central African ambassador in Kinshasa. Thus, even if Euloge was fully aware that going too often to the embassy could bring him trouble, to the point of risking his refugee status, he equally made an effort to stay on good terms with the ambassador.

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[313] *Il fut un bon moment la RCA est devenu un jardin personnelle, un patrimoine, une entreprise personnelle aux parlementaires: 'ce n'est que moi avec ma famille et voilà, les autres sont obligés de me regarder.' C'est comme ça la RCA.*

At the time of my research, the CAR ambassador was a proud Gbaya who advocated that working the land (i.e. agriculture) was the only path towards peace. A loaded political stance. Euloge would often visit him and help him out with small errands. His motorbike and access to the refugee services were an asset in this regard. Euloge thus tried to keep doors open to potential possibilities, personally and politically, and he learned to juggle with several worlds: sometimes he was a refugee, at others he was a CAR citizen, and yet at others he was Kinois. Contextually, embodying hybrid identities is one of the tricks for getting by in the urban jungle (Wilson Janssens 2018a), and it also helps to position oneself strategically and usefully for others. At the end of the day, one does not know which network will be activated in the future.

Trying not to give away too much information about oneself, keeping one's reputation clean, and knowing one's adversaries are all equally important in the interface between formal and everyday politics. Euloge had learned his lesson in Bangui:

> We were with [the president] when we were elected. After a while he starts seeing the money, he becomes untouchable,[314] so I withdrew. Automatically there were errors from my side. He had been scared. At night I was called to negotiate, I was told *'petit*, you see this is how it is'. At one point it didn't work [between us], I was taken out of the group. Automatically I had received [Seleka] elements. (Interview with Euloge, Kinshasa, 16 February 2015)[315]

> When the Seleka came, they were the ones who had distorted this information ... our own brothers, we knew each other! (Interview with Le Firmin, Kinshasa, 13 February 2015)[316]

Euloge was very much aware of the darker side of politics, which was also played out at the university premises. Taking distance from an older generation, but especially from old and detrimental practices such as 'seeing money' (which points to embezzlement), remained a challenge. One had to be strong-headed, yet at the same time, Euloge needed to deal with these practices too. This darker side of the political machinery did not deter Euloge from his involvement. As we will see

[314] On another occasion, Euloge mentioned that the president had started driving a big car.

[315] *On était avec [le president]. Quand on était élus, après quelque temps il voit l'argent il devient intouchable là, alors je me suis retirer. Automatiquement j'ai eu des éléments d'erreur. Il avait eu peur, la nuit on m'appelle pour négocier avec moi, on me dit petit tout ça, tu vois c'est ça. A un moment ça ne marchait pas [entre nous], moi j'étais retiré du groupe, automatiquement j'ai eu des éléments [Séléka].*

[316] *Quand Seleka est venue, c'est eux qui ont déformé cette information … nos frères qu'on se connaissait!*

in the next chapter, it is part of the revolutionary fight against the older generation—or rather against the mentality of the older generation.

Chapter VIII. Freedom, revolution, and creativity

1) Introduction

I have dedicated the last three chapters to spatial mobility and social becoming. In them I have illustrated how Euloge, Le Firmin, and other conflict mobiles left Bangui and moved to Kinshasa. Through this journey they have been transformed from students to refugees, from Banguissois to Kinois. They learned to fend for themselves, and it also formed a path into adulthood. These youngsters have become conflict mobiles. Euloge, who was an apprentice student leader in Bangui, became a committed refugee leader. His 'becoming' has been not only of a social, but also of a political nature: political becoming. In the future, Euloge envisions translating his experience in Kinshasa, added to his years as a student leader in Bangui, into political capital (which includes network building) that could be useful within the political context of his country. Adulthood is, hence, not an final destination, nor does the growth path stop when the refugee-students turn into responsible, self-sufficient, and engaged adults.

Building upon the last three chapters, I will now illustrate how the CAR refugees reflect on their paths in terms of continuity, revolution, and art. The focus here is on the ways out of stuckedness. In choosing to focus on these, rather than on the static nature of 'liminality' or 'waithood' (Utas 2005; Honwana 2012; Sommers 2012) , I prefer to underline creativity despite waithood and despite its more spatial translation, stuckedness. My purpose is not to enumerate possibilities in constraint, but through the narrative of the refugee stories, I want to celebrate the creativity and do justice to the time the refugees spent sharing their empowering stories with me. Despite the hardships, Kinshasa became a site of ambivalent opportunities, of stuckedness, certainly, but one that is informed by active as opposed to idle waiting (S. Turner 2015). Euloge, and others, found in it a '*nouveau souffle de vie*' (a new breath of life) and managed to turn uncertainty into an asset (S. Turner 2015, 190). Their paths thus became, as it were, filled with a sense of freedom, while stemming from the interaction between conflict and mobilities.

2) Continuity: Escaping the fraternal yoke

When I asked Euloge why it would not be better to return to Bangui, even empty-handed, in order to continue studying, instead of suffering in Kinshasa, Euloge agreed hesitantly. And then he added:

> That's a very good question. That's true. It's better to go back and evolve in Bangui, it's true... Except that in my conception, it's my own decision. If I had the chance to have a diploma in hand, it wouldn't be that hard to go back. I could today, I could also tell my parents. Several times I

> have been told to go home; my parents, they don't want me to stay like this, they told me to go home. But I refused, I said no! You can't go back in this way; I'd like to have it organized. Maybe it's destiny .... I think that all I do, all I say, it is really in God's hands. (Interview, Kinshasa, 16 February 2015)[317]

There is another level, perhaps a more transcendent, even spiritual, level of growth. In the quotation above, Euloge refers to a higher being, one to whom he devotes his life. Yet, simultaneously, Euloge proclaims his determination and self-will in the two phrases: 'It's *my own* decision'; 'I *refused*, I said *no*!' For Euloge, leaving the comfort and family ties behind, moving away from a secure, yet suffocating, environment, was a journey of self-affirmation—and a quest for freedom.

Being one of the youngest in his family, Euloge felt overprotected, in particular by his elder brothers. As we have seen in Chapter VII, soon after finishing his baccalaureate (high school degree), Euloge fell seriously ill and was taken care of by one of his older brothers in Bimbo. As he recovered and waited for the results of the high school exam—which in Bangui can take up to a year, forcing many youngsters to lose time waiting—Euloge decided to move back to town, not to the parental house, as his sisters had wanted, but to the university campus. Even though Euloge stressed how deeply he respected his elders, he did not feel he had to comply with their rules any longer. He was hungry for freedom; leaving the house of his brother was his first step towards that freedom, but certainly not the only one.

Fleeing, like migration, is a path of self-fulfilment, one that can turn the individual into a person of respect (Bredeloup 2008, 298). Refuge was for Euloge a way of escaping the familiar, or rather fraternal, yoke. Interestingly, refuge did not form a rupture with the past. In line with Klute and Hahn, Euloge's departure from Bangui cannot be conceived as a complete break (Klute and Hahn 2007, 9); on the contrary, it seems that the rupture with his family had taken place before fleeing to Kinshasa, especially in his mind, though not yet completely in the physical sense. In the following excerpt, Euloge describes the relationship with two of his older brothers in Bangui and tries to draw a comparison with his situation in Kinshasa:

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[317] *Ça c'est une très bonne question. C'est vrai. C'est mieux de rentrer et d'évoluer à Bangui, c'est vrai… Sauf que c'est ma conception à moi, c'est ma décision à moi, si j'avais eu la chance d'avoir un peu de diplôme en main, ça n'allait pas me couter cher de rentrer. Je peux aujourd'hui, je peux dire aussi à mes parents, plusieurs fois on m'a dit de rentrer, mes parents, ne veulent pas me voir rester comme ça, il m'ont dit de rentrer. Mais moi j'avais refusé, j'ai dit non! Il faut pas rentrer de cette manière, moi j'aimerai à que ça soit organisé. Peut-être ce que je dis est un destin. … Moi je pense que tout ce que je fais, tout ce que je dis vraiment c'est un programme de Dieu.*

CW: *But then, if I understand correctly, in Bangui you are really comfortable?*

Euloge: I'm fine in Bangui.

CW: *You eat well, you don't have a problem with clothes …*

Euloge: Yes, yes.

CW: *You told me that the motorbike …*

Euloge: Well, it's not my motorbikes, or my cars; it's the parents', my older brothers'. [The first brother] has two bikes; it's with these bikes that I ride around. But [the second brother] he had paid for the car so that we could rent it out as a taxi. He has his own car which he uses to go out in the evenings and a car from work. So he bought it just so he could rent it out as a taxi. But I didn't have a car or a personal motorbike; it's for my older brothers.

CW: *But the bike was at your disposal?*

Euloge: At my disposal, yes.

CW: *So it is in Bangui where you learned to ride it?*

Euloge: Uh-hum

CW: *But here in Kinshasa the bike is yours, right?*

Euloge: Yes, yes, it's mine. [laughs]

CW: *You like that?*

Euloge: I like it; it is a continuity, right?

CW: *You were telling me that in Bangui you don't pay for petrol?*

Euloge: I don't pay for it. [The first brother receives 5 litres of fuel at work]. I only use their fuel. [The second one works in an oil company]. So it's [laughs], it's always taken care of [*prise en charge*]. Even to cure myself, sometimes I cure myself on their account. [The second] often gets treated at the Institut Pasteur, he and his whole family. The older one goes to a clinic in town. So, I get medically treated like that.

(Interview, Kinshasa, 16 February 2015)

As Klute and Hahn have described, Euloge perceives his experience of refuge as personal growth, in terms of *continuité* (continuity). Both in Bangui as in Kinshasa, Euloge had driven a motorbike. In Bangui, one of his older brothers owned two motorbikes and received five litres of petrol a day. His other brother worked for an oil company and was able to move around as he wanted. Consequently, Euloge never had the need to own a motorbike nor to pay for petrol. Moving around the city did not pose a problem for him. Moreover, he did not need to pay for medical fees either, as he would use the work-privileged treatments of his brothers. As long as Euloge complied with his brothers' rules

and wishes, he could make use not only of their motorbikes, but also of the petrol they were granted through their jobs. This was no doubt comfortable.

The situation in Kinshasa, however, was the exact opposite: here Euloge rode his own motorbike instead of a borrowed one and had to pay for petrol, maintenance costs, and unofficial contributions to the army and traffic police—a considerable expenditure. When, during our interview, we underlined the contrast, he laughed. He was proud he managed to obtain a motorbike through his own efforts (granted by the UNHCR) and not through his brothers. It is here where the continuity lies: by moving from the family home to campus, first, and then from Bangui to Kinshasa, Euloge was *continuing* his path towards 'personal freedom' (Sommers 2012, 230). He emphasized:

> There are no parents here [in Kinshasa] to control me. I was already a grown-up boy, but I was afraid of my parents, of my older brothers .... Here [I have] all the freedom; I became a parent, I can lead my life as I want. My responsibility is in my hands. (Interview, Kinshasa, 16 February 2015)[318]

In August 2016, I followed up Euloge's family in Bangui and met his older brother, the second one. He was happy to receive me. From our conversation, I could gather that he had lost contact with Euloge. Euloge's decision to leave seemed to still hurt his brother. Even if he could not agree with his decision—nor could the rest of his family—he understood his younger brother needed to spread his wings in his own way. I often tried to picture Euloge while crossing the river to Zongo and wondered who had taken Euloge to the waterside on that early morning in April 2013—certainly not his brother. What did he see during those last minutes standing on the right riverbank of the Ubangi? Had he looked behind or not? Had he stared into a horizon that promised uncertainties and opportunities at the same time? It was only when Euloge neared Kinshasa, after weeks of hardships on the road, that he called Bangui to say he had arrived safe and well. As Euloge's brother told me this, I tried to explain how hard the road had been, how courageous his younger brother was, and how meaningful his work in the community is. Telephone calls from Kinshasa to Bangui were expensive at that time. Whatsapp, Messenger, Imo, and other social media were not as widespread as they are today. Knowing I would go back to Bangui, Euloge and Le Firmin had urged me to describe in detail how difficult life in Kinshasa was. It would have been too expensive to share that by phone. I am not sure I accomplished this mission. There are things that are just too difficult to explain.

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[318] *Il n'y a pas un parent ici [à Kinshasa] pour me contrôler. J'étais déjà grand garçon mais j'avais peur de mes parents, de mes grands frères. … Ici [j'ai] toute la liberté, je suis devenu parent, je peux mener ma vie comme je vois, ma responsabilité est entre mes mains.*

But let us return to the symbol of the motorbike. In Chapter VII I argued that moving around the city on his own motorbike was an act of symbolic mobility, in the sense that Euloge becomes a more efficient, credible, and better-connected community leader. Continuity seems to add another layer to this symbolic mobility. Just as for '*benskineurs'* (motor-taxis) in Douala (Cameroon), '[c]irculation is also about acquiring a facility to operate everywhere, and to not be known as a specific son or daughter of a specific family coming from a specific place with specific ethnic origins and professions' (Abdoumaliq Simone 2005, 520), for Euloge the facility to operate, by his own means, in Kinshasa reinforces his independence from the comforts his family can offer him in Bangui. The continuity resides in a continuous journey of personal growth. Had Euloge stayed in CAR, he would have been physically, and perhaps also socially, mobile, but he would have been existentially stuck (Hage 2009). Escaping Bangui meant for him existential mobility and freedom in its most ontological sense.

In no way do I question the gravity of the conflict in CAR, nor its deep-felt consequences for the CAR refugee-students in Kinshasa. However, I cannot claim that insecurity was the single cause that triggered the students to leave Bangui. It intrigues me, how in contexts of conflict some decide to leave while others decide to stay put (Both, Mouguia and Wilson in preparation). Euloge managed to turn the timing of the crisis to his own advantage; he had no strict responsibilities (children, for instance) and was hungry to study. Fleeing from war meant, for him, fleeing towards new potential (yet risky) opportunities—as if *running away from* something held in it the promise of *running towards* something else.

Just as economics seems to be only the visible surface of travelling motives for so-called economic migrants, fleeing conflict is also only one out of many motives for the CAR refugees to be in Kinshasa. Beneath the surface there is not only a sphere of ambitions to learn and a curiosity about the discovery of new people and places (Klute and Hahn 2007, 21), but also the potential to bypass and surmount the hierarchy of age order (Klute and Hahn 2007, 22). New rules stem from new migrations (Abdoumaliq Simone 2005, 529); and for Euloge, seeking refuge in Kinshasa—where fraternal structures and family roles could be turned upside down—opened up new spaces. Instead of being looked after by his brothers, it was actually Euloge who was taking care of himself. And more: he was dealing with his own younger brother's capriciousness and caring for the community.

3) *'Nous avons un esprit révolutionnaire'*

> So we had to choose between rejoining the rebellion or dying under the cursed trees of the neighbourhood. (Landry Kassaï, in preparation)

The quest for freedom is an expression of being against the established order, a manifestation of feeling limited or suffocated by this order. This quest and the forms it takes in engaged artistry, as we will see hereunder, can be read as revolutionary acts. Revolution, however, takes different forms. There are revolutions that topple long-standing oppressive regimes, such as the Burkinabé revolution (as we saw in Chapter II). There are other revolutions that take on more *emic* and personal meanings, yet are no less politically significant. The context of Kinshasa exemplifies how the macro and the micro level feed one another. Inspired by the events in Burkina Faso, the Congolese stood up against their own government; the urban CAR refugees, too, were going through an awakening. As if motivated by the context, they too saw themselves as revolutionaries.

On more than one occasion the students pointed to their 'revolutionary spirit'. In fact, all the inhabitants of *La maison blanche* (see Chapter VII) seemed to possess this spirit. As a Western researcher, I often struggled to understand their revolution. At times, I would link it to Euloge's grassroots endeavours and caring for the community, yet this did not seem to clarify it all. Likewise, neither going through the Kinois school—successfully learning how to fend for oneself—nor escaping the family yoke seem to suffice as explanations. I then understood that their revolution was no less than the revolutionary struggle grounded in a human striving for renewal and rebirth (Hannah Arendt in M. Jackson 2008, 60). This rebirth was to take place vis-à-vis the older generation and *their* established order. The older generation was doubtlessly represented by the family the refuges had left behind in CAR, but also by the older and inefficient representatives of the refugees in Kinshasa—and by the UNHCR, in the sense that, as we saw in Chapter VI, this institution replaced the function of parents. Just as circulating through the city connotes for *benskineurs* a set of tactics that attempts to elude a range of political controls whose purveyors are often content to maintain youth in a state of developmental suspension—so as to better manipulate them (Abdoumaliq Simone 2005, 520)—so too the refugee-students became well informed about the working of politics and about the working of their societies in international contexts, in order to circumvent, or rather hope to bypass, the patrimonial order. Their new knowledge and experience encouraged them to become who they wanted to be in their own eyes (De Bruijn and Wilson 2014), and especially in the eyes of the generation that preceded them.

The CAR refugees were tired of the way their country had hitherto been managed—as a personal garden (see Chapter VII)—and also of the ways in which youth had hitherto been excluded. This exclusion is the result of a policy of mis-education: youth are not educated to take on responsibilities; on the contrary, they are looked upon with disdain. Revolution, thus, meant a fight to include new blood in a rigid gerontocratic order. For Le Firmin, writing was a revolutionary act that could

> raise awareness among young people and to make sure that young people stop seeing themselves the way they are seeing themselves. It could also incite young people to revolution—not a negative revolution, but a positive revolution. That is, a revolution in meritocracy [...] my concern is that young people grow to have the capacity. Because today elders still despise this new generation, because we don't have the level and all that. So I would like us young people to be aware, to try to do something serious and that can still give us a certain value.[319]

In addition to war, CAR refugee-students also escape a political and patrimonial order that plunged them into a social moratorium (Vigh 2006a; 2006b). Once in Kinshasa, they found themselves in yet another moratorium. They were thus confronted by a double moratorium, from which escape in merely spatial terms was not possible—that is, there was no escape possible by moving, migrating, or fleeing. Euloge's and Le Firmin's revolution was one of value, of merit—a move away from the patrimonial relationships that have destroyed the workings of their country and their society. Even if respect for the elders is a fundamental principle, they felt ready to contribute in a lively way and actively (these are the words Euloge used) to the development of their country, which is in dire need of breaking the political carousel (Day 2016), the system of elite recycling (Oldenburg 2016, 5), in order to make room for a new political mentality. The fact that Euloge was a recognized leader of the refugee community, above people who were older than him, is also an act of revolution. Recognition through merit. The double moratorium in which the CAR refugee-students found themselves pushed them to fight a mindset that revolted and excluded them. In this sense, they were not in search of opportunities elsewhere—at least not permanent opportunities; they were striving to change their country.

Euloge often complained that in order to be a political leader in his country, one needed to walk the path of rebellion first. And indeed, fluid loyalties, and politico-military entrepreneurs who move between different rebel groups and government assignments (Debos 2008) are omnipresent where he comes from. The growth of rebel groups is a result of preventing youth from having a say in the country. The latter fill the lower (and most vulnerable to risk) ranks, only to be manipulated by the entrepreneurs in the race to their own prosperity. Disenfranchised youth, both in the cities as well as

[319] *sensibiliser les jeunes et à faire de sorte que les jeunes arrêtent de voir comme ils sont en train de voir, exciter aussi les jeunes à la revolution, mais pas une revolution negative, mais une revolution positive. C'est-à-dire une revolution de la méritocratie […] mon soucis est que les jeunes aient la capacité. Parce qu'aujourd'hui les gens méprisent toujours cette nouvelle generation parce qu'on n'a pas le niveau et tout ça. Donc j'aimerais bien que nous les jeunes, nous prenons la conscience, nous essayons de faire quelque chose de sérieux et qui peut quand même nous donner une certaine valeur.*

outside, will look for other paths to make themselves heard. Rebellion is one—revolution another. But in fact they are not that different. They are both an expression of and a claim for a vital need to make oneself heard. Even if the means available in the city (Kinshasa, Brazzaville, N'Djaména, and why not also Bangui) are different from those available at the margins of the margin (northern CAR, north-western Congo), the plea to be integrated within the state, and also within a global economy without global shadows (Ferguson 2006), remains the same. We should be more attentive to these calls.

4) *'La création est un atout majeur'*

Revolution is also expressed in more creative terms. In this sense, Euloge was not the only one to have found a new breath of life in Kinshasa; there were others too. In Chapter VI, for instance, we saw that for Le Firmin Kinshasa held the promise of an African version of the American dream. Even if he had not been able to continue his studies in law, he established a family in Kinshasa and became a responsible man. Other refugees turned to art; think of Oscar and his beadwork, or Willy, who, despite being an actor, used his creativity as a hairdresser and became successful in that (both are described in Chapter VII). I will dedicate this sub-section, however, to more explicit art forms, as represented by the young slam poet Esatis, the returned blogger and writer Max, and the older actor Papa Koyabade—all embody the capacity to transform exile into an artistic experience.

Slam poetry

Perhaps due to his taciturnity, I must admit that at the beginning I did not really take much notice of Esatis. Yet, from an early stage, he made an effort to interest me in his artistic projects. Slowly but surely, Esatis grew to be a friend and an inspiring counter-voice. One of the youngest sons of a late army officer, he was born into a large family. As we saw in Chapter V, after the failed coup d'état by the fallen president Kolingba in 2001, Esatis was forced to leave Bangui with his family and found shelter for two years at Mole refugee camp. He was just a boy at the time, yet he remembers the camp well—and retains these bad memories. As he became a refugee in 2013 for the second time in his life, these memories coloured Esatis' decision to circumvent Mole and head towards Kinshasa instead. Like other refugees, Esatis keeps close ties with the UNHCR, yet he found ways, through familial ties and other patrimonial relationships, to not depend solely on the UNHCR.

Just before the 2013 crisis, as Esatis was in *première*, the year before graduation, he had grown fond of language and envisaged becoming a writer. The crisis and refuge did not cause him to abandon his dream; on the contrary, in Kinshasa he managed to enrol at school and pay for his own school fees, graduating in 2016 from the Latin–philosophy stream, after which he enrolled at the public yet

expensive University of Kinshasa (UNIKIN), where he opted to study journalism. The political atmosphere around the highly contested third mandate of Kabila and the recurrent protest demonstrations and strikes on campus dissuaded him from studying and encouraged him to focus fully on his art, with which he had already started in 2014. However, in early 2019, after elections took place in DR Congo and were won by Tshisekedi, Esatis picked up studying again and enrolled at the Université Libre de Kinshasa (ULK).

Perhaps inspired by the thriving music scene in the city, Esatis gave a twist to his writing aspirations. He first moved from writing to rap and, subsequently, from rap to the more literary genre known as slam poetry. It is in this new cultural expression form that one can situate Esatis. Throughout my research I have seen this young man grow. Esatis pressed me to go along with him as he navigated the scene of Congolese musicians with whom he could collaborate. I followed him to different improvised studios in the city, from Kingabwa to Masina, from N'Djili to Ngaba. At times he introduced me to potential sponsors and new collaborators. Through him I discovered the slam scene in Kinshasa; and partly through him, as well, I was triggered much later to learn more about the slam poetry scene in CAR. In both countries, as elsewhere in Central Africa, the slam scene has been growing in the last five years.

A slam poet masters the spoken word which she or he proclaims or sings with a minor musical accompaniment; one is something between a poet and a rapper. The roots of slam poetry have been accredited to the American poet Marc Smith, who started the poetry slam in Chicago (USA) in 1984 (Mattern 2013, 89). In France, slam made its appearance in the mid-1990s, only to be spread a decade later through the Western Francophone world: Belgium, Switzerland, and Quebec. In Central Africa, it started appearing in the mid-2000s; it is thus a fairly recent form of artistic expression there. Slam often takes the form of a protest song against the wrongdoings of politicians (De Bruijn et al. 2017; Pajon 2017), and in many African countries it seems to have taken over this function from rap. Slam poets inscribe themselves in the register of African orality and are considered to be 'modern *griots'*, even though their performance is built on the co-existence of orality, writing, and digital media (Aterianus-Owanga 2015). In the last decade slam has spread out to other countries too: Chad, DR Congo, Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Mali—all have established communities of slammers. In November 2018, the first Africa Cup of Slam Poetry took place in N'Djaména.[320]

[320] For more information, see the official website https://www.casp-acsp.org/ [Accessed 24 February 2019]

After completing fieldwork in 2015, I continued following Esatis—and in particular his musical development. Since then, he has managed to write dozens of songs and is working on an album entitled '*Sergent au service*' (Esatis Lebon 2017). We keep in contact through Messenger and WhatsApp, through which from time to time he sends me some of his work, and in November 2017 we met in N'Djaména on the occasion of the *Ndjam s'enflamme en slam* festival.[321] In his poetry, Esatis proclaims his love for his country, speaks of the joys and pains of exile, the recent conflict in CAR, and African politics and poverty. At times he pleads for help at the doorstep of the international community; at other times, he wants to reinforce a sentiment of pan-Africanism. Even though he uses French and, in many cases, Sango in his texts, Esatis' style differs from that of the slam poets in CAR. Having learned the art in Kinshasa, his style is rather closer to Kinois slam poetry, a form that is often accompanied by acoustic guitar. This is particularly clear in the different appearances he has made together with Congolese artists, such as Maxel Muya, Nackson, and Isongo.

Figure 63 Esatis becomes a slam poet
From left to right: Esatis looks at the *échangeur* from the studio 'La capital du crime' in Kingabwa (26 August 2014). Esatis records '*On a du mal*' at a studio in Ngaba (5 February 2015). Esatis proclaims at the *N'Djam s'enflamme en slam* festival (24 October 2017). The first two photos were taken by the author, the third by Sjoerd Sijsma.

Here is an excerpt from one of the poems Esatis proclaimed in N'Djaména (2017):

[321] Follow this link for one of his performances: https://vimeo.com/242830206 (accessed 24 February 2019)

La vie nègre et le vinaigre sont aigres	The life of a black person and vinegar are sour
Ma vie de nègre est maigre c'est vrai	My black life is thin, it's true
Nos dirigeants nègres sont des tigres je crois	Our black leaders are tigers, I think
C'est pourquoi la vie nègre et le vinaigre sont aigres	That's why black life and vinegar are sour
Le quotidien d'un nègre, convient à un nègre	A black man's day to day is suitable for a black
Il suffit d'avoir ventre plein, nègre content	A full stomach is enough, for happy black
J'aime cette vie de nègre, même si cela est maigre	I love this black life, even if it's skinny
Pourvu qu'elle soit stable!	I hope it's stable!
Nos dirigeants nègres l'on rendue pénible	Our black leaders have made it dreadful
Malgré qu'elle est minable	Despite the fact that it's pathetic
Goûte un peu le vinaigre, tu sauras la vie nègre	Try some vinegar, you'll know the black life
Si tu me vois maigre, tu vois que je suis nègre	If you see me skinny, you will see I'm black

Theatre

More seasoned than Esatis, Papa Koyabade, father of five children and grandfather of two, was an accountant in Bangui. His motives for coming to Kinshasa, once again, cannot be reduced to a flight from violent conflict. Similar to the Fulani described in Chapter II, Papa Koyabade found himself caught between two fires. The Seleka, on the one hand, mistook his name for that of one of Bozizé's close collaborators, while the Anti-Balaka did not trust him because he was active in the diamond sector, as an accountant, and thus by definition friendly to Muslims. In addition to this, his family-in-law accused him of witchcraft and of causing the death of his wife, who had passed away a couple of years prior to the crisis, after he had bought a plot of land in order to dig for diamonds.[322] After his house was pillaged and moving (literally sleeping) around town became untenable, Papa Koyabade and his family fled to Kinshasa in different waves. In the first half of 2014, they all found themselves in the compound of their aunt in the Makala district, who had moved to Kinshasa a long time before. It is at this point that I met the family, before they split up again, each leaving on his or her own path.

Next to his responsible side, Papa Koyabade hid an artist in himself. In the past, Papa Koyabade had written religious songs and toured around his country, and it seemed that refuge in Kinshasa was

[322] Success in life is often related to the spirits of the underworld.

offering him an opportunity to express himself in that way again and even to expand his interest in the domains of theatre, playwriting, and film. Throughout history, Kinshasa has been a magnet for artists, and musicians in particular (Stewart 2003; Kubik 2007), and Papa Koyabade was particularly aware of this. He thus came to the conclusion that Kinshasa, more than Bangui, was a more suitable environment in which to develop his artistic skills—even just considering the city's sheer size in terms of potential members of an interested audience. In contrast to many young CAR refugees who expressed their willingness to move back to Bangui, Papa Koyabade envisioned from the outset a future in Kinshasa and was actively looking for someone who could support his work. With this in mind, he had presented himself to the local television and theatre groups as a script writer (he rehearsed, for instance, weekly at the Cinarc housed in Franco's 123 Building in Matonge. See photos in Figure 64). Papa Koyabada acted like a *sapeur*,[323] always carefully dressed, always elegant and gentle in his movements and his words. Even if he may have seemed ridiculous to some, and even if his plays were not always well written, he was inspirational in his resoluteness. It is never too late.

Figure 64 Collage '*La creation est un atout majeur*'
(Creation is a major asset), composed with pictures of Papa Koyabade during rehearsals at the Cinarc (26 May 2014), at the compound in Makala and the local TV studio 'Numerica' (29 May 2014).

[323] Société des ambianceurs et personnes élégantes. The *sape* is a cultural movement in both Congos composed of *sapeurs* or Congolese dandies. By dressing up (there are different styles ranging from classic and elegant to extravagant) and buying expensive clothing, the *sapeurs* defy societal rules and transform failure into apparent victory. *Sape* was turned into a verb, *saper* (to sape), which means to be conscious about one's clothes and to dress well.

Literature

In comparison with Esatis and Papa Koyabade, Max did not find his new breath of life in exile but once he was back at home. However, I would argue, his experience in exile, together with growing up through decennia of conflict and duress, did inform his artistic project. As a young boy studying in the seminary with the priests, Max learned to keep a diary. He kept short pieces of text with him, which he had lost during his flight in 2013. Before leaving Kinshasa in 2014, however, Max had shown me some of his remaining and newly written texts and poems. As he had previously worked as a journalist, he wanted to take up blogging. After a couple of attempts, he managed to start writing consistently from January 2016, at the time of presidential elections in CAR, a year-and-a-half after voluntarily repatriating.[324]

Even though he felt relieved at being back in Bangui, Max had a hard time making ends meet, and his gaze is turned outside the country. As previously mentioned, Max knocked on different doors in search of a job, but he grew disillusioned. In the meantime, he became a devoted father, which requires him to care not only for himself but also for his daughter. Nevertheless, Max still cherishes the possibility of studying abroad. In fact, one of the first administrative steps he undertook upon arrival back in Bangui was to get a passport.[325] When I last visited him in May 2018, four years after his return, he showed me the passport, still unused and due to expire in 2019. One way or another, writing has kept Max afloat. Writing and gardening. As he inherited land from his grandmother, together with a group youngsters he has turned to local agriculture. Max cultivates cucumbers. Unfortunately, even if state assistance exists on paper for these types of projects, which do not require major funding, it is difficult to be selected and to actually receive the funding.[326]

As regards writing, Max chose not to join the journal for which he used to work prior to his refuge—at least not fully. Instead, he has opted to become more visible within the blogosphere. He is, for instance, part of the association of CAR bloggers (ABCA) who are very active in social media. In contrast with the neighbouring countries, the bloggers in CAR still enjoy relative freedom of expression. As they explain, they are not persecuted for what they write, even though at times they need to subject themselves to the system of patronage in order to survive. It is his blogging that laid

[324] Max's blog Le chroniqueur centraficain: http://lechroniqeurcentrafricain.over-blog.com/

[325] The CAR passport is issued only in Bangui. CAR embassies in other African countries can issue only a *laisser-passer* to its citizens.

[326] Esatis' cousin also set up a similar cooperation, based not on agriculture, however, but on fishery. He too struggled to get funding.

the basis for the book he is writing, which is an amalgamation of prose, fiction, political analysis and opinion, report style with recommendations, blogging, of course, and poetry. It is partly autobiographical, yet at the same time it combines a range of voices. Not everything written here has been experienced by Max in person, though elements from his own life are woven into the text. Perhaps the book in process is best read as a product of auto-ethnography (Khosravi 2018) and popular culture, a genre which develops perspectives on topics that people themselves feel are interesting, attractive, or important (Barber 2018, 3).

Here, I wish to share an excerpt from a poem Max wrote together with Tezman. It is entitled 'The cry of hope' and deals with refugees, war, and peace. Max and Tezman first read and performed this poem for us in June 2014 in Kinshasa. The full poem will be published in his forthcoming book (M.-L. Kassaï in preparation).

The cry of hope

(written with E.T.)

Crack crack crack crack boom

Crack crack crack crack boom

A weapon, a sound, a man, a death.

Crack crack crack crack boom

Crack crack crack crack boom

Suffering, violence, movements,

Refugees.

Crack crack crack crack boom

Crack crack crack crack boom

My name is war, I'm meant to destroy,

rape, massacre.

I leave nothing in my path

Men, women, children

I slaughter them

Ah ah ah ah ah ah ah

But who has deceived you?

My sufferings are as sweet as honey

Behold, I create rebellions, I invade cities

And humanity is waiting to be delivered

Ah ah ah ah ah ah ah

Part Three

Discussion and concluding remarks

Chapter IX. Conflict mobiles and immobiles

1) Categorizing moving people

a) Ambivalent refugee-ness

Rather than a stark division between the two countries, the Ubangi River between CAR and DR Congo is a zone of contact. This connectivity and communication highway has fostered not only commerce but also foreign penetration for many centuries. People have crossed from one shore to the other in order to buy and sell goods and to visit relatives; but at times of conflict, they have also crossed the river looking for protection on the other riverbank. Throughout this thesis I have followed some of these mobile people who have crossed the border as a consequence of the recent conflict in CAR. Yet, their mobility patterns are not solely informed by conflict, nor are their trajectories necessarily new; rather, they are embedded in a context of previous waves of flight.

Even if the bulk of this thesis focuses on a group of urban refugee-students in Kinshasa, it contests and questions the definition of *the refugee*. Defined as any person who flees the country of her nationality owing to a well-founded fear of persecution, this thesis invites the reader to look beyond reductive labels. The definition of a refugee is not exclusive, meaning that an individual cannot be reduced to being only a refugee. There is not one kind of refugee. Nor are refugees either passive victims on the one hand, nor resilient actors on the other. The reality is more layered and nuanced. Among the people who fled CAR after 2013, some found refuge in refugee camps; others found refuge in towns along the border (which often are situated relatively close to the refugee camps); others made their way to larger cities and even to the capitals of neighbouring countries (the urban refugees); and yet others have found themselves in improvised limbo zones, such as the group of fishermen who settled on an island in the middle of the river.

Fleeing to another country does not automatically turn an individual into a refugee; in addition to fleeing, one needs to self-identify with being a refugee. Some categorically refuse to become or see themselves as refugees. This is, for instance, the case of several CAR citizens who found refuge with host families, or lived as merchants around markets. Maman Dorothée, whose story I have presented in chapters II and IV, refused (at least partly) to become a refugee. Even if she and her family were housed at the refugee camp in Lanza (Republic of Congo), she could not comply with the camp policy of inactivity. Refugees were not supposed to engage in agriculture, to conduct business, to cross the river. But if she had not done so, she asked herself rhetorically, how would her children have eaten? Pregnant with her fifth child, Dorothée started the risky business of selling palm wine to armed men

along the riverbanks; as is the case with many others, she too does not fit the image of a dependent refugee.

But the list of people displaced owing to conflict is not complete with camp refugees, urban refugees, town refugees, IDPs, and people who resist the refugee category. Almost as an alliteration, the *retournés* (returnees)*, repatriés* (repatriates)*, refoulés* (expelled), and *réinstallés* (resettled) add themselves to the list of people who, not being *refugees* in the strict sense, move because of conflict. Even if I have discussed all these categories above, bringing them together here conveys a sense of how ridiculously puzzling the overlap of these categories can be. My purpose is to reflectively question the usefulness of these overlapping categories, to perhaps un-categorize (and un-border) them.

In Chapter II, I described the paradoxical situation I encountered in Libenge, in which CAR refugees crossed into DR Congo in order to flee conflict in CAR at the very same time that Congolese refugees were leaving CAR to return to their home country. Official repatriates are given a survival kit by the UNHCR to restart their lives; this can be money, blankets, pots and pans, sometimes even a house (as in Gemena or Dongo). Unofficial or voluntary repatriates, such as Max, who was fed up with refuge, do not receive any benefits; and at times they retain their refugee cards in case of a pending official repatriation, during which they can go back to the camp and present themselves as a refugee in order to profit from the potential repatriation benefits. Drawing a line between the refugee and the repatriate is not always that easy. As we have seen, in 2013 and 2014 it was not uncommon to see repatriated Congolese refugees in CAR becoming CAR refugees in their own country.

The returnees are those people who hold the citizenship of the country they flee to. In this thesis, returnees are, for instance, the Chadian citizens by affiliation (second and third generation) who were forced to leave CAR. In many cases, Chadian returnees felt more Centrafricain than they did Chadian. The paradox lies in that living in their own country, the returnees are considered neither refugees, repatriates, nor IDPs and thus do not fall under anyone's responsibility. Uprooted from their daily lives, they are forced to learn to fend for themselves. The *refoulés* are foreigners in the country from which they are forcibly expelled. *Refoulés* are those Congolese (DRC) who were expelled by force by the Congolese (RC) authorities from April to September 2014. Even if they held Congolese (RDC) nationality, many of them came from the rural north, had crossed the river from DR Congo to Congo (RC) in the north, and had never set foot in the capital (Kinshasa) of their own country before. In fact, many of them experienced living in Brazzaville before living in Kinshasa. Thus, in addition to being *refoulés*, these people from the north are also rural migrants to the city.

Finally, resettled refugees are those who have fled their country and, after having been received by a second country, are resettled to a third country—where they become, for instance, asylum seekers. Even though protracted displacement has become the rule rather than the exception in many African countries, resettlement has a permanent character. Being resettled is a hoped-for category, especially if the resettlement takes place in a Western country—often in Canada or the United States. Within the group of CAR refugees I have followed, I am aware of only one person, who had fled from Bangui to Kinshasa, crossed from Kinshasa to Brazzaville, and from there on was resettled in Canada. Canada is in fact not the third but the fourth host country in this particular trajectory, which I have followed both physically and digitally. While resettlement brings with it much hope, this hope is often enveloped in despair. The places available within the resettlement policies are scarce and thus highly coveted. This scarcity finds its expression in mistrust. The unwillingness to share information with others (including a researcher from a European university) is linked to an ontological fear of missing one's opportunity to be resettled. In the eyes of the CAR students in Kinshasa, *être réfugié c'est un marché* (being a refugee is a business). Rumours have it that Congolese humanitarian workers and government officials 'use' the stories of the CAR refugees, 'selling' them in order to send brothers and sisters to resettlement in the global North. This of course has been refuted publicly by the authorities. In an environment with limited opportunities, this mistrust should be read as an explanation for why so few refugees are resettled. Many believe themselves to be victims of (invisible) others who profit instead.

From a *longue durée* perspective, as Dennis Cordell suggests, forced migrations, especially those informed by a political conflict, date from long ago. Refugees *avant la lettre* have moved within Africa long before the 1951 UNHCR Refugee Convention and definition of a refugee. Writing about the nineteenth-century razzias that depopulated what is nowadays north-eastern CAR, Cordell notes that the humanitarian crises that resulted from them were no less severe than those we know today—they are simply less well documented. Historical flows of people in Central Africa can teach us a lot about contemporary refugee movements. The most important lesson, Cordell claims, is that Africans have been able to manage these types of calamities for centuries without the intervention of the West and its supposed humanitarian ethos. One of the strategies of fleeing, for instance, was to regroup in fortified villages where security could be provided. In essence, this does not differ from the clustering in refugee camps. These ancient and endogenous strategies of survival counter, once again, the 'dependency syndrome' discourse, as well as the perpetuation of stereotypes that nourish prejudices against so many Africans refugees (Cordell 2012).

Regarding the urban refugees, Kinshasa not only is an unwelcoming city to refugees, but constitutes a challenging living environment for its own inhabitants too. Kinshasa has been described as a 'city of refugees'—also in relation to the Kinois themselves. This phrase should be understood in the emotional sense, meaning that in order to survive Kinshasa, people look for escapisms, such as religion, the pleasure of beer and music, witchcraft, or violence—because in Kinshasa, nobody is really at ease (De Goede 2015a, 275). I often tried to confirm this general uneasiness in living—in the eyes of refugees who had come from elsewhere, such as Papa Afrique and Euloge—but in vain. Even if they acknowledged Kinshasa as a difficult place to live in, they underscored their particularly disadvantageous and vulnerable position: neither Papa Afrique nor Euloge possesses the right language knowledge nor did they have close-by family members on whom to rely when they first arrived. In this sense, the refugees in Kinshasa could be considered as being double refugees. They are refugees, on the one hand, because, feeling threatened in their country, they left in order to look for safety elsewhere. On the other hand, they are refugees because they too are prey to the escapist Kinois mentality—in order to cope, they too are forced to escape into music, religion, and other diversions.

Finally, in this thesis, refugees are not only refugees in the sense that when a particular situation arises, the group of CAR individuals whom I met in Kinshasa prefer to present themselves as cunning Kinois urbanites (when dealing with the traffic police), devoted students (during our conversations), or fervent citizens of their country (during official visits or public holidays, which they celebrate together at the CAR embassy). In addition to these roles, the CAR refugee-students are also brothers, sisters, sons and daughters, parents, friends, politicians, and artists. One identification does not exclude the other but is rather added upon the other. Just like Malkki's urban refugees, the CAR refugee-students in Kinshasa are cosmopolitan: they mix, they erase boundaries, and they refuse to be fixed within one categorical identity—they subvert identification (Malkki 1995, 4).

b) The humanitarian caravan

As we saw in Chapter IV, since the early 2000s CAR and DR Congo have both hosted refugees from one another on different occasions. Refugees, however, are not the only ones to dance back and forth across space. Humanitarians, too, join the refugee tango in search of work and opportunities. Their jobs depend, if not to say exist, on the presence of refugees. Refugees can be considered as resources that serve the international labour market. One could even argue that the humanitarian enterprise follows the political culture of concessionary politics discussed previously (Hardin 2011). Thus, the three key phases of concessionary politics also apply to the workings of the humanitarian agencies: (1) by identifying and documenting refugees, humanitarian agencies prospect for

resources; (2) by fixating clear-cut refugee camp sites, they map boundaries; (3) by redistributing monthly food supplies and paying out monthly cash grants, they negotiate the circumstances of redistribution of wealth (within the refugee camps). Researchers, too, in a way, prospect, map, and redistribute knowledge.

Despite the differences between refugees and humanitarians, I challenge the reader to consider the humanitarian as another avatar of the conflict mobile, individuals whose movements and mobility—and lack hereof—are induced by conflict.[327] Humanitarians do not travel alone, however, but are followed by a caravan that includes NGO workers, logistics employees—cooks, cleaners, security guards, drivers, mechanics—representatives of the state, soldiers and police forces, journalists, and researchers—the list is not exhaustive. All of these, including the researcher (!), are avatars of the conflict mobile.

However, insofar as movement is not mobility—in the sense that the latter is imbued with meaning—the differences that exist between the refugee and the humanitarian, especially the expatriate humanitarian, cannot be denied or diminished. Even if both are on the move, the motivations and conditions of movement, its velocity, and the mobility regimes that foster or hamper it differ. Refugees, repatriates, and returnees move, but their options are restricted. These restrictions result at times in resilient practices—leaving the refugee camps by one's own means—while at others they result in immobility and feelings of stuckedness. Yet, the humanitarians, too, are in a way restricted to their compounds. Strict curfews apply to them, and loneliness is a common emotion. Even if physically *stuck* in the compound, however, the humanitarians, especially the expatriate ones, are not existentially stuck.

The humanitarian world, in fact, follows a pyramidical hierarchy, and throughout this thesis I have pointed to its different layers. The top of the pyramid, more often than not, is occupied by expatriate workers who work especially, yet not exclusively, in headquarters in a capital city in a country or in other humanitarian hubs.[328] These expatriate workers conduct field-site visits in the interior of the country every so often but usually do not stay for more than a couple of days. The middle layer is constituted mainly of nationals, yet nationals who come from elsewhere in the country. Many of the

[327] I am not implying that *the* humanitarian exists; like the refugees, humanitarians cannot fall under a single stereotype. I draw, for instance, upon the distinction made by several of my informants: the *humanitaire de nom ou de profession*, on the one hand, and the *humanitaire de coeur ou de vocation*, on the other. The former is in the field to further his own career and personal interests; the latter engages with local people.

[328] Goma in eastern Congo, for instance, is such a hub.

Congolese NGO workers present in north-western DR Congo, for instance, had come either from Kinshasa, the capital, or eastern Congo, in particular north and south Kivu. In the aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan genocide and the Second Congo War, eastern Congo has both received and expelled thousands of refugees. Simultaneously, it has attracted humanitarian agencies and workers from all corners of the world. More than twenty years after the Rwandan events, the 'benefiters' of humanitarian assistance have learned its intricate machinery and idiom. Former refugees and other 'vulnerables' use this expertise to lead programmes on the other side of the country, where recent waves of refugees have arrived. These former Congolese refugees have experienced mobility due to conflict, from a care-receiver perspective—that is, as displaced persons in their own country, having been taken care of by a proliferation of NGOs in eastern Congo. Yet, these former refugees have also experienced mobility as care-takers, becoming national NGO staff sent to other regions of the country. Herein their experience as a displaced person turns into an asset, and thus also a form of expertise.[329]

Finally, the bottom level of the pyramid is constituted of local people—in the context of this thesis, from within the Équateur Province itself. Former Congolese refugees in CAR, who had become repatriates in their country, for instance, hoped to make use of their refugee experiences in a new context of urgency. Such was the case of Papa Pascal, introduced in Chapter IV, who moved from being a Congolese refugee in Batalimo (CAR) to being a repatriate in Libenge. Looking for work, he came to Libenge to knock on the doors of the NGOs that had arrived in town. His curriculum vitae includes refugee camp experience as a refugee, but also as a voluntary, for which he proudly carries a pin on his shirt.

But when a crisis subsides, what happens to the humanitarian caravan? The answer to this question is also hierarchically layered. For those high on the pyramid, they will probably move on to a faraway destination. Expatriate humanitarians, especially Western ones, will hop from country to country, as if checking off a list of crises and disaster regions around the world. During my last fieldwork in Libenge, from December 2014 to January 2015, for instance, the head of the UNHCR in Libenge left to Mali. In August 2016 in Bangui, another humanitarian worker complained about having spent too much time in CAR; he was ready for the next adventure. It is as if humanitarian agents, as conflict mobiles, do not move because of conflict but thanks to it. Borders and possessing the right documents do not pose a problem to them. Similarly, national staff will be posted in other parts of

[329] Of course, there are more than two perspectives (care-taker versus care-giver); there are, for instance, the perpetrators as well—they too are mobile.

the country. If successful in their work, they will be sent abroad to other countries in Africa, or they might decide to start an organization of their own.

From the perspective of the bottom of the pyramid, however, the departure of the humanitarian caravan leaves a feeling of abandonment. In Dongo, for instance, the once refurbished mud roads and provisional bridges built during the presence of the humanitarians began to erode as the first organizations started to leave the town at the end of 2014. A similar erosion took place in human terms. Maman Dorothée—whom we met in chapters II and IV, and who worked for one of the partner organizations of the UNHCR, a job that offered her a good, yet not stable income with which she nevertheless was able to extend her house—was worried. She knew that not only would she lose her job, but also she would become the mockery of the town. A higher salary had not only enabled her to pay old debts, but also, envisaging potential payments, pushed her to enter new debts. The short-term wealth had enabled her to sport expensive hairstyles she grew accustomed to. By the end of 2014, Maman Dorothée commented how other women talked and laughed at her behind her back; her hair was not as fancily made up as it had been in the months before. Maman Dorothée was looking immobility in the eye. Even though she, like many others, is very aware of the difference between short-term and long-term investment—that is, between short-term investment by the international community in humanitarian work, and long-term state investment—the short-term development and economic growth related to the former did feed her sense of mobility and hope of a better life. When these hopes begin to erode along with the roads, regimes of mobility that apply to the different conflict mobiles—especially within the humanitarian pyramid—become very clear and their consequences on individuals, poignant.

2) Final note

Inspired by the trajectory approach and following the strategy within the mobility turn, I have followed in this thesis the lives of different conflict immobiles in Central Africa. However, in addition to following the conflict mobiles 'physically', I have extended this strategy in two ways: firstly, by following them from a distance and with genuine interest: keeping up with their lives through social media and phone calls, sharing frustrations, memories, and new (joint) projects; secondly, by following the conflict mobiles longitudinally—that is, through time, more precisely over a lapse of five years—and thus combining mobility with temporality. This layered and more holistic following strategy reveals that one form of mobility is related to other forms of mobility (Khosravi 2018).

Through the conflict mobile, moreover, I have come to learn that mobility has a central place in the social life of the region and that borders, more than being barriers, are there to be crossed. From a

perspective of mobility, dichotomies do not hold: autochthony versus foreignness, refugee versus non-refugee, one nationality versus another nationality, and so on. In order to understand what happened in Bangui, or with the Banguissois, it is impossible to limit oneself to the national borders. The life histories of conflict mobiles have been drawn by movement and cross borders. There exist multiple mobile links between CAR and DR Congo, links that do not limit themselves to, but go beyond, the different waves of refugees. Throughout history, the movement between these two countries has been triggered by different reasons: movement can be related to education and becoming, or to the incessant search for opportunities; and movement can be the result of conflict.

Combining the conflict mobiles described in Chapter IV with the CAR refugee-students discussed in Part Two, and taking into account that they are from different generations, social backgrounds, and nationalities, many of the important topics that are discussed in Chapter IV are also central to the refugee-students' lives today. These topics include, but are not limited to: (formal) education, freeing oneself from the parental yoke, coming of age, revolution, uncertainty, moving around in search of better horizons, fleeing war, and the fear of going back home empty-handed and of losing face. Regarding education, parallels can be drawn from the colonial to the present times. It is because of education (in an encompassing sense, education in terms of becoming) that the likes of Lumumba and Boganda could stand up and rebel against the colonial regime. Education, too—or at least the hunger to learn—was one of the drivers in the many journeys of Yaya Rico, Espérance, and Émile, as it is also a guideline in how these three individuals bring up their (grand)children today. It is the hope to be able to study, finally, that, in contrast to hanging around in refugee camps, thrust the CAR refugee-students to go to Kinshasa against all odds.

Ironically, many of these conflict mobiles have escaped conflict in their own respective countries only to find themselves caught in conflicts in the countries in which they found refuge. Yaya Rico, for instance, never witnessed conflict personally in his own country, but found himself in a situation of conflict in the neighbouring countries; he twice 'survived other people's war' (Maindo Monga Ngonga 2001). Espérance too was driven by the desire for a future elsewhere that could replace an unpleasant past (Khosravi 2018). In her case, even if she did not personally live through the unpleasant past her parents suffered, she did grow to embody it through their memories—so strongly that it drove her to leave Chad in search of greener pastures in CAR. The irony, again, lies in the fact that Espérance has witnessed almost three decades of conflict in CAR; in other words, she too has witnessed 'another people's war', yet stays put and refuses to leave Bangui. Also, Kinshasa is probably not a safe refuge for the CAR refugee-students in the long term. Since politically inspired demonstrations against the political leadership have become more and more common in the city,

grudges can be easily misplaced and translated into xenophobic practices which are then transposed to the refugees (as we saw in Brazzaville). Both conflict and mobility are part of the long history that has shaped societies in Central Africa.

Within the mobility paradigm, Kinshasa is not only a point of arrival, but constitutes equally a zone of transit and a point of multiple departures. In line with Johnson-Hanks, who questions the life cycle, in this thesis I, also, question the migration cycle. Thus, from a mobility-inspired perspective, just like vital conjunctures form nodes of decision-making moments, or periods of time, so do vital conjunctures inspired by migration. Faced by a decision-making moment of where to go next, every individual, depending on his or her accumulated experiences (and duress) will make unique decisions. This thesis brings together a theory on vital conjunctures, with mobility studies and readings on duress. Interestingly, in the case of the refugee-students, we learn that even if the environment changes abruptly, their aspirations may not, and that fleeing from their home environments in fact forms rather a continuity than a rupture in the process of social becoming.

By combining conflict and mobility in the concept of the conflict (im)mobile, I link the mobility paradigm to identification processes. Conflict and mobility inform a vision on the self, in which duress and the internalization of violence play an important role. Yet duress does not need to limit the conflict mobile. As we have seen in this thesis, in a process of social becoming informed by duress, the CAR refugee-students look for ways of connecting and belonging to a wider world, of claiming freedom, of expressing themselves artistically with the tools they have at hand. Agency, in combination with duress, does not limit itself to survival strategies and practices of resilience; it is a quest for freedom. While this is universal and as ancient as humanity itself, the structures and regimes of mobility that shape it today, and through which the CAR refugee-students must navigate, differ and are in constant change—more so in a digital age where a so-called global village is in fact a world filled with global shadows.

I have followed the students' paths in becoming meaningful global citizens, who dream, who envision, who want to change not only themselves (micro), but also their surrounding community (meso), and even their society (macro). Change is happening, and not only through arms. There are certainly many reasons to be pessimistic, but there are also reasons to be optimistic. Not all conflict mobiles in Central Africa want to leave their continent. In fact, this thesis shows how many prefer to fight in their own countries and societies. Conflict mobiles in rural DR Congo, such as Maman Dorothée and Papa Popol, understand that a better future lies in their own hands and do not wish to depend on international humanitarian agencies that will end up leaving the region anyway. They do

not want to live in refuge; they call for their own government to invest in infrastructure in order to encourage agricultural and semi-industrial companies to invest in their region, so as to step out of isolation, to open up to the world, and to earn their living with decent salaries.

Through a mobility lens, I thus claim that conflict mobiles are not only victims of their systems but they also contribute to the social fabric. The Central African youth is in need of a more profound and structural engagement, in the first instance by the humanitarian agencies, but ideally also by the Central African states themselves—so that many more young people in a context of uncertainty and distress, such as refuge, can profit from self-established, grassroots initiatives.

Even though it seems that we, as academics, remain rooted in a system that is fundamentally unequal, I would like to round off this thesis by encouraging academics, despite the constraints, to apply a mobile mindset to methodological practices and epistemological processes—in other words, to do and write up research more inclusively. Unfortunately, advocating for other types of knowledge is too quickly branded as emotional, activist, and unscientific. The problem runs deep in academia. So-called objectivity stands in the way, and transparency pays the price; cognitive knowledge takes the upper hand and trumps all others. But what if we play down objectivity for the sake of transparency? What if we could include more varied and comprehensive types of knowledge? What if we were to complement cognitive with emotional and embodied knowledge? What if we were to complement cognitive with mobile knowledge produced by nomadic minds, who also find themselves outside the walls of universities? Opening up to sensory understanding, daring to instrumentalize the senses, leads to an opening up towards others. A sensory methodology opens the door to see these others not as mere informants, nor research participants, but rather recognizes their roles as co-creators of knowledge.

During my ethnographic fieldwork and writing, I hope I have recognized and acknowledged moments of co-creation, and I hope that the people with whom I worked have experienced it this way too. It was clear that from the outset this study was to be an inter-disciplinary study. What I did not forecast, however, was that it would end up being a pluri-disciplinary study, in the sense that it has forced me to look beyond the walls of academia and to embrace knowledge*s*, in the plural, that are created outside university. I would say that this is the most valuable lesson of my doctoral years. Mobility, rather than rooting us in a new paradigm, should *route* us to explore mobile, inclusive, creative, imaginative, and open-ended paths. Just like the river, university does not need to be a barrier; it can be a contact zone, a space that invites mobile individuals of all walks of life to un-border together.

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Samenvatting in het Nederlands

Conflictmobielen zijn personen wier mobiliteit - en gebrek aan mobiliteit - wordt gevormd door geweld en conflicten. Dit proefschrift is een etnografie van mobiliteit gebaseerd op de persoonlijke verhalen van mensen die zich binnen en buiten de Centraal-Afrikaanse regio over grenzen heen en weer verplaatsen. Door mobiliteit als axioma te nemen en het leven van 'mensen in beweging' centraal te stellen, is het doel van dit proefschrift tweeledig. Enerzijds betwist het de vastgestelde (nationale) grenzen en stelt het statische historische lezingen van Centraal-Afrika aan de kaak. Anderzijds onderzoekt het hoe de meervoudige trajecten van individuen in Centraal-Afrika vorm geven aan het mobiliteitsparadigma. Voor veel mensen in Centraal-Afrika staat mobiliteit centraal in hun bestaan. Ontsnappen aan conflicten en calamiteiten is slechts één van de vele redenen om te migreren. Naast dat het vorm geeft aan de levenswegen van individuen, heeft mobiliteit ook de regio gevormd. Dit proefschrift betwist sedentaire en statische inzichten van 'het veld' en nodigt de lezer uit tot 'ontgrenzen' en door een mobiele lens naar het veld te kijken.

De samensmelting van die hierboven genoemde doelen ligt ten grondslag aan het ontstaan van de conflictmobiel' (en soms conflict immobiel). Er zijn veel avatars van de conflictmobiel, waaronder: vluchtelingen en andere ontheemden, humanitairen, handelaars en zakenlui, gewapende groepen, bandieten, universiteitsstudenten en vele anderen die op zoek zijn naar een betere horizon. De CAR (Centraal-Afrikaanse Republiek) vluchtelingstudenten in Kinshasa (DR Congo), waarop het empirische deel van dit proefschrift is gebaseerd, vormen slechts één avatar van de conflictmobiel. Het zijn de omzwervingen van deze studenten, hun levensverhalen, hun zelfredzaamheidstrategieën, hun dromen en frustraties die aan de basis liggen van dit proefschrift.

Hoofdstuk I schetst het theoretische kader dat vorm geeft aan de conflictmobiel. Dit kader combineert interpretaties van mobiliteit (geïnspireerd door migratie, transnationalisme en vluchtelingenstudies) met concepten van geweld (in het bijzonder de ervaring en verinnerlijking van geweld (m.a.w. *duress*) en sociale theorie rond jeugd. *Vital conjunctures*, belangrijke beslissingsmomenten in de levenspaden van individuen, staan op het kruispunt van *duress* en sociale vorming. In dit proefschrift worden deze *conjuncturess* ook vanuit een historisch perspectief bekeken; vandaar het belang van de biografische methode, die de individuele levensverhalen in dialoog brengt met macrohistorische gebeurtenissen. De Ubangi rivier (die de grens vormt tussen de Centraal-Afrikaanse Republiek en DR Congo) dient als achtergrond waartegen deze verhalen worden geplaatst, maar ook als een metafoor voor mobiliteit, verbinding en disconnectie. Lijken worden in

de wateren van deze stroom gegooid, beslissingen worden genomen door de rivier te doorkruisen en de geschiedenis wordt gevormd door de letterlijke en metaforische navigatie op het water.

Na de theoretische inleiding wordt in Deel I van dit proefschrift de mobiele aard van het studiegebied gepresenteerd door een geografische (*multi-sited*), methodologische en historische lens. Het bevraagt de gevestigde grenzen tussen nationale staten en hun koloniale verleden, maar ook de 'harde grenzen' tussen verschillende soorten kennis binnen en buiten de academische wereld. De hoofdstukken in het eerste deel van dit boek bevragen en hervormen statische perspectieven, en vullen ze aan. Hoofdstuk II introduceert mobiliteit en *multi-sitedness* met behulp van visuele technieken. Door het gebruik van kaarten en andere visueel materiaal wordt de lezer uitgenodigd om over de nationale grenzen heen te kijken. Dit hoofdstuk gaat over de vele geografische veldlocaties in Centraal-Afrika die tijdens het veldwerkonderzoek in de meest letterlijke zin van het woord zijn bezocht. Maar het beperkt zich niet alleen tot geografie, het omvat ook historische, digitale en (massa- en sociale) mediaperspectieven. Daarnaast gaat hoofdstuk II in op het conflict dat begon met de staatsgreep van de Seleka in 2013 en introduceert het een aantal van de methoden die tijdens het veldwerk zijn gebruikt.

Voortbouwend op hoofdstuk II behandelt hoofdstuk III de methodologie, maar het gaat verder dan een opsomming en beschrijving van de methoden. Terwijl 'methoden' de eigenlijke bouwstenen zijn van dataverzameling, verwijst 'methodologie' naar een filosofische benadering van het doen van onderzoek en het in het veld zijn, vooral in relatie tot degenen over wie en 'met' wie we onderzoek doen. Deze methodologie gaat verder dan ‘het veld’ en bevat het belang van bewustwording over een meer inclusieve benadering van onderzoek binnen de academische wereld. Ook hier staat mobiliteit (vooral in de geest) centraal. Het hoofdstuk begint met een beschrijving van fysieke beweging als een middel om gegevens te verzamelen. Langzaam maar zeker maakt fysieke mobiliteit ruimte voor niet-fysieke vormen van mobiliteit. Methoden van bewegen omvatten dus ook het emotioneel 'bewogen' worden of geraakt zijn door wat we in het veld tegenkomen. Deze emotionele lezing van mobiliteit opent alternatieve manieren van denken over meer inclusieve onderzoekspraktijken, maar ook over het 'bewegen' in dezelfde richting met anderen en het creëren van artistieke en academische kennis met anderen.

Voortbouwend op de biografische verhalen en de beschrijving van persoonlijke levenspaden die tussen landen en over de grenzen heen en weer slingeren, brengt hoofdstuk IV enerzijds de geschiedenis van de regio vanuit een subjectief en microhistorisch oogpunt en anderzijds vanuit een mobiliteitsperspectief voort. De levensverhalen in dit hoofdstuk bestrijken samen vier landen in

Centraal-Afrika: de Centraal-Afrikaanse Republiek, de Democratische Republiek Congo en, in mindere mate, Congo-Brazzaville en Tsjaad. De verhalen bepalen de historische context van dit proefschrift en zijn verbonden met macrohistorische gebeurtenissen en nationale geschiedenissen. In dit hoofdstuk wordt de geschiedenis van de prekoloniale tijd tot 2011 behandeld (de meest recente geschiedenis wordt behandeld in hoofdstuk II). Ik onderzoek hierin hoe mobiliteit de regio op lange termijn vorm heeft gegeven: vanaf de oprichting van kleine gemeenschappen tijdens de (uit)spreiding van de Bantoe volkeren; de verschillende slavenroofacties in de prekoloniale tijd; de gewelddadige koloniale indringing en onderdrukking; het kritische decennium rond de onafhankelijkheid in 1960, gevolgd door decennialange dictaturen en militaire bewinden; de tijd van de zogenaamde liberalisering en democratisering, die vervolgens bij de millenniumwisseling tot nieuwe vormen van rebellie en andere gewelddadige uitingen geleid heeft. Omdat het gebaseerd is op levensverhalen volgt hoofdstuk IV een subjectieve chronologie, die door het geheugen gekleurd, en dus niet chronologisch, is. De verhalen die deze levenspaden schetsen gaan over grenzen heen. Ze benadrukken dat, ook al hebben willekeurige grenzen de regio diepgaand beïnvloed en onmiskenbaar vorm gegeven, ze er nooit in geslaagd zijn om de regio volledig te verdelen.

Deel II gaat over de CAR-vluchtelingstudenten in Kinshasa en is gebaseerd op de levensverhalen van deze studenten (hun familieleden, verwanten, vrienden, buren) in Kinshasa, Bangui en Brazzaville. De term vluchtelingstudenten dient enerzijds om hun mobiliteits- en immobiliteitsstatus te accentueren en anderzijds om te proberen een bepaalde groep jongeren aan te duiden. Niet iedereen in deze groep is echter een student in de strikte zin van het woord; sommigen waren nog steeds bezig met het afmaken van de middelbare school, terwijl anderen al enige tijd eerder hadden gestudeerd. Toch zijn ze allemaal stedelijk en opgeleid; en omdat ze zich door conflict over een internationale grens hebben begeven en gebruik maken van het Vluchtelingenverdrag van de Verenigde Naties, omschrijft het adjectief 'vluchteling' hen het best - ze identificeren zich namelijk met het label 'vluchteling'. Deel II bestaat uit vier empirische hoofdstukken, die op zichzelf gelezen kunnen worden, dat wil zeggen *horizontaal*, ook al moedig ik de lezer aan om ze *verticaal* te lezen: als lagen op elkaar, waarin elk hoofdstuk dieper graaft en een nieuwe laag van analyse toevoegt aan het vorige. Dit deel van het proefschrift illustreert, aan de hand van het voorbeeld van de vluchtelingstudenten, hoe jongeren een plaats vinden in hun eigen gemeenschap en daarbuiten. Alle hoofdstukken in dit deel gaan over beweging en het ontbreken daarvan. Beweging wordt in fysieke, symbolische en existentiële termen opgevat. De verschillende hoofdstukken onderzoeken samen de verschillende lagen van de meervoudige omzwervingen van de studenten uit de Centraal-Afrikaanse Republiek.

Hoofdstuk V gaat over de fysieke reis - dat wil zeggen, de meervoudige geografische routes van de vluchtelingstudenten. Het uitgangspunt voor allen is Bangui. Het punt van aankomst is daarentegen meervoudig en verschillend voor elk individu, en naarmate de tijd evolueert en verplaatst het zich. Hoofdstuk V houdt ook rekening met het ontbreken van beweging, de pauzes tijdens verplaatsing, de omwegen en de verschillende momenten van onbeweeglijkheid en vastzitten. Hoofdstuk VI gaat in op de zoektocht naar het 'worden' - met andere woorden, naar de beoogde horizon waar de reis naartoe leidt: toegang tot onderwijs. In dit hoofdstuk wordt onderwijs in de ruimste zin van het woord opgevat: in termen van scholing en opvoeding (zowel door het gezin als door de samenleving in het algemeen). Het hoofdstuk begint met een beschrijving van het Bangui van de jeugd van de vluchtelingstudenten, dat zich afspeelt tegen het turbulente decennium van de jaren negentig. Door een diepere inkijk in hun verleden, helpt het hoofdstuk om de beslissingen die de studenten later in hun leven als jongvolwassenen nemen te contextualiseren en te nuanceren. Scholing en opvoeding beperkt zich echter niet tot de context van Bangui, maar wordt voortgezet in het ''opgroeien'' in hun geadopteerde thuis, de vijandige stad Kinshasa, waar zij zijn genoodzaakt om een hele reeks van overlevingsstrategieën te ontwikkelen. Kinshasa wordt zo een plaats van opvoeding op het gebied van overleving, een levensschool.

In hoofdstuk VII wordt de zoektocht naar het 'worden' voortgezet, maar de focus verlegt zich naar de wording van de bredere gemeenschap van Centraal-Afrikaanse vluchtelingen in Kinshasa. Hoewel opnieuw uit de vele ervaringen van de verschillende vluchtelingstudenten wordt geput, staat in dit hoofdstuk het verhaal van Euloge - en vooral zijn politieke betrokkenheid en ontwikkeling en dus ook zijn sociale en politieke mobiliteit - centraal. Aan de hand van concrete voorbeelden, waarin Euloge de problemen van leden van de vluchtelingengemeenschap uit CAR in Kinshasa behandelt, worden de wortels van zijn betrokkenheid geïllustreerd. Dit engagement is niet nieuw; het vormt een voortzetting van Euloge's inspanningen als studentenleider in zijn universitaire jaren in Bangui voorafgaand aan de crisis van 2013. Hieruit moet continuïteit, in tegenstelling tot een breuk, in migratie worden begrepen. Hoofdstuk VIII bouwt voort op deze continuïteit, en richt zich op persoonlijke en spirituele groei, maar ook op creativiteit en artistieke uitingen. Het illustreert hoe de vluchtelingstudenten de gevestigde sociale normen trotseren en de grenzen van hun persoonlijkheid verkennen.

De verschillende avatars van de conflictmobiel leiden uiteindelijk tot een reflectie over de definities van de vluchteling enerzijds en van de humanitairen anderzijds. De beweging van beide avatars, en vele anderen, waaronder ook de onderzoeker, wordt gevormd door conflict, maar de routes volgen verschillende mobiliteitsregimes. Terwijl de vluchteling in een staat van verlamming verkeert, is de

humanitair ultra-mobiel. De term conflictmobiel helpt om deze verschillen en ongelijkheden aan de kaak te stellen. Dit proefschrift stelt bovendien dat conflicten en mobiliteit deel uitmaken van de lange geschiedenis die de samenlevingen in Centraal-Afrika heeft gevormd. De conflictmobiel omvat buitenstaanders, indringers en ontdekkingsreizigers en deze laatsten hebben ook een rol gespeeld in de vormgeving van de regio en haar geschiedenis. Het is dit gemeenschappelijke streven naar mobiliteit, ten goede en ten kwade, dat de nomadische geest voedt. Een nomadische geest op zoek naar mogelijkheden om verschillende praktijken van kennisproductie samen te brengen om zo beter te begrijpen wat mobiliteit betekent aan de oevers van de Ubangi rivier.

Summary in English

Conflict mobiles are individuals whose mobility—and lack of mobility—is informed by violence and conflict. Based on personal narratives of those who move across borders within and beyond the Central African region, this thesis is an ethnography of mobility. By taking mobility as its axiom and placing the lives of people on the move at its centre, the goal of this thesis is twofold. On the one hand, it contests fixed (national) borders and defies static historical readings of Central Africa. On the other hand, it investigates how the multiple trajectories of individuals in Central African give form to the mobility paradigm. For many people in Central Africa, mobility stands at the core of their existence. Escaping conflict and calamity is just one out of many reasons to move. Mobility not only shapes the life paths of individuals, it has also shaped the region. This thesis challenges sedentary and static understandings of the field and invites the reader to 'un-border' by looking at the field through a mobile lens.

The combination of the above two goals gives birth to the conflict mobile (and sometimes conflict *im*mobile). There are many avatars of the conflict mobile, including the following: refugees and internally displaced people, humanitarian agents, merchants and business (wo)men, armed groups, road bandits, university students, and other individuals looking for better horizons. The CAR (Central African Republic) refugee-students in Kinshasa (DR Congo), on whom the empirical part of this thesis is based, form only one avatar of the conflict mobile. It is these students' journeys, their life stories and means of fending for themselves, as well as their dreams and frustrations, that stand at the core of this thesis.

Chapter I sets out the theoretical framework in which the conflict mobile is understood. This framework combines readings of mobility (migration, transnationalism, and refugee studies) with concepts of violence (in particular the experience and internalization of violence—i.e. duress) and social theory around social becoming and youth. Vital conjunctures, important moments of decision in the life paths of individuals, stand at the intersection of duress and social becoming. These conjunctures are also viewed from a historical perspective; hence the importance of the biographical method, which places the individual life stories in dialogue with macro-historical events. Throughout, the river, the Ubangi River in particular (which forms the border between CAR and DR Congo), serves as the background against which these stories are placed, but also as a metaphor of mobility, connection and disconnection. Dead bodies are thrown into the waters of the Ubangi, decisions are made by traversing it, and history has been shaped by the navigation on its waters.

After the theoretical introduction, Part One of this thesis presents the mobile nature of the field of study through a geographical (multi-sited), methodological, and historical lens. It questions established boundaries between national states and their colonial pasts, but also the 'hard borders' between different types of knowledge within and outside academia. The chapters in Part One contest, complexify, and complement static perspectives. Chapter II introduces mobility and multi-sitedness visually. By the use of maps and other visuals, the reader is invited to look beyond national borders. This chapter deals with the multiple geographical field locations, in the most literal sense, in Central Africa visited during the fieldwork research, yet is not limited to geography only but includes historical, digital, and (mass and social) media perspectives. In addition to these, Chapter II touches upon the conflict which started with the 2013 Seleka coup and introduces some of the methods employed during fieldwork.

Building on Chapter II, Chapter III deals with methodology but goes beyond an enumeration and description of methods. While 'methods' are the actual building blocks of data collection, 'methodology' refers to a philosophical approach towards doing research and being in the field, especially in relation to those on whom, and 'with' whom, we do research. Beyond fieldwork, this methodology informs a more inclusive approach towards academia. Here too, mobility (especially in the mind) stands at the core of the methodology. The chapter begins with a description of physical moving as a way of collecting data. Slowly but surely physical mobility makes room for more non-physical types of mobility. Moving methods, then, encapsulate being emotionally 'moved' or touched by what we encounter in the field. This emotional reading of mobility opens up alternative ways of thinking about more inclusive research practices, as well as pursuits of 'moving' in the same direction with others and creating artistic and academic outcomes with others.

Building upon biographical narratives and the description of life paths that weave back and forth among countries and across boundaries, Chapter IV presents the history of the region from both a subjective and micro-historical point of view, on the one hand, and a mobility-inspired perspective based on these personal trajectories, on the other hand. Added together, the life stories in this chapter cover four countries in Central Africa: CAR, DR Congo and, to a lesser extent, Congo-Brazzaville, and Chad. They set the historical scene of this thesis and are connected to macro-historical events and national histories. The chapter covers the history from pre-colonial times up to 2011 (more recent history is treated in Chapter II). In it, I explore how mobility shaped the region in the long term: from as early as the establishment of forest communities during the Bantu expansion; to the different slave-raiding incursions in pre-colonial times; the violent colonial penetration and oppression; the critical decade around independence, followed by decades of dictatorship and

military rule; the age of so-called liberalization and democratization, which then gave rise to different forms of rebellion and violent expressions at the turn of the millennium. Because it is based on life stories, Chapter IV follows a subjective chronology, one that is unchronological and coloured by memory. The main purpose in doing so is to underline that even if arbitrary borders deeply impacted and undeniably shaped the region, they never managed to completely divide it.

Part Two deals with the CAR refugee-students in Kinshasa and is based on the life stories of these students (their family members, relatives, friends, neighbours) in Kinshasa, Bangui, and Brazzaville. The term refugee-students serves to accentuate their (im)mobility status, on the one hand, while on the other hand it makes an attempt to demarcate a particular group of youth. Not all are students in the strict sense of the word, however; some were still finishing high school, while others had studied for some time before. Nevertheless, they are all urban and educated; and because they moved due to conflict across an international border and make use of the UN Refugee Convention, the adjective 'refugee' describes them best—they even self-identity with this label. Part Two comprises four empirical chapters, which can be read on their own—that is, horizontally—even though I encourage the reader to read them vertically: as layers one on top of the other, wherein each chapter digs deeper and adds a new layer of analysis to the former one. This part of the thesis illustrates, through the example of the refugee-students, how youth find a place in their own communities and beyond. All the chapters in this part deal with movement and the lack thereof. Movement is understood in physical, symbolic, and existential terms. Taken together, the different chapters examine different layers of the CAR refugee-students' multiple journeys.

Chapter V deals with the physical journey—that is, the plural geographical itineraries of the refugee-students. The point of departure for all is Bangui. The point of arrival, on the other hand, is multiple and different for every individual; and, as time evolves, it keeps on moving and changing. Chapter V also takes into consideration the lack of movement, the pauses during journeys, the detours, and the various moments of immobility and of being stuck. Chapter VI touches upon the quest for becoming—in other words, on the envisaged horizon to which the journey leads: access to education. In this chapter, education is understood in its broadest sense: in terms of schooling (going to school) but also in terms of upbringing (education outside school, both within the family and the wider society). In a first instance, this chapter goes back in time to the Bangui of the refugee-students' childhood, which is set in the turbulent decade of the 1990s. By digging deeper into their pasts, the chapter helps to contextualize and nuance the decisions the students take as young adults later in their lives. Schooling and upbringing, however, are not limited to the context of Bangui but are then transposed to their 'growing up' in their newly adopted home, the hostile city of Kinshasa,

and the necessity to develop a whole array of coping strategies. Kinshasa is transformed into a site of education in terms of survival, a school of life.

In Chapter VII, the quest for becoming spreads beyond the self to the wider community of CAR refugees in Kinshasa. Even if this chapter draws, again, on multiple experiences of the different refugee-students, the story of Euloge—and most importantly, his political engagement and growth and hence social and political mobility—stands at its core. By means of concrete examples, in which Euloge deals with the problems of members of the CAR refugee community in Kinshasa, the rooting of this engagement is illustrated. This engagement is not new, however, but forms rather a continuation of Euloge's endeavour as a student leader in his university years in Bangui prior to the 2013 crisis. It is here where continuity, rather than rupture, in migration and flight must be understood. Chapter VIII builds on this continuity, but turns to personal and spiritual growth, as well as to creativity and artistic expressions. It illustrates how the refugee-students defy established social norms and explore the limits of their personalities.

Considering the different avatars of the conflict mobile leads to a reflection on the definitions of the refugee, on the one hand, and on the humanitarian agent. The movement of both avatars, and many others, including the researcher, are informed by conflict, yet the itineraries follow different mobility regimes. While the refugee suffers in a state of stuckedness, the humanitarian agent is ultra-mobile. The conflict mobile helps to underline these differences and inequalities. This thesis argues, moreover, that conflict and mobility are part of the long history that has shaped societies in Central Africa. But as the conflict mobile incorporates outsiders, intruders and explorers, these have also played a role in shaping the region and its history. It is this common endeavour, for better and for worse, that feeds a nomadic mind, one that looks for ways to bring together different practices of knowledge production in order to better understand what mobility means along the shores of the Ubangi River.

Résumé en Français

Les *Conflict mobiles* sont des individus dont la mobilité – ou l'absence de mobilité - est façonnée par la violence et les conflits. Sur la base de récits personnels de ceux qui bougent au travers des frontières à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur de la région d'Afrique centrale, la présente thèse est une ethnographie de la mobilité. En prenant pour axiome la mobilité et en plaçant les vies des gens en mouvement en son centre, le but de cette thèse est double. D'une part, elle conteste les frontières (nationales) fixes et défie les lectures historiques statiques de l'Afrique centrale. D'un autre côté, elle recherche comment les multiples trajectoires individuelles en Afrique centrale donnent forme au paradigme de mobilité. Pour beaucoup en Afrique centrale, la mobilité est au cœur même de leurs existences. Échapper aux conflits et aux catastrophes n'est que l'une des nombreuses raisons de se mouvoir. La mobilité ne façonne pas seulement l'existence des individus, mais elle façonne également la région. La présente thèse remet en cause les lectures sédentaires et statiques du terrain de recherche et invite le lecteur à faire tomber les frontières en le regardant à travers un filtre de mobilité.

La combinaison des deux objectifs décrits ci-dessus donne naissance au *conflict mobile* (et parfois au *conflict immobile*). Il existe beaucoup d'incarnations du *conflict mobile* et cela inclut : des réfugiés et des personnes déplacées à l'intérieur du pays, des travailleurs humanitaires, des marchands et des hommes et femmes d'affaires, des groupes armés, des bandits, des étudiants et tant d'autres personnes à la recherche de meilleurs horizons. Les étudiants-réfugiés de République centrafricaine à Kinshasa (République démocratique du Congo - RDC), sur lesquels la partie empirique de la présente thèse se base, sont seulement l'une des incarnations du *conflict mobile*. Le parcours de ces étudiants, leur histoire de vie, leurs moyens de se débrouiller ainsi que leurs rêves et leurs frustrations sont au cœur de la présente thèse.

Le chapitre I présente le cadre théorique dans lequel le *conflict mobile* est compris. Ce cadre allie des lectures de la mobilité (migration, transnationsalisme et études sur les réfugiés) à des concepts de violence (en particulier l'expérience et l'internationalisation de la violence, en d'autres mots, la*duress*) et la théorie sociale autour du devenir social et de la jeunesse. Des conjonctures vitales (*vital conjunctures*), des moments importants de décision dans leurs existences individuelles sont à l'intersection de la *duress* et du devenir social. Ces conjonctures sont également vues d'un point de vue historique, d'où l'importance de la méthode biographique qui fait dialoguer les histoires individuelles et les évènements macro-historiques. Tout le long, la rivière et en particulier la rivière Oubangui (qui forme la frontière entre la République centrafricaine et la RDC) sert d'arrière-plan sur

lequel sont situés ces récits, mais également de métaphore de mobilité, connexion et déconnexion. Des cadavres sont jetés dans les eaux de l'Oubangui, des décisions sont prises en la traversant et l'histoire a été influencée par la navigation sur ses eaux.

Après une introduction théorétique, la première partie de cette thèse présente la nature mobile du domaine d'étude d'un point de vue géographique (multi-sites), méthodologique et historique. Elle questionne les frontières établies entre les différents états nationaux et leurs passés coloniaux, mais également les frontières strictes entre les différents types de connaissance au sein et en dehors de l'université. Les chapitres de la première partie contestent, complexifient et complètent les perspectives statiques. Le chapitre II introduit la mobilité et le multi-site de façon visuelle. Avec l'utilisation de cartes et autres visuels, le lecteur est invité à regarder au-delà des frontières nationales. Ce chapitre traite des emplacements géographiques multiples visités en Afrique centrale pendant le travail de recherche sur le terrain au sens le plus littéral. Il n'est cependant pas uniquement limité à la géographie, il inclut également des angles historiques, numériques, de médias de masse et de médias sociaux. En outre, le chapitre II aborde le conflit qui a débuté avec le coup d'état de 2013 de la Séléka et il introduit certaines des méthodes employées pendant le travail de terrain.

Développant le chapitre II, le chapitre III traite de la méthodologie, mais il va au-delà d'une simple énumération et description de méthodes. Même si les « méthodes » sont les composantes de base de recueil de données, la « méthodologie » se réfère à une approche philosophique pour faire de la recherche et « être » sur le terrain, surtout en relation avec ceux sur lesquels, et surtout avec lesquels, nous faisons des recherches. Au-delà du terrain, cette méthodologie façonne une approche plus inclusive à l'égard du monde universitaire. Ici aussi, la mobilité (surtout celle de l'esprit) se trouve au cœur de la méthodologie. Le chapitre commence par une description des mouvements physiques comme un moyen de collecter des données. Lentement mais sûrement, la mobilité physique laisse place à des types de mobilité au-delà du physique. Mouvoir des méthodes entraîne ensuite émouvoir : être ému ou touché par ce que nous rencontrons sur le terrain. Cette interprétation émotionnelle de la mobilité ouvre des modes de pensée alternatifs sur des pratiques de recherches plus inclusives, ainsi que des poursuites de « mouvements » dans la même direction avec d'autres et de créer des projets artistiques et académiques avec d'autres.

Construite sur des récits biographiques et la description d'existences qui zigzaguent entre les pays et au travers des frontières, le chapitre IV présente l'histoire de la région, à la fois d'un point de vue subjectif et micro historique et d'une perspective inspirée de la mobilité, basée sur les trajectoires

personnelles. Ensemble, les récits de vie de ce chapitre couvrent quatre pays d'Afrique centrale : la République centrafricaine, la RDC et dans une moindre mesure, la République du Congo et le Tchad. Ils posent le décor historique de cette thèse et sont connectés à des évènements macro-historiques et des histoires nationales. Le chapitre couvre l'histoire de l'époque précoloniale jusqu'à 2011 (l'histoire plus récente est traitée dans le chapitre II). Dans celui-ci, j'explore comment la mobilité a modelé la région, en commençant à partir de l'établissement de communautés forestières pendant l'expansion bantoue ; les incursions de rafles d'esclaves ; l'invasion et l'oppression coloniale violente ; la décennie cruciale vers l'indépendance suivie de décennies de dictature et de régime militaire ; l'âge des soi-disantes libéralisation et démocratisation qui ont engendrées différentes formes de rebellions et d'expressions violentes au tournant du millénaire. Comme il est basé sur des récits de vie, le chapitre IV suit une chronologie subjective ou non-chronologique, et faussée par la mémoire. Le principal objectif de faire ainsi est de souligner que même si des frontières arbitraires ont profondément affecté et indéniablement modelé la région, elles n'ont jamais réussi à la diviser complètement.

La deuxième partie traite des réfugiés de République centrafricaine à Kinshasa et elle est basée sur les récits personnels de ces étudiants (de leurs parents, amis, voisins) à Kinshasa, Bangui et Brazzaville. Le terme de réfugié-étudiant sert d'une part à accentuer leur statut (im)mobile et d'autre part, il essaie de délimiter un groupe particulier de jeunes. Ils ne sont cependant pas tous des étudiants au sens strict du mot : certains étaient encore en train de terminer leurs études secondaires alors que d'autres avaient déjà étudié auparavant. Toutefois, ils sont tous citadins et éduqués et comme ils se déplacent à cause de conflit à travers une frontière internationale et font appel à la Convention relative au statut des réfugiés, le terme « réfugié » les décrit le mieux – ils s'identifient eux-mêmes avec cette étiquette. La deuxième partie est composée de quatre chapitres empiriques qui peuvent être lu chacun à part, c'est-à-dire horizontalement, même si j'encourage le lecteur à les lire verticalement, comme des couches successives, où chaque chapitre creuse plus profondément et ajoute une nouvelle couche d'analyse à la précédente. La deuxième partie illustre au travers de l'exemple de réfugiés-étudiants comment la jeunesse trouve une place à elle dans leurs propres communautés et au-delà. Tous les chapitres de cette partie traitent du mouvement ou de son absence. Mouvement est compris dans un sens physique, symbolique et existentiel. Pris ensemble, les différents chapitres examinent les différentes couches des multiples voyages des étudiants de République centrafricaine.

Le chapitre V traite du voyage physique – c'est-à-dire les itinéraires géographiques pluriels des réfugiés-étudiants. Le point de départ pour tous est Bangui. D'un autre côté, le point d'arrivée est

multiple et différent pour chaque individu ; il continue de bouger et de changer au fur et à mesure du temps qui passe. Le chapitre V prend également en considération l'absence de mouvement, les pauses pendant les voyages, les détours et les différents moments d'immobilité ou de blocage. Le Chapitre VI aborde la quête du devenir – en d'autres mots, l'horizon envisagé vers lequel le voyage mène : l'accès à l'éducation. Dans ce chapitre, l'éducation est comprise dans le sens le plus large en terme de scolarité (aller à l'école) mais également en terme d'éducation (en dehors de l'école, à la fois au sein de la famille et plus largement, dans la société). Ce chapitre revient d'abord aux temps du Bangui de l'enfance des étudiants-réfugiés qui prend place dans la décennie turbulente des années quatre-vingt-dix. En plongeant plus profondément dans leur passé, ce chapitre aide à contextualiser et à nuancer les décisions qui sont ensuite prises par les étudiants, en tant que jeunes adultes. La scolarité et l'éducation ne sont cependant pas limitées au contexte de Bangui mais sont transposées à leur changement en adulte dans leur nouveau foyer, la ville hostile de Kinshasa et leurs stratégies d'adaptation. Kinshasa est transformée en un lieu d'éducation en terme de survie, une école de la vie.

Dans le chapitre VII, la quête du devenir s'étend au-delà de soi-même à la communauté plus large des réfugiés de République centrafricaine à Kinshasa. Même si ce chapitre fait à nouveau appel aux expériences multiples des différents réfugiés-étudiants, l'histoire d'Euloge – et surtout, son engagement politique et son développement et donc sa mobilité sociale et politique – est au cœur de ce chapitre. L'enracinement de cet engagement est illustré avec des exemples concrets dans lesquels Euloge s'occupe des problèmes des membres de la communauté des réfugiés de la République centrafricaine à Kinshasa. Cet engagement n'est pas nouveau, il forme plutôt une continuation des efforts d'Euloge en tant que leader étudiant dans ses années universitaires à Bangui avant la crise de 2013. C'est ici qu'on doit comprendre continuité plutôt que rupture dans la migration et la fuite. Le chapitre VIII s'appuie sur cette continuité mais se tourne vers le développement personnel et spirituel ainsi que les expressions créatives et artistiques. Cela illustre comment les réfugiés-étudiants défient les normes sociales établies et explorent les limites de leurs personnalités.

Considérer les différentes incarnations du *conflict mobile* amène à une réflexion sur les définitions d'une part du réfugié mais également d'autre part du travailleur humanitaire. Les mouvements des deux incarnations, et de beaucoup d'autres, y compris celle de la chercheuse, sont façonnés par le conflit et cependant, les itinéraires suivent des régimes différents de mobilité. Pendant que les réfugiés souffrent d'être bloqués, le travailleur humanitaire est ultra-mobile. Le *conflict mobile* aide à souligner ces disparités et inégalités. En outre, la présente thèse soutient que conflit et mobilité font

partie de la longue histoire qui a modelé les sociétés en Afrique centrale. Mais comme le *conflict mobile* intègre des outsiders, des intrus et des aventuriers, ces derniers ont également joué un rôle dans le modelage de la région et de son histoire. Cette entreprise commune, pour le meilleur et pour le pire, nourrit un esprit nomade qui cherche des moyens de réunir différentes pratiques de production de connaissance afin de mieux comprendre ce que la mobilité signifie le long des rives de la rivière Oubangui.

Author's biography

Born in Bogotá (Colombia) in 1983, Catherina was raised in Colombia, Belgium, and South Africa. After completing her high school degree, she enrolled at the African Languages and Cultures programme at Ghent University. During her BA degree, she travelled to Central Africa in 2005 for three months. During this first fieldtrip she visited different cities in DR Congo and focused on learning Lingala. In 2009–2010 Catherina went back to DR Congo for a period of six months in order to conduct research in Kisangani. This resulted in an MA thesis on the use of Lingala and Swahili among the youth. The thesis is entitled "The Congolese Yankee: Language and identity among youth in Kisangani" and was shortlisted for the LUF thesis award and the African Studies Centre MA thesis award. In 2012 Catherina joined the Connecting In Times of Duress programme at the Institute of History (Leiden University). Under the supervision of Prof. Mirjam De Bruijn, she carried out research on people on the move for a period of twelve months (in total) in both DR Congo and the Central African Republic. The results of this research are presented in this PhD thesis. In addition to doing fieldwork, Catherina has contributed to organizing various conferences, seminars, workshops, and other cultural activities (such as exhibitions and film screenings). She is currently working as a post-doc in an EU-funded Horizon 2020 project on forced displacement and migration flows within and outside Africa (TRAFIG). Within TRAFIG, she is conducting research on the Congolese communities in urban Tanzania and collaborates closely with Dignity Kwanza, a Tanzanian NGO based in Dar es Salaam. She also teaches courses on ethnographic methods at Leiden University. Catherina lives in Utrecht (The Netherlands) with her partner and two children, Erikah (8) and Camilo (4).

Appendix I

Kinshasa le 02 decembre 2014

Objet : Requête

A Monsieur le representant du service de protection (UNHCR)

courrier reçu le
02 DEC 2014
HAUT COMMISSARIAT DES NATIONS UNIES POUR LES REFUGIES

Monsieur le representant,

J'ai l'honneur de venir très respectueusement auprès de votre haute responsabilité deposer ma requête suite à la decision prise par le HCR relative à la suspension des activités génératrices de revenus AGR pour l'année prochaine.

En effet, je fais partie des cinquantes (50) réfugiés centrafricains retenus pour l'assistance à Kinsasa. J'avais reçu la garantie locative depuis le mois de Mai 2014 et en demandant cette aide pour la maison, l'ERUKIN m'avait passuré que les AGR font suivre automatiment, raison pour laquelle j'avais jugé intelligent de prendre une maison d'une chambre et salon comme la maison est situé juste au bord de la grande route pour utiliser le salon un studio photo (je suis photographe) par rapport à mon projet de AGR que tout le monde avait apprécié au niveau de ERUKIN. Alors après avoir épuisé ma garantie, puisque c'est l'AGR qui pouvait la maintenir et il y a de cela deux mois que je suis expulsé de la maison. L'heure où je vous parle, je passe des moments extrêmement difficiles si bien que je ne pourrai ~~pas~~ patienter jusqu'à janvier, vu les personnels de l'ERUKIN le savent bien, non seulement que je mange difficilement mais aussi et surtout que je coure un danger grave. Alors je vous prie à ce qu'une dérogation me soit accordée car je ne change que des eglises pour passer la nuit.

Veuillez agréer monsieur le representant, l'expression de mes douleurs les plus profonds.

Appendix II

COLLECTIF DES ETUDIANTS
CENTRAFRICAINS REFUGIES

Kinshasa, le 20 Août 2014

25 AUG 2014

Transmis Copie pour Information à :
- Madame le Secrétaire Permanent à la Commission Nationale pour les Réfugiés(CNR) ;
- Monsieur le Coordonnateur de l'Equipe d'Encadrement des Réfugiés Urbains de Kinshasa(ERUKIN).

Tous à Kinshasa.

A Monsieur le Représentant du Haut Commissariat des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés(UNHCR)
à Kinshasa.

Objet : Doléances.

Monsieur le Représentant,

Nous réfugiés centrafricains en particulier les étudiants avons le réel plaisir de venir très respectueusement auprès de votre haute personnalité déposer nos doléances.

En effet Monsieur le Représentant, il fait aujourd'hui 2 ans que nous étudiants réfugiés centrafricains n'avons pas eu accès aux études, or une jeunesse sans formation est une jeunesse sans avenir étant donné que nous constituons une classe jeune qui peut également aider notre pays qui est profondément tombé au bas du sol, à cause de la crise qui continue toujours de perdurer, Monsieur le représentant nous sollicitons votre bonne volonté de penser à notre formation de cette année académique 2014 – 2015 autrement dit de nous inscrire dans des formations professionnelles ou dans des universités car les études universitaires à Bangui sont paralysées par les grèves successives des enseignants.

Ci- joint la liste des étudiants.

Dans l'espoir d'une suite favorable, veuillez agréer, Monsieur le Représentant, l'expression de nos considérations les plus distinguées.

Appendix III

Bureau de la communauté des
Refugiés Centrafricains
à Kinshasa

Kinshasa, le 27 janvier 2014

Transmis copie pour information à

- Madame la Secrétaire Permanent de la Commission Nationale de Refugiés

- Monsieur le Coordonateur de l'Equipe D'encadrement des Refugiés Urbains De Kinshasa
Tous à Kinshasa

Objet : Remerciement et Doléances

A Monsieur le Représentant Régional Assistant Chargé de la Protection au HCR
à Kinshasa/Ngaliama

Monsieur le Représentant,

Nous membres du Comité organisateur de la Communauté des Réfugiés Centrafricains de Kinshasa, élu en date du 25 janvier 2014, avons l'honneur de venir auprès de votre haute personnalité par cette présente remercier le staff de la CNR, du HCR, de l'ERUKIN pour le soutien et l'assistance que chaque organisme a apporté aux Centrafricains en détresse depuis quelque mois en RDC.

Nous profitons de cette occasion de présenter aux représentants de chaque service cité ci-haut nos vœux les meilleurs de l'an 2014. Que 2014 vous apporte santé, prospérité, courage et bravoure pour lutter pour la cause et protection de tous les Refugiés en RDC.

Nous profitons également de la circonstance pour vous présenter les doléances des Refugiés Centrafricains qui ont de problèmes selon les cas suivants :

- Les Refugiés Centrafricains malades internés à l'hôpital St Joseph ont le problème d'alimentation, leur assistance alimentaire connaît parfois de ruptures pendant six à sept jours.

- Ceux qui sont malades et qui ont reçu leur garantie locative ont aussi des difficultés. Par rapport à leur état de santé, ils ont un régime alimentaire qui nécessite une assistance. Ils sont abandonnés à eux-mêmes. Et à chaque fois ils sont rechutés parce qu'ils prennent les médicaments sans avoir mangé. Le sous alimentation a provoqué un accouchement prématuré d'une femme dans le cite de Kimbanseke.

- Certains Refugiés qui sont dans des familles d'accueil ne sont pas assistés et leurs enfants ne sont pas scolarisés.

- La plupart des Refugiés sont des étudiants qui ont fuit le pays à cause de leur appartenance politique. Ces jeunes sollicitent votre secours pour être formé.

Veuillez agréer, Monsieur le Représentant Régional, l'expression de notre haute considération renouvelée.

[redacted]

Président de la Communauté des Refugiés Centrafricains

[redacted]

Appendix IV

Kinshasa, le 04 février 2015

Copie Transmis à

- Son Excellence Monsieur le Premier Ministre chef du gouvernement
- Son Excellence Monsieur le Ministre de L'intérieur et de la Sécurité Président de la Commission Nationale pour les Refugies
- Monsieur le Représentant de la Ligue des droits de l'homme
- Monsieur le Représentant de MONUSCO
- Monsieur le Représentant de l'UNHCR à Genève
- Monsieur le Représentant Régional du UNHCR à Kinshasa

Objet : Informations et Dénonciations

A Madame le Secrétaire Permanent à la Commission Nationale pour les Refugies (CNR).

Madame,

L'honneur m'échoit de venir très respectueusement auprès de votre haute personnalité informer et dénoncer ce qui m'est arrivé au HCR le 3 février 2015 à 13h15' environs.

En effet madame, le matin du mardi 03/02/2015 j'ai reçu un coup de fil téléphonique de la part de [redacted] refugiée centrafricaine mère de 2 enfants avec un[redacted]sse de 7 mois qui désire rentrer au site de Molé mais ne connaissait pas comment mené les démarches pour demander son rapatriement car le HCR répète souvent que l'assistance des réfugies se trouvent aux sites. Alors cette dernière m'appelle en tant que responsable de la communauté pour pouvoir l'aider dans ce sens. En arrivant devant Monsieur [redacted] personnel du service de la

protection du HCR, ce dernier au début nous reçoit avec courtoisie mais au moment ou il demandait à la compatriote son document d'identité, la compatriote lui présentait sa carte d'identité des refugies et ce qui est regrettable c'est que son NOM NE FUGURE PAS DANS LA BASE DES DONNEES DU HCR. Alors j'ai tout simplement posé la question à Monsieur Anthony pour savoir :

- Comment une personne peut être détenteur d'une carte des refugies délivré par le HCR alors que son NOM N'Existe PAS DANS LA BASE DES DONNEES DU HCR ? pourquoi ?si ce dernier peut Harmoniser son travail pour qu'on ne puisse jamais assister à de telles situations. automatiquement il me hurle dessus en me demandant de sortir de la salle avec un ordre accompagné d'une voix autoritaire : or il ignore qu'il est là pour écouter et protéger les refugies. Quand je lui demandais de me permettre de dire au moins un mot avant de sortir, il appelle les agents de sécurité pour une déguerpir avec force. effectivement les a gents sont venus deux (2), l'un m'a brutalisé avec force, froissé et même cassé ma montre en me tenant des langages blaisant. Et l'autre m'a rien touche bref. Monsieur [redacted] m'a donné des promesses qu'il va décider mon sort. Alors une chose est vrai mes destiné sont entre les mains de Dieu qui m'a crée et qui a crée [redacted] alors je me pose ces questions :
- Pourquoi ce ressentiment évident ? Alors que je suis comme tout autre refugie au monde qui a des droits et des devoirs.
- Si en tant que secrétaire général de la communauté, je suis froissé, brutalisée sous l'ordre d'[redacted] sans but a plus forte raison mes compatriotes ? or j'avais en mains les préoccupations de la communauté pour lui soumettre.
- C'est de cette manière qu'on doit traiter les refugiés ? alors qu'on est sensé les protégés.

Etre refugié ne veut pas dire qu'on a pas droit de prendre la parole lorsque ça ne marche pas en vous rappelant aussi que nous disposons certaines libertés d'expressions car nous sommes dans un pays démocratique

Je n'hésiterai jamais d'informer et de dénoncer les mauvaises pratiques

Ainsi je vous sollicite de porter un regard particulier sur des cas pareils et d'être sensible aux cris des refugies.

Veuillez, croire, Madame le secrétaire permanent l'expression de haute considération.

Didier Lassdi 2017