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

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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

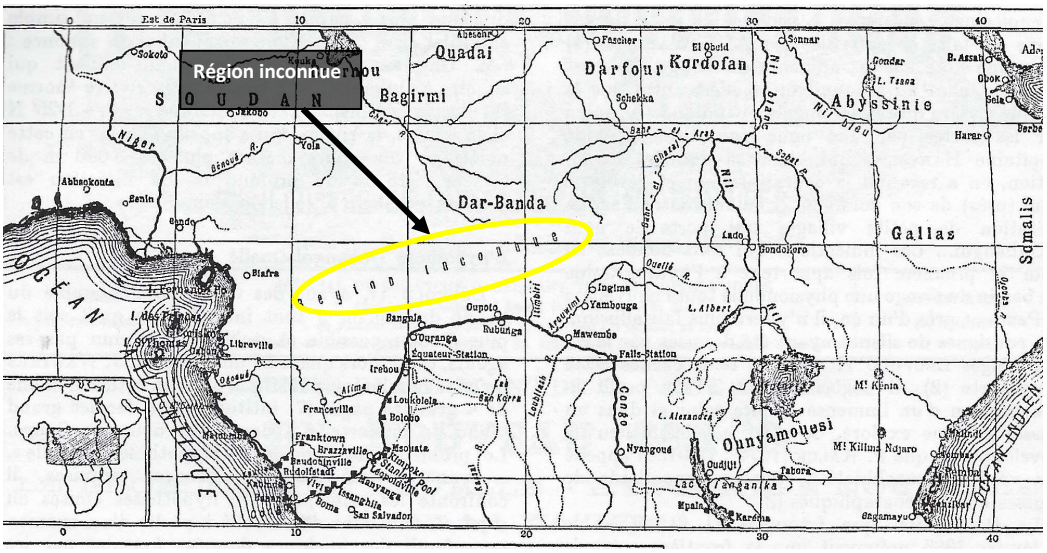

Figure 7 *Région inconnue* or Unknown region
Top: CAR is 'somewhere… HERE!' La Nouvelle Centrafrique 2013 – Bottom: *Croquis de l'Afrique centrale, dressé d'après les dernières découvertes* (Le Mouvement géographique n°1, 6 avril 1884 in: Boulvert 1985, 393). Notice white area with description '*région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

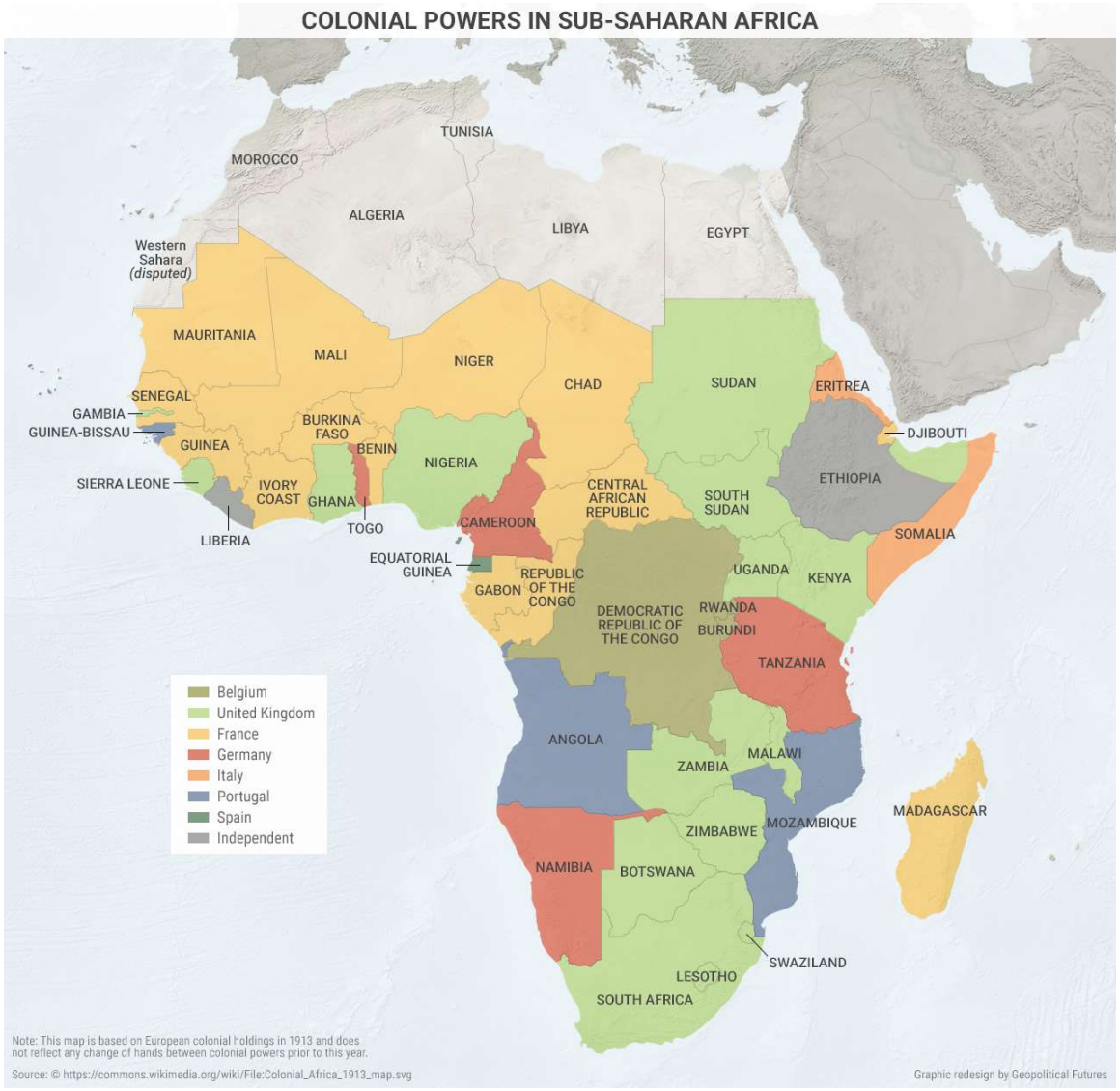

Figure 8 Colonial Africa in 1913[19]

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

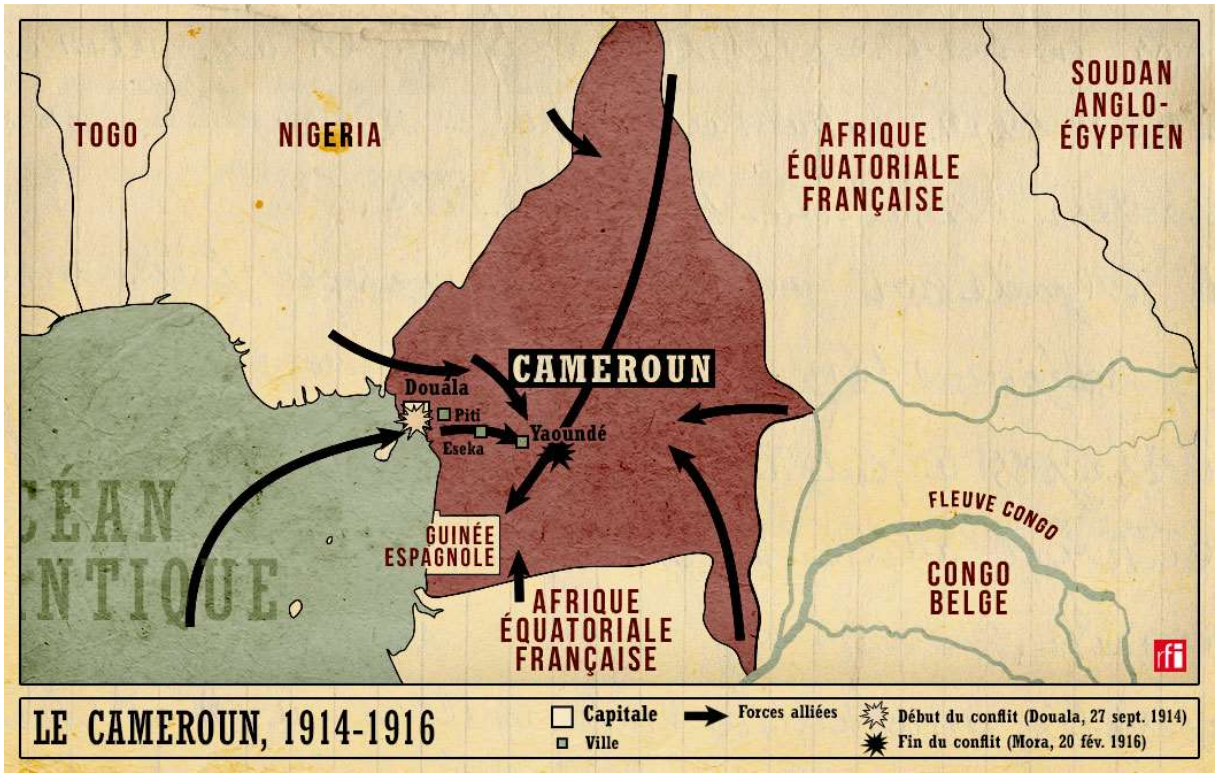

Figure 9 Cameroon 1914-1916[20]

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).

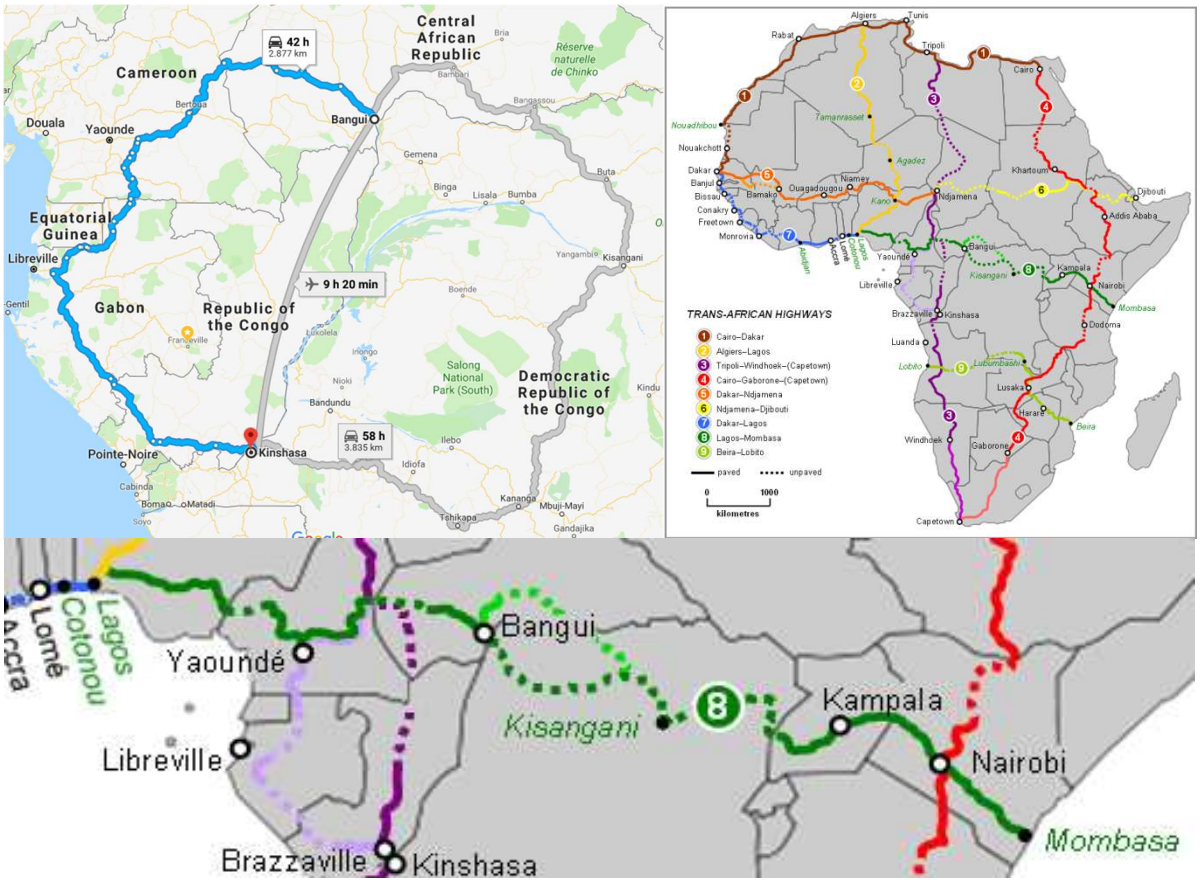

Figure 10 Roads and highways
Screenshot Google Maps, Recommended travel routes from Kinshasa to Bangui, last viewed 26 January 2019. Trans-African Highways with zoom-in on Highway #8.[21]

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.

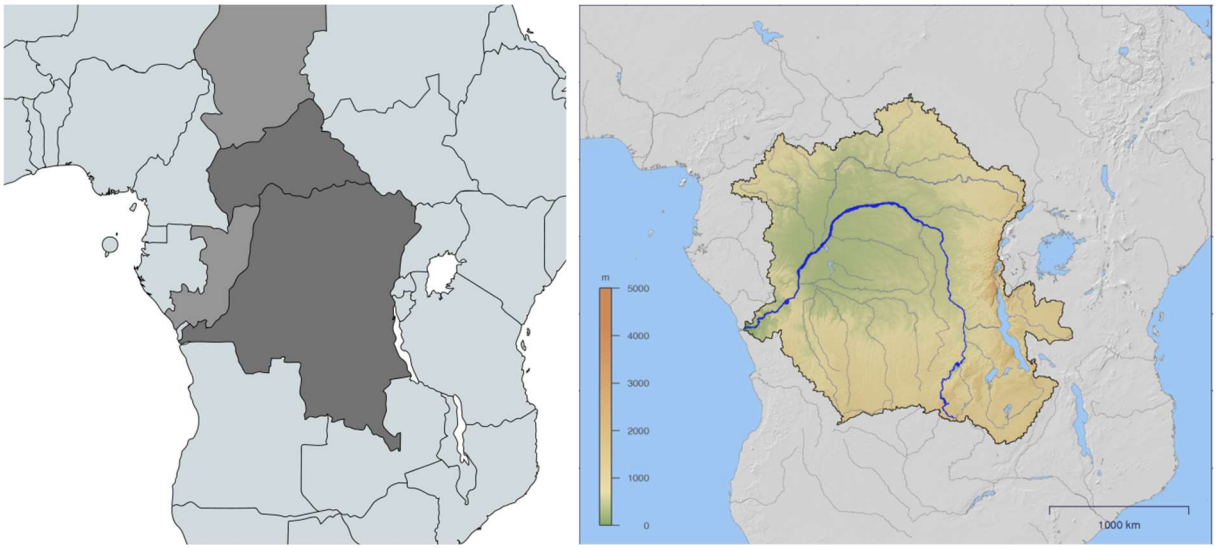

Figure 11 Congo Basin
(Left) Political borders of CAR, DR Congo, Congo-Brazzaville, and Chad by Mapchart.net. (Right) Limits of the Congo Basin.[23] The Congo Basin includes the DR Congo in its (almost) totality, in addition to parts of Congo-Brazzaville, Cameroon, CAR, Tanzania, Burundi, Zambia, and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

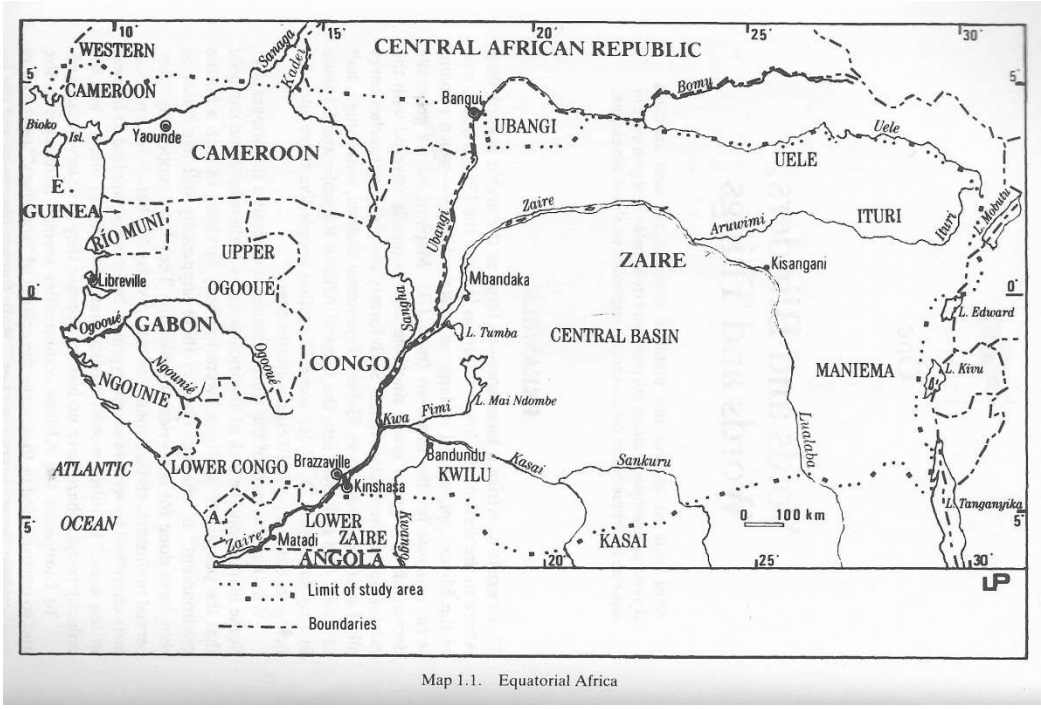

Figure 12 Equatorial Africa[24]

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*

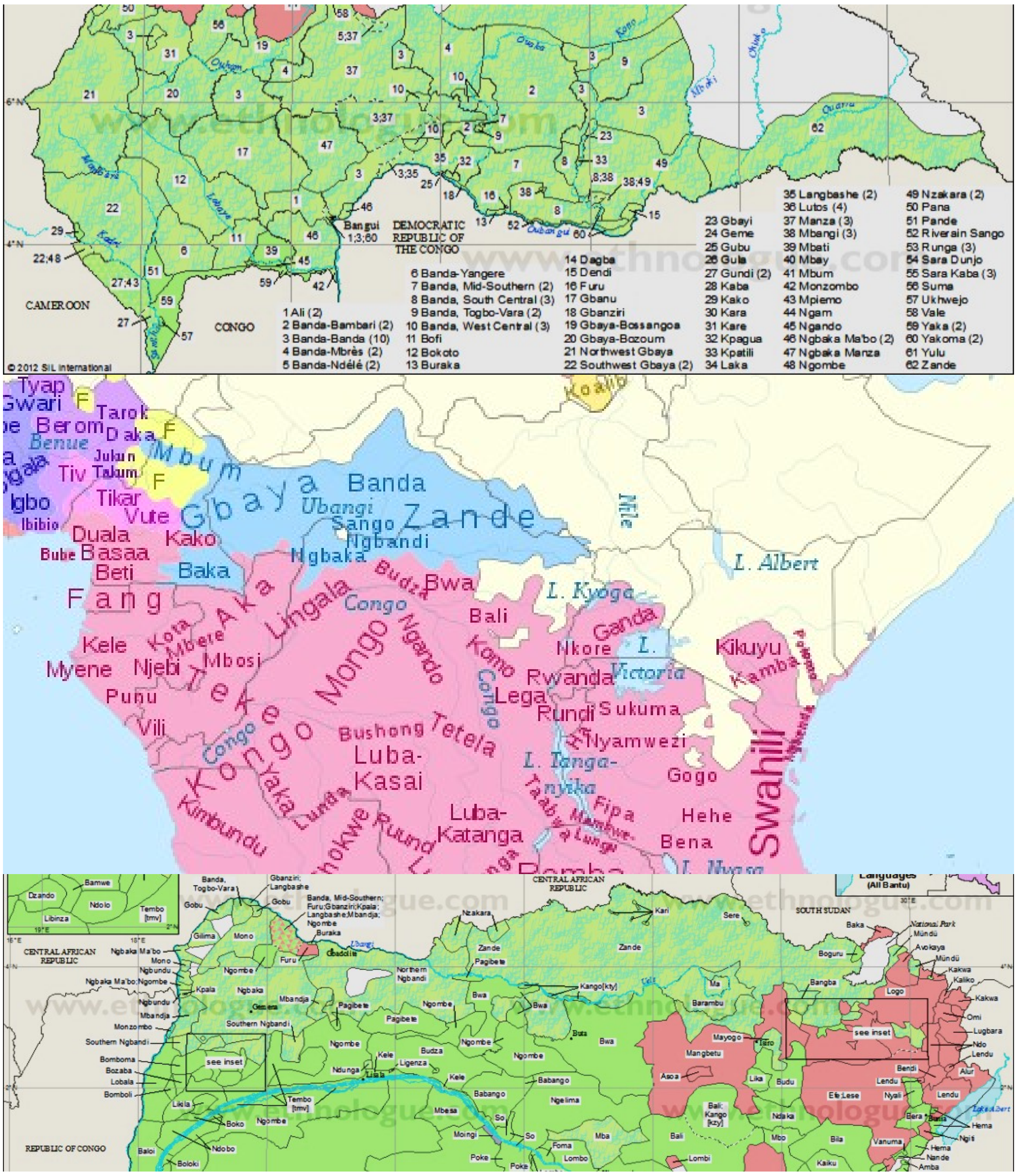

Figure 13 Language maps

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,

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 foisonnant 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

[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

[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.

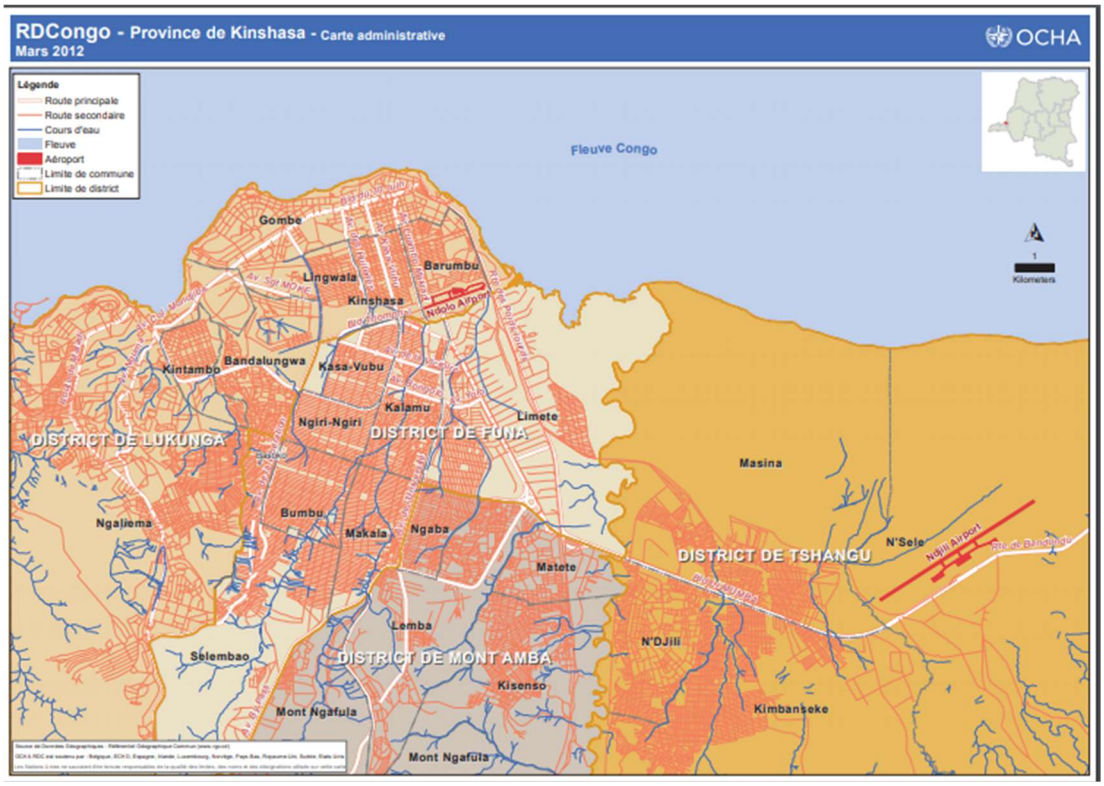

Figure 26 Map of Kinshasa
(OCHA reference map 2012)

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.

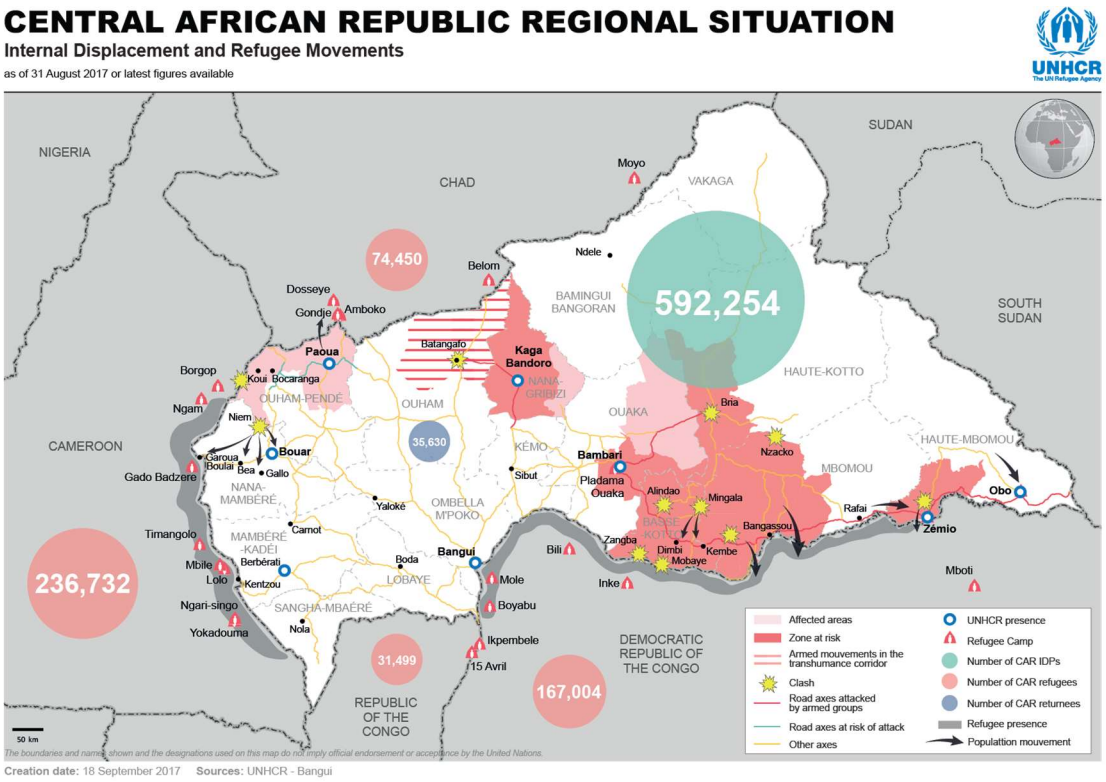

Figure 29 Number of CAR refugees in neighbouring countries[83]

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]

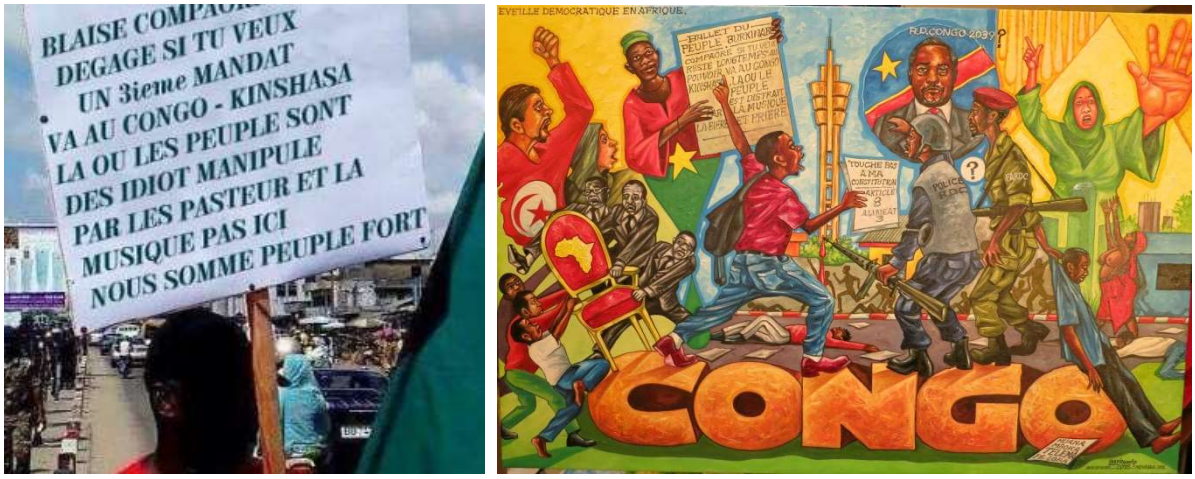

Figure 30 'Blaise Compaoré dégage'
(Left) Photoshopped image that went around Facebook at the end of 2014. (Right) Eveille démocratique en Afrique (Makengele 2015a).

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.