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

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Chapter IV. A history of mobility in a transborder region

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

1) Introduction

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

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

[105] Nickname of the informant

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

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

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

[106] Keynote speech Jewsiewicki, April 26 2018.

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

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

Elles sont à deux à pouvoir partager mon coeur
Elles n'ont jamais vécu une relation tendue
Malgré les temps durs, la haine et la rivalité sont inclues parmi elles
…
Refrain
Je clame mon affinité à Bangui la coquette;
Et, Kinshasa la plus belle.
Au début l'aventure était belle,
Jusqu'à ce que Bangui deviant la roquette;
Kinshasa la poubelle.
Je n'ai pas besoin de pourparlers
Pour parler de l'hétéroclité entre la coquette et la roquette.
La plus belle et la poubelle.

They're two who can share my heart
They've never had a strained relationship
Despite the hard times, hatred and rivalry are included among them
…
Refrain
I proclaim my affinity with Bangui the coquette,
And Kinshasa the most beautiful.
At the beginning the adventure was lovely,
Until Bangui turned to the rocket,
Kinshasa to the garbage can.
I don't need no negotiations
To talk about the mismatch between the coquette and the rocket,
The most beautiful and the garbage can.

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

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

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

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

2) Dictatorship and democracy: The first decades after independence

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

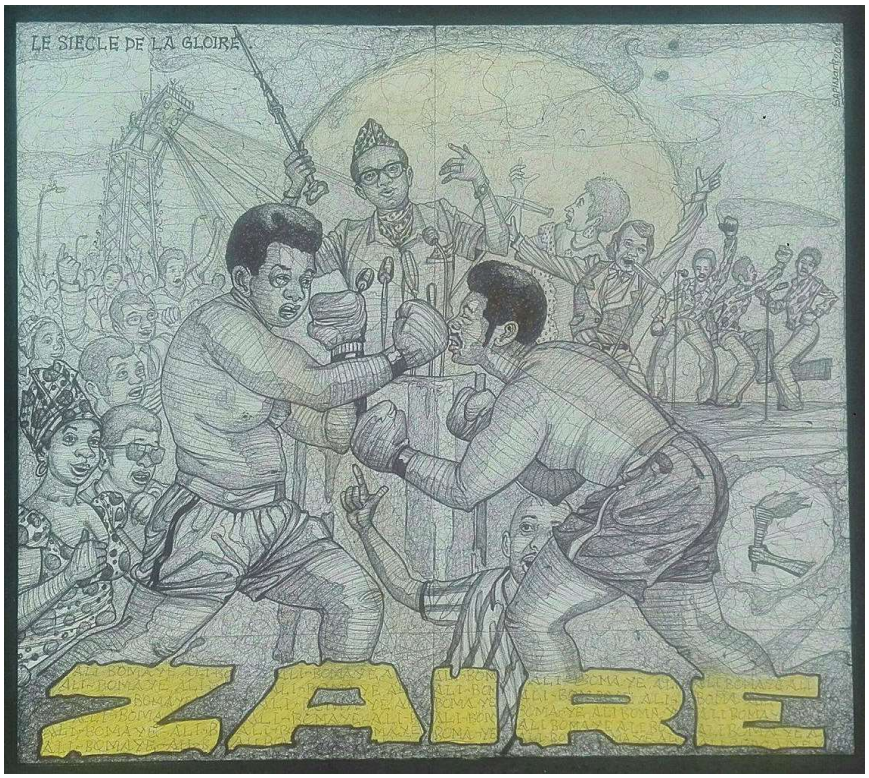

Figure 38 Le siècle de la gloire
Sapin Makengele (2016)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3) The turbulent 1990s

a) Hope

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

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

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

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

b) 1996–1997

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

c) Paranoia

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4) Deep water: More violence and new dictatorships

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

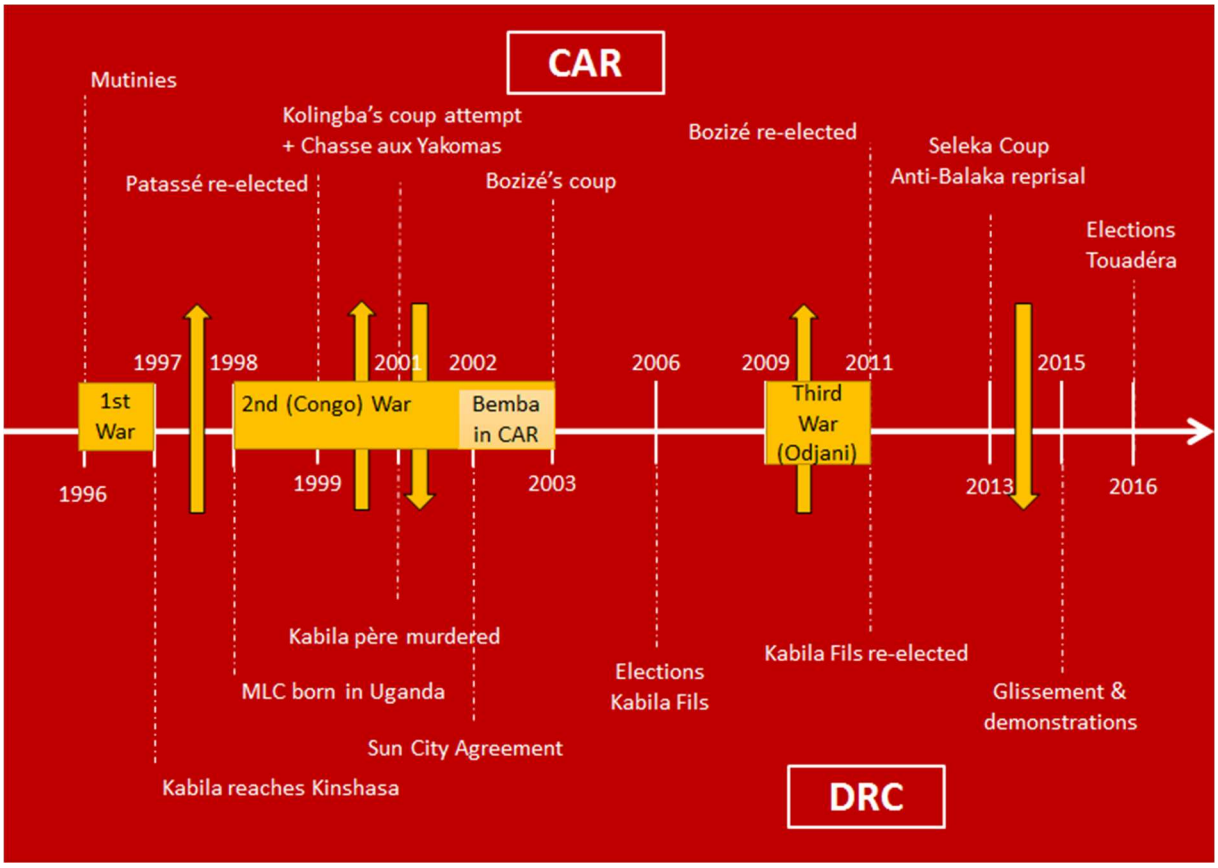

Figure 40 Combined timeline CAR – DR Congo
From the mutinies until the 2016 CAR elections. The arrows stand for refugee flows.

a) The Congo wars

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

The first wave of conflict in NW Congo

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The second wave of conflict in NW Congo

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

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

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

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

[144] Fieldwork notes Dongo, 10 December 2014.

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

b) Coup bid and the Banyamoulengue

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

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

[145] A campaign of reprisal killings

[146] Interview Oscar, Bangui August 2016

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

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

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

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

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

[148] Kolingba, Demafouth, Bozizé

[149] Interview Gemena July 2013

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

c) La 'Bozizie'

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

[156] International Criminal Court in The Hague, Netherlands

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Figure 45 Émile's visiting card

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

d) Odjani: The third war

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

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

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

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

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

P: Things got really lost …

[167] See for instance Olson 2010.

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

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

CW: *Who ?*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5) Movement, violence and borders

a) The longue durée

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

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

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

[172] Lingala term used to designate white people.

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

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

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

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

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

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

b) Pre-colonial times

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

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

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

c) Intruders and explorers

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Concessionary politics and its legacies

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Grassroots resistance and the road to independence

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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