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

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Part Two

The CAR refugee-students in Kinshasa

Chapter V. On moving and being stuck

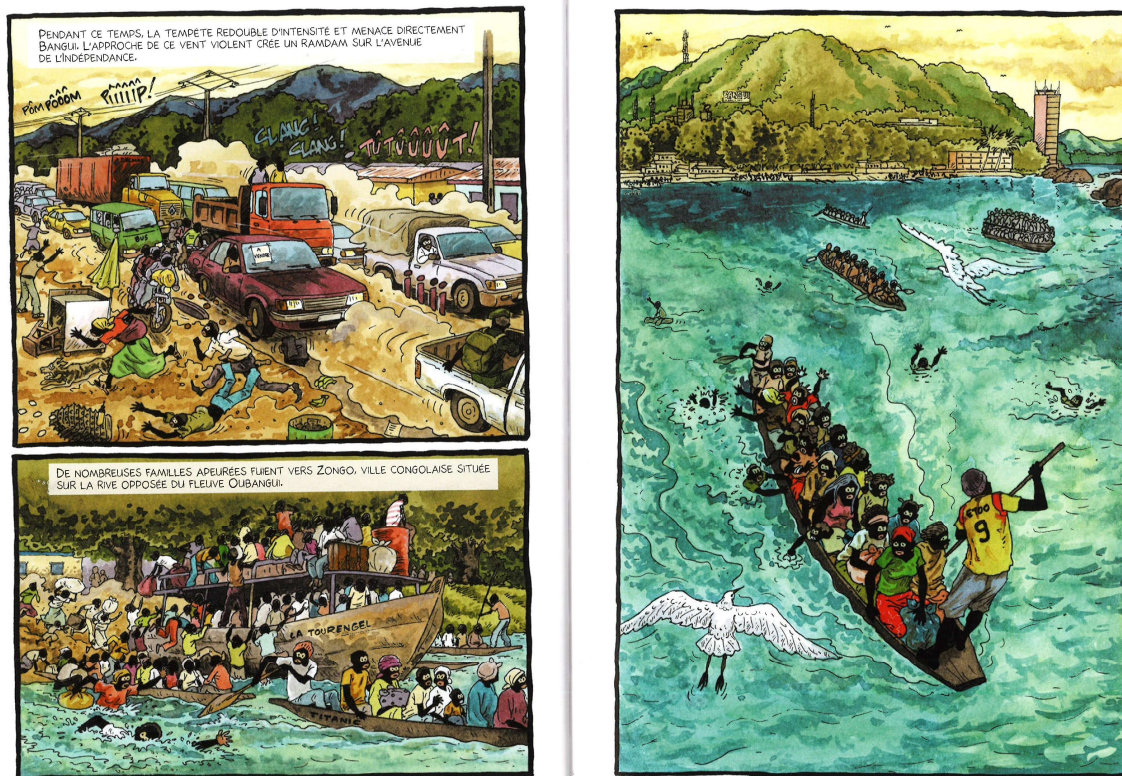


Figure 47 Excerpt 'Tempête sur Bangui'

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

1) Introduction

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

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

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

2) The coup's aftermath

a) To flee or not to flee

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁹⁰ District of Bangui (see Figure 244)

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

Seleka and the Anti-Balaka. Even if they are more present in the north-western region of CAR—meaning that many escaped to Cameroon—they nevertheless trod the border with DR Congo.¹⁹² Their escape routes and waves have been described by others ([Amadou_2018a](#), [2018b](#); [de Vries_2018](#)). Nor do I touch upon those CAR citizens who had converted to Islam in the years prior to the conflict. Nor do I touch upon the many others. More than an enumeration, the purpose of this division into waves is to underline the fact that there is a considerable variety among refugees. Therefore, they cannot be viewed or treated as a homogeneous group with homogeneous needs—which is, unfortunately, too often the case in humanitarian discourse.

b) The breakdown of the social fabric: Personal feuds

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

c) Memories and duress

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3) Crossing the Ubangi

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

a) Escaping encampment

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

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

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

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

²⁰⁰ Interview in Kinshasa, 16 February 2015

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

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

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



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

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



Figure 51 Boyabu crossroads
(16 July 2013)

It is important to underline the proximity of the camps to these two towns in order to nuance the image of camp refugee versus urban refugee, as put forward, among others, by Malkki in her book *Purity and Exile* (1995). Within the category of refugees who live outside the camp, one can make several distinctions, informed by the refugees' nationality, location, and degree of mobility. Camp refugees, likewise, do not limit themselves to the confinements of the camp either. There are important multilateral connections between camp and town. Refugees can be, for instance, economically active in the market of the town—that is, both those refugees officially registered inside the camp and those living outside it. This is particularly obvious on the days that the cash grant²⁰³ is paid: the motorbike circulation to and from the camp is many times busier compared with that of other days. The two towns, moreover, house most of the rotating NGO staff who work in the camp, as well as the CNR,²⁰⁴ or the regional representation of the Ministry of Interior. The hospitals care for the ill refugees that need treatment beyond primary care. Regionally, Zongo and Libenge have also become magnets for unemployed individuals from the region looking for petty jobs—such as those of gardeners, security agents, cooks, and cleaners—brought along with the humanitarian caravan.

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

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

²⁰⁴ Commission Nationale pour les Réfugiés

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

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

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

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

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

However, not all Guy describes is necessarily negative. He had, for instance, welcomed the installation of the Club RFI²⁰⁶ in the camp and was to be found every evening among the audience in front of the screen on which news was projected.²⁰⁷ There are other accounts, published on the UNHCR website in particular, that underscore miscellaneous activities and positive developments. Some youngsters, for instance, turned themselves into social leaders (Schmitt 2015). The camp knew a successful, albeit short-lived, capoeira initiative that inspired and gave hope to youngsters who continued to dance capoeira even after their return to Bangui. As Grayson-Lune (2017) indicates, refugee camps are connected to the world. In their dreams, refugees travel to the world, but the world would also travel to the camp. Francis recounts the visit of different representatives from Geneva, the United States, even China. He insisted on showing me the photos on his phone as if to prove it. But as nothing concrete follows these worldly connections, at least in the eyes of the refugees, they end up being an even greater source of frustration. Likewise the Internet: it fails to open up the world equally to all individuals, exacerbating the refugees' feelings of missing out and pushing them further into marginalization (Grayson 2017; Ferguson 2006).

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

²⁰⁶ *Compétitions, organisations, ce sont les loisirs*

²⁰⁷ During the FIFA World Cup in Brazil 2014



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I first met Guy in August 2013 at the Zongo hospital run by an Italian congregation of Catholic sisters, where I was sojourning. Even if distant, Guy was always up for a chat. In those days he wore grey jeans, a black t-shirt, and a red Nike cap. A couple of weeks after our first meeting, Guy and his family returned to the camp, where I tried to look them²⁰⁹ up and ended up seeing only his wife and a friend, whom I also knew from Zongo. The second time I met Guy, serendipitously, was in June 2014, almost a year later, again at the hospital in Zongo. Guy was wearing the same grey pants and black t-shirt, but this time inside out. I took photos of him on both occasions and placed them one next to the other.²¹⁰ It is difficult to express what I feel when I think of the fact that he was wearing the very same clothes. In 2014, Guy was definitely less cheerful, looked worried, had lost weight, and suffered from insomnia and chronic hunger. Guy compared Mole to a concentration camp. He had never chosen to stay at a refugee camp, and being a refugee constituted a choiceless decision (Coulter 2008). He felt tortured—and who could prove him wrong?

b) A tedious and never-ending journey

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

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

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

Zongo and Gemena, for instance, he found comfortable accommodation. The roads in north-western Congo are in poor condition for all its travellers. During the rainy season, trucks get stuck in the mud over and over again. Gemena is only 260 km from Zongo, but many times that distance in terms of travelling hours. It took Euloge four days to travel from Zongo to Gemena. Next to the poor infrastructure, administrative encounters with the Congolese authorities posed a whole series of problems. In Gemena, rumours had preceded Euloge; the authorities knew that a *petit* with money was on his way. The ANR²¹¹ made use of this knowledge to extort money from him. Euloge ended up paying officers for a document that would supposedly help him to arrive in Kinshasa.

From Gemena onwards, Euloge travelled on muddy and bumpy roads to Akula, a town on the shores of the Mongala river (an affluent of the Congo River), which serves as Gemena's harbour. In Akula, he had planned to take a vessel towards Kinshasa, but he fell prey to a spider web of small-scale corruption, from which—as an affluent foreigner unable to speak the local vernacular—it was difficult to escape. The ANR of Akula contested the document issued by the ANR of Gemena, and Euloge was sent back to Gemena. After spending some time in Gemena again, he tried out an alternative route. Euloge left, in his own words, 'clandestinely' to Mogalo (a locality on the shores of the Lua, an affluent of the Ubangui River); here he was stopped by the DGM²¹² and sent back to Gemena.

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

²¹¹ Agence Nationale de Renseignement, the Congolese information service.

²¹² Direction Générale de Migration

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

²¹⁶ Fieldwork notes: ‘Little fish eat little money and big fish eat big money’, 17 July 2013

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

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

By shedding light on how certain orders are maintained to benefit the lucky few, the above excerpt tells us something about politics in Africa. Little fish eat little money, and Congolese officials in the hinterland are not the ones really benefiting. They have no choice but to play along with the rules of the game. On the other hand, big fish eat big money, and they do benefit—the bountiful, happy few—to the cost of millions of others. In this sense, both the average Centrafricain refugee and the average Congolese clerk are both victims of a predatory system.

It would be naïve to think, however, that despite our shared foreignness, language is the only difference. In the excerpt above, I explained how the DGM officers were unable to come up with an infraction on my part—I had all the official papers, meaning that I could *pay* for them. Travelling the very same roads the Centrafricain refugees travelled, but in opposite directions, has also made me aware of the differences that exist between my informants and myself. These differences not only expose the different level of comfort while travelling and the choices we could make (using the motorbike, for instance, instead of the less reliant and slower trucks), but also point towards existing hierarchies and mobility regimes (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). Coming from the Netherlands, and backed up by a recognized institution such as Leiden University, I *was* able to arrange and pay for all my papers (visas and permits) in order to be able to cross borders legally. After all, it *was my choice* to go to the area. Fleeing war is an entirely different story, and I think it is important to keep these inequalities in mind to better comprehend how others view us as researchers and to better appreciate the relationships we build up with people (as discussed in Chapter III).

Finally, while borders in Central Africa are porous, they are selectively so. Rebellions are transborder engagements, whereby other, regional and global, regimes often support militias in neighbouring countries, or whereby foreign militias are often called in to do the dirty work.

Examples in Central Africa abound—Chad–Sudan/Darfur (Debos 2016)—or the case of the Banyamulenge described in Chapter IV. Likewise, natural resources from conflict areas are ‘laundered’ when crossing the border—for instance, clandestine CAR diamonds (Rousseau 2017, 41–43), and also illegal logging from CAR to Uganda (Cakaj 2015). People that live on both sides of the border cunningly play with borders too. The rest pay. While politicians and humanitarians (and also researchers) seem to have less trouble in paying, refugees, (illegal) migrants, and petty traders need to be good hagglers. Transnational borders are not singular and unitary but are designed to encourage some kinds of mobility (investors, businessmen, tourists, students and the like are welcome) and discourage others (illegal immigrants and refugees are not welcome) (Salazar and Smart 2011, iv).

4) Urban jungle

a) Arriving in Kinshasa

Many of the CAR refugees expressed a feeling of being overwhelmed when first arriving in Kinshasa:

It was the time when we didn't know what to do to get by in Kinshasa. Even going out on the boulevard frightened you, considering the tension in Kinshasa. (Focus Group Le Firmin, Kinshasa, 31 January 2015)²¹⁸

When one is used to a one-million capital city in a country with less than five million inhabitants, Kinshasa—the second-largest Sub-Saharan city, with 10–12 million inhabitants—is indeed scary. Population-wise, Kinshasa alone is more than twice the size of the whole of CAR. In terms of size, Bangui counts eight districts and spreads over an area of 67 km²; Kinshasa has 24 districts, and its urban area amounts to 583 km². Moving from one point to another in Kinshasa is not only more fatiguing and expensive than in Bangui; it is also more chaotic, as the regulations regarding public transportation in the former are less marked than in the latter.²¹⁹

Kinshasa is a difficult city for everyone, and the ‘mostly pauperised urban population lives a precarious existence characterised by daily struggle’ (International Crisis Group 2016, 4). Yet, the

²¹⁸ *C'était l'époque où on ne savait pas quoi faire pour vivre à Kinshasa, même sortir sur le boulevard ça te donne déjà la peur vu la tension de Kinshasa.*

²¹⁹ In Bangui, taxis are recognizable because they are yellow, and buses are green. In Kinshasa, any car and van is transformed into a vehicle for public transportation, with all the consequences this entails. As from 2018, taxis and buses were painted yellow and thus became recognizable. This was not necessarily the case in 2013–2015 during my fieldwork.

refugees find themselves in an even more vulnerable position than the locals. The newly arrived need to learn to find their way in this urban jungle. Immigrants to the city, whether from the interior of the country or foreigners, are an easy prey to the survival logic whereby everyone is forced to take advantage of the other (Wilson 2012). Foreigners, such as Euloge and Le Firmin, are particularly susceptible, because they do not have any family ties, nor do they master the local language, Lingala. Uncountable times Euloge was stopped by the traffic police while riding his motorbike. His lack of knowledge of Lingala and lack of social capital in the local network turned out, time and again, to be disadvantageous.

However, he let us know straightaway that Kinshasa 'is another reality and that no one here takes care of anyone else'. It is 'every man for himself, and God for all'. It was here that our hell began. (M.-L. Kassai in preparation)

Kinshasa is not only huge in terms of size, but it works according to its own rules. It is a space where the urban and the rural, the centre and the periphery, dissolve into one another. Kinshasa is also a 'space of the forest [...] potentially dangerous, frontier-like margin' and inhabited by the 'hunter' (De Boeck and Plissart 2004, 41). In the urban jungle, the Kinois is turned into a hunter that looks for opportunities (Wilson 2012).

b) Challenge of housing: Being moved around

When Euloge arrived in Kinshasa, he presented himself on the doorstep of the CNR, the organization in charge of registering refugees. He first spent a couple of nights at the Lingwala commune, an office turned into a dormitory at night,²²⁰ after which the ERUKIN²²¹ relocated him to the nearby 'Maison de la Bible'. In July 2013, together with about twenty countrymen, and two countrywomen, Euloge was then relocated to Kimbanseke, a less well-to-do peripheral, and at times rural-like, district of Kinshasa (see Figure 26).

²²⁰ When I first met Euloge in May 2014, he took me to see the Central African refugees sleeping at the Lingwala commune. The premises of the commune served for administrative purposes during the day and were transformed into a dormitory for refugees at night. The refugees (14 at the time, among whom were a couple of women) would sleep on cardboard boxes that served as improvised mattresses on a cement floor. This was known and tolerated by the CNR, which was based only a couple of blocks away.

²²¹ L'équipe d'encadrement des réfugiés urbains de Kinshasa. A Congolese NGO that works with urban refugees in Kinshasa and which had a partnership with the UNHCR at the time of research.

The refugees seemed to be well received by the local community. But, as had occurred during the boat trip, they were both taken care of and tricked. Little by little, they became part of their surroundings, assisted religious services at a nearby Pentecostal church and built up good relationships with their neighbours. On a Sunday in May, Euloge took me to visit this compound, even if he did not live there anymore. We had to take a bus to its terminal station, and from there on we continued on foot. Euloge was greeted all along the way, and we often stopped to shake hands. During a second visit, about a week later, Euloge's fellow refugee mates were hosting a visitor who had brought them *pondu*.²²² It was said that at the beginning, when the refugees had just moved in, the girls in the neighbourhood would parade in front of the young men's compound, on their way to fetch water, in their Sunday best to flirt with these attractive foreigners. Two of these girls later moved in and had children with two of the refugees.

Even if the house was relatively comfortable and the compound walled and secured, its location was a problem: it lay far away from the institutions (e.g. the UNHCR, CNR, CAR embassy). Students felt, in a way, 'stuck in the compound' (Hansen 2005, 13). In order to go to the centre of town, the refugees were forced to take several minibuses and spent a relatively large amount of money on transportation, or, alternatively, walked for long hours. The situation changed rapidly in October 2013, when the UNHCR/CNR posted a notification that stated, in bold letters, the decision to stop refugee assistance in Kinshasa and that

An important consequence of this decision is that the Central African refugees in Kinshasa have to take care of their housing, which will not be provided any longer by the UNHCR/ERUKIN.²²³

The young Central African refugees were requested, in other words, to leave the house by the end of the month. The UNHCR was unable to provide for them outside of the refugee camps, it was said, and if they wanted assistance they would have to be repatriated to the Inke, Mole, or Boyabu refugee camps in the north of the country. Few accepted the offer at that time. There was an alternative, however, in the form of a contestation letter in which the refugee could explain his or her grievance in order to be considered for what was known as '*le cas particulier ou individual*'. Each

²²² Cassava leaves, a national dish in different Central African countries. *Pondu* (in Lingala) is a Congolese dish that consists of pounded cassava leaves cooked in palm oil. It is eaten on a daily basis. Even if prepared differently (often with peanut butter), the cassava leaves are also on the daily menu in CAR, where they are named *ngundja* in Sango.

²²³ Information pour les réfugiés centrafricains nouvellement arrivés à Kinshasa. Kinshasa, 11 October 2013. UNHCR & CNR.

individual case would then be analysed; and if the arguments supporting it were valid, in the eyes of the UNHCR, they would give the refugee a chance to stay legally in the city as a urban refugee *without* assistance. The final addition of the accepted '*cas particulier*' would give birth to the 'list of fifty' (see Chapter VII).

The abrupt decision to oust the refugees from Kimbanseke—which in refugees' opinion was amateurish, since it lacked any official stamp and/or signature—nevertheless turned their lives upside down. While Euloge moved to another part of town, Le Firmin decided to try his luck in Brazzaville; others remained, despite harassment, for as long as possible, until they were moved to '*La maison blanche*' in Kingabwa (see Chapter VIII). When I first met Le Firmin and Euloge in early May 2014, they were renting a two-room studio in Kingabwa, an industrial area of the city. Le Firmin had just returned from Brazzaville. Heavy trucks would rumble by the house, the train grind by a couple of times a day, but these were not nearly as disturbing as the Pentecostal church next door, with which they shared a wall and which held noisy services at all hours of the day—and night.

c) Moving in the city

A couple of weeks after I met Le Firmin and Euloge, they decided to move again; the noise of the church was unbearable and the rent too high. Together with their other two roommates, Le Firmin and Euloge moved to a simpler house with no water or electricity in a more remote area of the city, Kingabwa. Kingabwa's remoteness does not necessarily relate to its physical distance from other neighbourhoods—it is fairly central—but rather to its setting. This is particularly the case during the rainy season.²²⁴ Because there is a need for new housing and there is no urban planning, the inhabitants of Kingabwa have built houses in wetlands. During the rainy season, water floods the lower parts of Kingabwa. On bad days, people are prisoners in their own compounds, and if they go out, they need to literally take a canoe to cross some sections of the road. Stagnant pools of water create a lethal mix that combines sewage and exposed electricity cables. This part of Kingabwa illustrates the tangible manifestation of 'infrastructural violence' and lack of urbanization at its worst (Rodgers and O'Neill 2012).

When I returned to Kinshasa in July 2014, Euloge was one of the first people to drop by my house for a visit; he had come on his newly acquired motorbike. For health reasons, Euloge was among the refugees retained in Kinshasa (see Chapter VII). He was supported by the UNHCR on two fronts; he

²²⁴ The Kinosis colloquially refer to Kingabwa as 'Venice'.

received a *garantie locative*,²²⁵ on the one hand, and later on a motorbike, as part of the UNHCR's IGA (Income-Generating Activities) programme, on the other. With his motorbike, Euloge was no longer dependent on third parties or on public transport to move around the city. He could now visit fellow refugees and attend meetings more efficiently, provided that he had enough money for petrol.

In their article 'Surviving through movement', Langevang and Gough explain how youngsters in Accra spent much of their time

visiting friends, sexual partners, family members, (potential) patrons, or ill acquaintances; going to social events such as funerals, weddings, football matches, or drinking in bars; attending church services or prayers in the mosque; delivering goods or money, and exchanging information with a range of people both within and outside the neighbourhood' (Langevang and Gough 2009, 748).

The enumeration of these activities fits very well the daily occupations of Euloge. He was present at official meetings with the CNR or the embassy, at funerals, at the matches of the CAR team during the handball cup; he would, moreover, take money to the sick and distribute clothes among the refugees. During the rainy season, the bike even helped him, literally, to navigate through puddles, especially after moving to the swampy Kingabwa neighbourhood. I accompanied him on his motorbike on his chores as he helped me out on mine. The motorbike became a mobile yet intimate location of research, echoing the drive-along method (discussed in Chapter III), where we would have many conversations while on our way to the members of the community in the four corners of the city.

Up until the end of July 2014, the motorbike made Euloge considerably more mobile. Thereafter, due to supposed attacks on the military by men on motorbikes,²²⁶ Euloge had to learn to be careful and picky about which routes to take and which to avoid. Circumventing traffic police officers formed another challenge. These were particularly hungry at the beginning of the school year, but also on

²²⁵ Advance of money needed to secure a house in Kinshasa.

²²⁶ In July 2014, during the supposed attacks on camp Tshatshi, the assailants were said to have come by motorbike, after which, due to security concerns as it were, motorbikes were forbidden to travel after dusk. This safety measure soon grew to be hated, as it deprived many people of their daily income. The measure was (temporarily) lifted in February 2015, when after a week of riots, the government sought to assuage the anger of the population.

weekends. On a Saturday morning in August 2014, I remember, Euloge had come to pick me up and together we left to visit the CAR ambassador in Kinshasa. At the busy Bongolo-Gambela crossroads, a police officer stepped out in front of us by surprise and deftly removed the keys from the motor. Euloge's inability to defend himself properly in Lingala, added to my foreign appearance, rendered us vulnerable to *tracasseries* (hassles, harassment). Nevertheless, the traffic policeman's case was solid: we were not wearing helmets. After much arguing, Euloge followed the officer to the blue-and-yellow container that housed the police office. He came out some minutes later with the keys of his motorbike: he had paid a fine. It was the beginning of the weekend, and he paid like any Kinois would have been forced to do. The difference, however, is that Euloge, not knowing how to defend himself properly in Kinois Lingala and not having mastered the appropriate attitude, did not pay in Congolese francs, but in American dollars. Despite the challenges and the expensiveness, the improvement of Euloge's physical mobility led, thanks to his motorbike, to other types of mobility. In Chapter VI, the motorbike as a means of livelihood, and thus of socio-economic mobility, will be discussed. In that chapter, I will also deal with the *esprit Kinois*—that is, the right attitude to take in order not to be tricked on every occasion. In Chapter VII, I will discuss the differences Euloge felt between riding a motorbike in Bangui and Kinshasa, which ultimately leads to our looking at Euloge's motorbike as a metaphor of symbolic mobility.

d) Food and stuckedness

Even when the refugees moved with more ease outside their neighbourhood, the peripheral location of the compounds where they lived still highlighted the distance felt between their daily hardships and their dreams and aspirations: the daily reality of idle waiting and the aspiration to study and become somebody. Because mobility was limited to Kinshasa, and not beyond, mobility and immobility patterns in the city indeed echoed the sentiment of being stuck (Vigh 2009a, 105). Just as in the camp, the refugees felt existentially immobile. And even if they had come far, as Le Firmin would have it, they felt they were going nowhere.

Slowly but surely, the scarcity of opportunities turned the urban jungle into a social moratorium—characterized by 'a state of massive marginalisation, abject poverty, impairment of social being' (Vigh 2006b, 45)—for the refugees, and even more so given the handicap of their foreign-ness. When, in January 2015, after almost two years of refuge, the CAR students had not received any positive answer to their grievances, their frustration only deepened. In a very emotional discussion, Le Firmin expressed himself as follows:

Almost two years we have not had any professional training, don't even talk about university ... So we ask ourselves the question, if we have to go home today because [becomes emotional] there is no better place than home—that is, I tell you that even if we don't want to go home, one day we will go back because it's our home. Because in our country, you see, the people here ... there are some who sleep in their homes; there are some who are already responsible back in the country. But today you go out in the morning, the only problem is about eating—meaning, just find something to eat, well, you have saved your day. (Focus Group Le Firmin, Kinshasa, 31 January 2015)²²⁷

From not being able to study, Le Firmin moves to a comparison between how the CAR refugees saw themselves in Bangui and how they see themselves in Kinshasa, and he concludes by making reference to the lack of food. With time, the frustration seeped in deeper and deeper, touching the refugees' self-perception. Many had escaped Bangui hoping to find, after a short period of hardship, better horizons and new opportunities. But in Kinshasa, many refugees felt their situation to be more dire than the one back home, where they were at least '*responsable*'—meaning, they could take care of themselves and their families. In Kinshasa, their status declined markedly: from being responsible they had become dependent.

In a way, they had swapped one social moratorium, that of Bangui, for another, that of Kinshasa. Constraint upon constraint impacted profoundly their individual sense of dignity and self-worth. It is precisely this feeling, and all the layers that go to constitute it, that is understood under the term '*duress*' (De Bruijn and Both 2018). The longer the refugees stayed in Kinshasa, the more urgent their need for food became. Food, the quality and quantity of food, eating and not eating, reminiscing about how good and cheap the food in Bangui was while complaining about the food in Kinshasa, and especially about being satiated²²⁸—all were topics we discussed on a daily basis. The CAR refugees would often joke about how birds leave Kinshasa in the early morning, cross the river in

²²⁷ *Deux ans presque on n'a aucune formation professionnelle, l'étude universitaire n'en parlons plus... Alors on se pose la question, s'il faut aujourd'hui rentrer parce que [becomes emotional] on n'est mieux que chez soi, c'est-à-dire, je vous dirais qu'on veuille ou pas un jour nous allons rentrer chez parce que c'est chez nous. Parce que chez nous tu vois, les personnes ici ... il y a certains qui dorment dans leur maison, il y a certain qui sont déjà des responsables au pays. Mais aujourd'hui tu sors le matin, le seul soucis se résume sur le manger. C'est-à-dire ne fusse que tu trouves à manger, eh bien en tout cas, ta journée est sauvée.*

²²⁸ Or in the local terminology: *être rassasié*, *manger à sa faim*, *kotonda* (Lingala: the state of being full), *li ti mbi a si awé* (Sango: my belly has arrived)

order to look for food in Brazzaville, only to come back in the evening. But they do come back. In any case, food turned out to be an important measure of duress and a metaphor for dignity.

It should be highlighted that the inability to eat one's fill was not unique to the refugees; the inhabitants of the urban jungle also struggle to make ends meet. The price of food in Kinshasa is exorbitant and the quality poor. Most of the Kinois do not eat three meals a day—but two, sometimes one, sometimes even one every other day. Kinshasa is not unique in this sense; Vigh has described a similar situation in Bissau, where it is a case of 'one shot of food a day—if lucky' (Vigh 2006b, 45). As the Central African refugees have become part of Kinois society, they too suffer from these high prices and lack of nutritious food.

However, the feeling of being reduced to something one is not was new to this group of refugees. Anecdotes about (not) eating illustrate painfully the unexpected hardships refugees in Kinshasa had to endure. Le Firmin and Euloge would repeatedly express how they had lost many kilos since they fled Bangui. Max and Tezman complained they could not even think about playing basketball or dancing hip hop, as they had done in Bangui, because that would require eating well after returning home. They could not afford to needlessly lose energy. This loss of strength is not only physical but also, and especially, metaphorical. Being reduced to looking for food for survival, Le Firmin and Euloge felt they had been deprived not only of the chance to study, but of a piece of their human dignity as well. In his book, for instance, Max compares himself to the street children in Kinshasa, who could also not fend for themselves:

We encountered the Compassion Church of Pastor Marcelo, where there was 'Le Restaurant du Cœur' for street children and the poor. We mixed in with them and went regularly to this restaurant to eat. (M.-L. Kassaï in preparation)

Food thus becomes a painful metaphor, one that reduces an individual looking for study opportunities to a modern hunter-gatherer in the urban jungle. One that reduces an individual to her or his simplest expression: survival.

Max expresses in several passages in his book his disdain towards the inedible food available in Mole. Francis and Guy echo this sentiment. Food was insufficient, monotonous, and sometimes even either unavailable or beyond its shelf-life and rotten. They often mentioned the infamous peas. Francis, for instance, , used to go out of the camp every so often in order to get supplies in Zongo, because he

simply could not eat peas ‘from the first to the thirtieth of each month’.²²⁹ Likewise, Guy felt underfed and worried about his children, who ate peas at ‘breakfast, lunch, and dinner’ and did not even have sugar—meaning calories—in the mornings.²³⁰ I met him in Zongo. He was taking care of his ill wife, who had been hospitalized, and explained:

Catherina, it's really very, very painful. Three kilos of peas a month, to get to the hospital [his voice changes, as if he is crying]. Even the ill do not have enough to eat. I'm going to bring you what they'll give my wife, so you'll really know the conditions we're living in here in the Congo. The truth is that we are suffering. (Interview with Guy in Zongo, 15 June 2014)²³¹

Just like the refugees in Kinshasa, Guy had the feeling of merely getting by. Peas were not eaten to live; they were eaten to survive. Papa Afrique, a senior refugee from Brazzaville—senior in the sense that in 2014 he had been a refugee for over 15 years—also reflected upon the situation through a discourse of eating, but takes it a step further:

Today, even eating is a refugee's concern [with emphasis] EATING! Elsewhere eating has ceased to be a concern. They are thinking about how to transform tomorrow's society. But not what will I eat, and will it be enough? But if we are already thinking how will I eat tomorrow? Will it be enough? But it's dangerous! (Interview Papa Afrique, Kinshasa, 31 January 2015)²³²

This is, in fact, a political statement. By comparing the worries of the refugees in DR Congo with the worries of refugees elsewhere, Papa Afrique concludes that their thoughts have been reduced from changing the society, to thoughts limiting themselves to physical survival. The potential of political change remains unrealized and is even neutralized. Without being conspiracy-minded, it is difficult to believe this is mere coincidence. I will pick up this political reading in chapters VII and VIII.

²²⁹ Interview in Kinshasa, 1 September 2014

²³⁰ Interview in Zongo, 15 June 2014

²³¹ *Catherina c'est vraiment très très douloureux. Trois kilo de petits pois par mois, pour se déplacer pour aller à l'hôpital [his voice changes, as if he is crying]. Même les malades ne mangent pas à leur faim. Je vais te présenter ce qu'on va donner à ma femme, comme ça tu sauras vraiment dans l'état dans lequel nous vivons ici au Congo. La vérité c'est que nous souffrons.*

²³² *Aujourd'hui même manger est une préoccupation du réfugié [with emphasis] MANGER! Ailleurs manger a cessé d'être une préoccupation. On réfléchit comment transformer la société demain. Mais pas qu'est-ce que je vais manger et si je vais me rassasier? Mais déjà si on va dire demain comment je vais manger? Qu'est-ce que je vais manger? Est-ce que je me rassasierai? Mais c'est dangereux!*

5) Moving on

Each CAR refugee I met during my fieldwork had taken different decisions when confronted with vital conjunctures in his or her path. The trajectory of each one of them had been unique and individual. Whereas each Bangui-sois had decided differently on whether to stay in Bangui or to flee the city after the coup, and whereas, once having crossed the border, each refugee had chosen within the limits of the possible the setting of their refuge, in camps, in rural areas or small towns, or in Kinshasa—so had each student within the group of refugees I met in Kinshasa acted differently upon encountering blocked opportunities and feelings of stuntedness. In this and the following section, I will deal with those refugees who no longer felt at ease in Kinshasa and therefore decided to leave the city on their own initiative (these are thus not the refugees who felt forced to return to the camps). Others decided to return to Bangui instead of awaiting fleeting horizons and official repatriations—the latter will be dealt with in the next section.

Despite its similarities, and thus the closeness to home, there were disadvantages for CAR citizens in Brazzaville. The most noteworthy was that while in Kinshasa the Bangui-sois could pass unnoticed and mingle among the mass of people, in Brazzaville it was more difficult to do so. Sango is often heard on street corners. CAR refugees were easily identified in Brazzaville, and thus also more easily stigmatized and even denigratingly referred to as *'kigwenabangui'* (Wilson 2014).

Many refugees crossed from Kinshasa to Brazzaville after the Mbata ya Bakolo operation (see Chapter II). Among the refugees who crossed to Brazzaville were Le Firmin and Tezman. I base my observations of the city mainly on their stories and experiences, which I subsequently complement with observations made and interviews with other refugees in Brazzaville—some of whom I knew from Kinshasa, others whom I met in Brazzaville. Let me now turn to the stories.

a) Being a refugee in Brazzaville

As we have already seen, Le Firmin, expelled from Kimbanseke, handed in a contestation letter to the UNHCR (see Appendix I), gave the proof of reception to Euloge, whom he asked to follow his file, and then decided to cross the river to Brazzaville in December 2013 in order to try out his luck there while waiting for an official reply from the UNHCR in DR Congo. By contracting possibilities on both sides of the river (and beyond), Le Firmin was expanding his chances and multiplying the possibility of a positive response. Traversing to Brazzaville was a first step in the direction of an envisaged trip to Gabon, where there was a good friend of his and, supposedly, a country where people live decent

lives. But Le Firmin needed a passport to enter Gabon, which he did not have and could not get, as it is issued only in Bangui and not in the embassies outside the country.²³³

Le Firmin ended up staying in Maman Françoise's house, an acquaintance he had met while working as a security guard in Bangui.²³⁴ She must have been impressed by Le Firmin's diligence, since he combined working and studying, and thus decided to take him under her wing. She registered Le Firmin at the Marien Ngouabi University in order to continue his studies in law and even paid for his fees. Meanwhile, Le Firmin had found a job selling mobile phone credit, through which he was able to get by and even put money aside, considering that he was not paying rent. But in February 2014, Le Firmin's name appeared on the list for eligibility for assistance by the UNHCR and, given that he did not feel comfortable at Maman Françoise's house—he had to share a room with one of her sons and slept badly—he decided to return to Kinshasa, planning to collect the money (*garantie locative*) the UNHCR was to provide him and to return with it immediately to Brazzaville in order to go to university, which would begin by mid-February. He wanted to use this money to rent his own studio in Brazzaville, in order not to depend any longer on Maman Françoise.

But, as life often goes, things turned out differently. While Le Firmin was eligible, it took over three months to receive the money. By May 2014 the courses at university had started long before, and Le Firmin would not have been able to catch up with them. He understood that it would not make sense to go back to Brazzaville and decided to stay in Kinshasa, to wait for the other half of the promised UNHCR money—which, a year later in February 2015 he had still not received. When I told Le Firmin I would visit Brazzaville, he urged me to look for Maman Françoise (he gave me the address, as he had lost her telephone number), tell her he was doing well (he insisted I should tell her that he was studying!), and come back with his French dictionary (which I did). An intelligent and intuitive

²³³ Le Firmin obtained a *laisser-passer*, which was sufficient to cross the border from DR Congo to Congo-Brazzaville but insufficient to enter Gabon. This is quite a paradox, considering that Gabon is part of the CEMAC, meaning there should be free movement of goods and people between its countries—and thus also between CAR, Congo-Brazzaville, and Gabon. Because of their more advantageous economic position, both Gabon and Equatorial Guinea opposed themselves to this principle, especially since the oil boom. Lately, however, Gabon has softened its policies and now welcomes CEMAC members to its territory. Equatorial Guinea's borders are still hermetically closed.

²³⁴ Maman Françoise is Congolese (Brazzaville). She works as a *douanier* (customs officer) at the customs and resided in Bangui during most of 2012 in order to follow a course with other *douanier* colleagues from the different CEMAC countries. Le Firmin and Maman Françoise met because the former used to work as a security guard in the compound where she was staying (see Chapter VI).

woman, Maman Françoise understood my visit very well, and without beating around the bush, she told me that Le Firmin did not dare to confront her because he was ashamed of having lost the opportunity. He had even left his clothes in the house and was now paying the price for taking the wrong decision. During our interview much later, in February 2015, he admitted regretting leaving Brazzaville, but he underlined that he was happy not to be dependent on others; he simply could not go on putting more weight on their shoulders.

In August 2014, after travelling together and going through the refugee experience as a team, Max and Tezman separated. Max decided to go back to Bangui, while Tezman opted for Brazzaville. With a *laisser-passer* and some money in hand, we accompanied Tezman to Beach Ngobila, where he took a speedboat that would take him across the border into Brazzaville. His sister lived there and would receive him. Three months later, during my visit to Brazzaville, I looked up Tezman and, despite his busy schedule, we met up on several occasions, and it was he who showed me around town. In Brazzaville, Tezman managed that which in Kinshasa had seemed impossible: to find a job. He worked as a room boy in a hotel run by Lebanese in Ouenzé. The job gave him a sense of belonging, purpose, and especially financial independence and stability. When I met him there, Tezman looked good, in control, and felt responsible. He had left his sister and rented a well-equipped room, which he shared with a CAR friend, close to his job.

b) Freedom

It was puzzling for the refugees to assess which of the two mirror cities brought about more opportunities than the other. Brazzaville's familiarity and its more realistic job and study openings seemed to be eclipsed by the CAR refugees vulnerability, expressed not only in the form of xenophobia but also through the control the state exerted on undocumented mobile people. Le Firmin, Tezman, and others stressed the importance of being documented at all times—even if you are just going to buy bread around the corner, so to speak. For the refugees, being documented meant carrying the plasticized refugee card issued by the UNHCR. The contrast between the efforts undertaken by the refugees in Kinshasa, on the one hand, to get such a card—often to no avail, meaning they had no choice but to wander around without it—and the rigidity of having to carry one in Brazzaville, on the other, is striking.

There were too many arbitrary arrests taking place in the city, many by the military. One of Tezman's friends told me, for instance, he had been arrested together with other CAR refugees, without trial, for not carrying his ID with him, and thrown into prison for over a month. The prison conditions were deplorable, and one of the refugees became seriously ill. Paradoxically, it was the news about this

man's illness that ended up getting them out of prison. A couple of days after arrival, Tezman also had been imprisoned; he was lucky to have his sister pay the bail for him and was released after a couple of hours. This experience encouraged him to get his refugee ID as soon as possible, which, in contrast to Kinshasa, was valid for five years.

Despite the practical advantages of Brazzaville, there was something both Le Firmin and Tezman appreciated in Kinshasa : freedom. Freedom was also expressed in terms of hospitality, which then again contrasted with the xenophobia experienced in Brazzaville. Because movement in Kinshasa was not (as) controlled as in Brazzaville, Le Firmin compared the former with the United States, and this more than once :

They say that when you are in the United States, you feel a little free; certainly there are police and other controls, but there is still freedom. It's like living in Kinshasa: since I've been in Kinshasa, never has a policeman come to ask me randomly for the papers. But that's what's different in Brazza, what's contrary to Brazza. (Interview, Kinshasa, 13 February 2015)²³⁵

As we have discussed, familiarity and visibility, while advantageous in the city, had a price too. But besides the intervention of Brazzavillois soldiers, there is another level in which the CAR refugees felt their freedom limited in Brazzaville. As the CAR community in Brazzaville was more important, many refugees had family members and acquaintances who lived in the city and thus who could keep a controlling eye (as Maman Françoise for Le Firmin). In Kinshasa, Le Firmin, and especially Euloge, did not have a controlling parent, and thus they could break loose from family ties in their search for personal freedom. This type of freedom will be discussed further in Chapter VIII.

In other words, it seems that Brazzaville's clarity and familiar order hampered, in a certain way, certain refugees from becoming who they wanted to become. Kinshasa, on the other hand, as big, overwhelming, and chaotic as it is, offered the refugees another type of opportunity. It is a city where the stakes are high, where the extremes (in terms of, for instance, extreme wealth and extreme poverty) are very pronounced; a city where big dreams can be realized, but where big failures seem to be more commonplace—reminiscent of Steinberg's man of good hope, where the chances taken are risky and he sets out for all or nothing. Curiously, however, it is also in Kinshasa that the hope for resettlement, to a third country, often in the global North, is more easily shattered.

²³⁵ *On dit que quand tu es aux Etats-Unis tu te sens un peu libre, certes il y a des contrôles policières et autres, mais il y a quand même une liberté. C'est comme on est en train de vivre à Kinshasa, depuis que je suis à Kinshasa, jamais un jour comme ça un policier se présente devant moi pour demander les papiers. Hors c'est ce qui est différent à Brazza, ce qui est contraire à Brazza.*

For a couple of individuals, moving to Brazzaville was not a bad start at all, as they were resettled in Canada. It is difficult to know in advance where luck will first strike. Luck feeds hope, and hope is mobile. It moved from Bangui to Kinshasa, from Kinshasa to Brazzaville and, as we will see hereunder, it moved back to Bangui. Hope can move elsewhere too. It never dies out ‘but migrates— ahead of migrants that follow it’ (Vigh 2009a, 105).

6) Moving back and the fear of losing face

a) Enduring

In migration literature, there seems to be a tension between stories of hope, on the one hand, and shame on the other. Those who have left the country constitute a diaspora, which is admired (and consulted for important decisions), but which equally carries a heavy weight on its shoulders. Many studies underline the importance of the remittances migrant communities send back home and the economic dependence on these by the communities that stay behind (Lindley 2009; S. Turner and Kleist 2013). Despite its hardships, in many case migration is equated with hope and abundance. The anthropologist Michael Jackson has labelled this the ‘logic of sacrifice’, for which ‘by giving up the life to which one was born, one stood to gain, through a kind of rebirth, a greater or more abundant life elsewhere and at some future time’ (M. Jackson 2008, 60). Bredeloup, also, writes of the adventurer as a recurrent symbol in migratory politics, whereby the migratory adventure is a path of self-fulfilment, of emancipation through movement, turning the adventurer into a person to be respected (2008) and the allure of a journey far away from home into a coveted asset that should not be given up that easily.

The logic of the migrant and the adventurer also applies to the CAR refugees in Kinshasa. In the sense that if the urban refugee is not able to realize an ‘abundant life’, or at least a self-fulfilling quest during his or her experience of refuge, the reverse is true: the experience turns into a failure. Not thriving abroad is worse than being immobile at home (Bredeloup 2008, 301–2). Returning home empty-handed is shameful and is to ‘be avoided at all costs’ (Kleist 2017). The fear of failure (Sommers 2012) is a subtle form of socially informed violence that is intimately linked to the socio-cultural environment in which the CAR refugees grew up. This fear of losing face is thus violence carried within, moulded by upbringing, and linked to personal ambitions and socially informed expectations.

This tension, between success and failure, extends into a tension between returning home empty-handed, on the one hand, or continuing to endure hardship in exile, on the other. As we will see,

different refugees have dealt differently with this tension. When asked if he was ready to return to Bangui, Euloge, for instance, replied:

I plan to go home if there is peace. I arrived as a refugee, I fled the war. I enter like this [opens his hands]—there is nothing, not even a diploma, not even some money—how will I go back? (Interview, Kinshasa, 16 February 2015)²³⁶

When the students fled CAR, they had hoped to find greener pastures across the border, especially in terms of study opportunities (this will be discussed in more detail in Chapter VI). The first prerequisite for a return to Bangui is peace. As long as the situation is not considered stable—by the international community, for instance—the official repatriation of the CAR refugees cannot take place. This is still true at the time of writing in 2019. If one is to look more closely, for Euloge peace is not the only criterion: as long as Euloge feels he has nothing to go back with—in terms of a degree, knowledge, and life experience, or, more concretely, some capital or a running business—it is difficult for him to step out of refuge.

Euloge does not refuse to return to his country; on the contrary, he is very much aware that the future of his country is in the hands of young Centrafricains like himself, and that he needs and wants to ‘contribute to the development of his country’. But in order to do so he needs to study; and while in Kinshasa, he has no access to education:

It has been a year-and-a-half since I last studied, and little by little I lose the [chemistry] formulas; I lose and lose everything! I don’t reject the idea of going back to my country ... but I cannot go back like this! I lost everything; how can I go back without having learned something? And if I went back [like this], I would be zero [nothing]. (Interview with Euloge and Le Firmin, Kinshasa, 30 January 2015)²³⁷

While in the first quotation above, Euloge touches upon a tangible form of empty-handedness, the potential sense of failure in the second quotation runs deeper and touches him in his personhood. It is no more about going back without something in his hands; it is about going back in a certain state.

²³⁶ *Je compte rentrer s’il y a la paix. Je suis arrivé en tant que réfugié, j’ai fuis la guerre, je rentre dans cet état [ouvre les mains] il n’y a rien, même pas un diplôme, même pas un moyen, comment je vais rentrer?*

²³⁷ *Ça fait aujourd’hui pratiquement un an et demi que je n’ai pas étudié et au fur à mesure je perds les formules [chimiques], je perds et je perds tout! ... je ne refuse pas le retour dans mon pays, ... mais je ne peux pas rentrer dans cet état! J’ai tout perdu et je suis arrivé sans apprendre, comment je vais rentrer? Et si je rentre ça sera encore eh, je serai encore eh ... Le contraire, sera zéro.*

Reminiscent of the above-discussed reduction to hunting for food, Euloge speaks of the risk of being nullified: migration without fruit can turn a person to zero.

b) Going back to Bangui

In contrast to Euloge, Max does take the decision to go back to Bangui; Tezman, too, will eventually follow him. Staying in Kinshasa amounted, for Max, to an ‘imminent death’—not so much a ‘physical’ but certainly a ‘social death’ (Vigh 2006b, 45). Rather than leading to new opportunities, escaping Bangui had led to an ‘existential impasse’ (Vigh 2009a, 104); and even if he ‘moved spatially’ within the city, he found himself to be ‘stuck socially’ (Vigh 2009a, 105).

In August 2014, both Max and Tezman left Kinshasa. Tezman, as we saw above, crossed over to Brazzaville, while Max registered for the formal procedure of voluntary repatriation to the refugee camps. As such, Max could make use of the infrastructure set up by the UNHCR: flying to Libenge, taking the transportation provided for refugees up to Mole, and from there on travelling by his own means to Bangui, first by motorbike to Zongo and then crossing the river by pirogue. Upon his return, and coming back empty-handed, Max confronted the enquiring eyes of family and friends. It has been argued that it is those who lack courage who go back (Bredeloup 2008, 297); however, dealing with shame equally constitutes an act of courage. He did not waste any time, looked for a job, and ended up working at different places: as a journalist for the journal for which he used to work before fleeing, in the NGO sector installing latrines in the numerous IDP camps around the city, and as a high school teacher. But the general low salary, nepotism, and unfavourable conditions soon wore him down, so he turned to blogging and farming his grandmother’s land (see Chapter VIII).

After working for almost two years in Brazzaville, Tezman grew tired of the city. When the Lebanese management team at the hotel were replaced by a local Congolese team, the atmosphere at work changed. There was an incident where the CAR workers took some beer to celebrate the New Year, an action which was, perhaps not unjustly so, viewed as theft. Tezman and his friends were imprisoned for about a week and were able to get out only after paying bail. Another incident took place a couple of months later with a petrol boat travelling upriver from Brazzaville to Bangui. The passengers on the boat—who are not permitted to travel on a potentially inflammable vessel, but whose presence on boats travelling on this river is generally tolerated despite the risks—were stopped in DR Congo and sent back to Brazzaville. Sassou, it was said, agreed to arrange a plane to help these stranded travellers. As there was spare room on the plane, some of the urban refugees decided to occupy the empty seats and to return to their country. The flight took place mid-2016, and at that time an official repatriation from Brazzaville (and elsewhere in Republic of Congo) had

not yet taken place.²³⁸ So when I visited Tezman in August that year, he had freshly arrived from three years of exile and still carried the above-mentioned allure of someone just returned from a successful journey of migration. Because their sentiments towards the journey differed—but probably also due to the fact that Tezman was still fresh in Bangui—the ‘auras’ of both young men stood in stark contrast, even if they had started the journey together. The lessons learned, as well as Tezman’s aura of success, will be further discussed in the next chapter.

As we had been in contact through social media, I knew Max, Tezman, and Oscar travelled back to their home city. Yet, they were not the only voluntarily repatriated returnee-refugees I met back in Bangui during my short fieldwork trip in 2016. I actually stumbled upon at least three other people whom I knew from Kinshasa (two young men and one young lady) and who, for different reasons, had decided to return. On the other hand, I was informed, albeit not in detail, of Euloge’s, Le Firmin’s, and Esatis’ (among others) continuing battle in Kinshasa.

The numerous and varied paths the CAR refugees have taken are perplexing. They are stories that cannot lead to one-size-fits-all solutions. Trying to understand how, confronted by a similar situation, different individuals make different decisions is puzzling. I often wondered, for instance, why, if it was so difficult to live in Kinshasa, some stayed against all odds, while others succumbed. Even stuckedness is not uniformly experienced and felt. The above-mentioned girl, whom I met coincidentally in Bangui, had even travelled twice back and forth between Bangui and Kinshasa. The security situation in CAR certainly influenced decision-making; but it needs to be underlined, first, that security is not read equally by everyone; and secondly, that it is not the only element to take into account at a moment of decision-making. Just as taking the decision to flee Bangui does, taking the decision to go back also forms a vital conjuncture. Perhaps we should not see these two critical moments as two separate vital conjunctures, but rather as constitutive moments of an extended period of vital conjuncture (Langevang 2008, 2046) and thus also a continuous process of personal becoming. It is along these lines that the discussion will be continued in chapters VI and VII.

²³⁸ In the last year, there have been a couple of voluntary repatriations from Republic of Congo to CAR. In April 2018, for instance, hundreds of refugees were voluntarily repatriated from the camp near Betou to the Lobaye region (Moungoumba) (Jeune Afrique and AFP 2018). Likewise, in September 2018, hundreds of CAR refugees were preparing to leave Betou and to return to Lobaye. There were also over a hundred urban refugees repatriated by air from Brazzaville to Bangui (UNHCR 2018a).