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

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Chapter VI. Quest of becoming: The refugee-student and the school of life

1) Introduction

In previous chapters, education has been an important thread. In Chapter IV, for instance, the quest for education and becoming motivated Yaya Rico, Espérance, and Émile to cross borders. Education seems to be intrinsically linked to mobility. In the new wave of mobility unleashed by the Seleka coup in 2013, students escaping open violence also left Bangui to look for study opportunities. I have discussed this in Chapter V; many were forced to leave their academic year unfinished. Education, or rather the hunger for education, turned into another main instigator in their decision-making, particularly in choosing the location of refuge—that is, a city which offers study opportunities, in this case Kinshasa, instead of an isolated (Mole) refugee camp.

This chapter deals with the education of the conflict mobiles we follow, in its literal sense—that is, in terms of schooling and studying. However, the main purpose is to adopt a focus on education in a broader sense. First, this chapter deals with education in terms of upbringing and coming of age in Bangui, as well as with schooling: primary, secondary, and tertiary education. Second, it deals with the promises and aspirations of education, which include getting a job, becoming someone, emancipation, 'having a life', and turning into a responsible and independent individual—promises which, in the current context of Central Africa, seem more and more difficult to be realized and which end up leading to frustration. Notwithstanding, Euloge and Le Firmin continue asserting themselves as intellectuals, on the one hand, but also as refugee-students in the hope of making a claim on the 'right to have rights' (Isin in Innes 2016, 266) at the doorstep of an international organization, the UNCHR.

By the time I rounded up my fieldwork in Kinshasa in February 2015, none of the students had managed to enrol at any institution or university in Kinshasa,[239] and their frustration weighed heavily on their shoulders. The envisaged access to university did not materialize and Kinshasa became a city of closed doors. But, as the saying goes, when a door closes, a window always opens. Frustration was only one side of the coin, dreaming the other. Because hope is never lost, education, or rather becoming, did present itself in at least two ways. The first one is very practical: learning to get by and

[239] Nowadays (2109), Esatis is enrolled at university, mainly because of his own efforts and personal contacts. Le Firmin followed a '*formation informatique*' in 2017–2018, a mere shadow of what he had envisaged for himself, but nevertheless a first step.

survive in a hostile city, colloquially known as *la débrouille*. The second path propels the refugees to dream of and aspire to better futures, and this runs parallel with Oldenburg's approach to education, which

> embraces a multitude of perspectives and mirrors the regional conflict dynamics, offers knowledge and networks, is a space of freedom, articulation and experimentation, a platform of pleasure with peers, of solidarity and love and it contains the potential for political activism. (Oldenburg 2016, 2)

The creativity and concrete aspirations that follow this logic of thought will be discussed in chapters VII and VIII.

Last but not least, there is the hunger for becoming that motivates the refugee-students to undertake a life journey. Beyond finding work and stability, the quest for becoming here described is linked to a universal and existential hunger for personal growth, which is expressed in terms of adulthood. During refuge, the students entered a liminal zone, reminiscent of Van Gennep's *Les Rites de passage* (1909) and Turner's 'liminal periods' (1967), which transformed them. The question remains whether after this 'ritual' they are able to return to their societies as adult men.

2) Coming of age in CAR

a) Euloge

Euloge is the eleventh of 15 children and the eldest of his father's third wife. Euloge's father was a civil servant who worked as a director in the national communication office under president Kolingba.[240] He was often posted in different localities throughout the country and thus travelled a great deal. Euloge's mother was also well educated and used to provide religious workshops in different parts of the country. Sometimes, when his parents were outside the capital, he stayed behind with his siblings in Bangui to attend school. Yet at other times, especially on weekends and holidays, Euloge would travel along with his father or mother. That is how he saw much of the country: Kembe, Bangassou, Mbaiki, Mongoumba, Bozoum, Bouar, and other places. As an adolescent, moreover, Euloge studied for a year in the respected Cécile Digo's Lycée, a school set up by the former president Kolingba in Kembe, a town that lies 600 km to the east of Bangui. All these elements—his father's position, his mother's religiousness, and the travelling of both his parents—formed Euloge to be the man he has become today, as he often expressed it himself.

[240] And partly also under President Patassé

The year he was to graduate from high school, Euloge's father passed away after an inexplicable one-week coma. He was said to have been poisoned. Euloge was preparing for his final exams, and his father's death left a deep void in his life. Despite the emotional difficulties, however, Euloge passed his baccalaureate exams in Mbaiki; he graduated in 2008 but fell ill soon afterwards. It was only after a year-and-a-half after receiving his diploma that Euloge started studying at university. Having such a long time lapse between one's graduation and university is not uncommon in Bangui. At university Euloge enrolled in chemistry, which he complemented with a course at a private institute on banking, micro-financing, and insurance. Next to his studies, as we have seen before and as we will see later, Euloge was very much active in one of the university's student associations. It is here where he became friends with Le Firmin.

b) Le Firmin

Le Firmin grew to become one of Euloge's closest friends in Kinshasa. I often met them together. Even though they are both from the same ethnic group, they were not as close in Bangui, and their lives had followed, up until 2013, different trajectories. Whereas Euloge was the son of a respected civil servant, Le Firmin came from a more humble background. His father was a schoolteacher and his mother a tradeswoman. It is from his father that Le Firmin says he inherited his love and discipline for study, and from his mother her courage. Both Euloge's and Le Firmin's fathers passed away; however, when the latter's father died, Le Firmin was only a child. In the context of a less wealthy family than Euloge's, the death of Le Firmin's father was even more deeply felt. The family, headed by a single mother from then on, lost their house, which was inherited by Le Firmin's family members (i.e. his uncles and cousins) on his father's side. Nevertheless, his mother managed to provide for her children through efforts in petty trade. The children also learned to contribute to the household, and Le Firmin used to sell petrol after school. Unfortunately, a couple of years after his father's death, Le Firmin's mother also passed away, and Le Firmin became an orphan at the age of only 13 years. As his siblings could not take care of him, Le Firmin soon learned to fend for himself. Taking into account that he was a studious young boy, a maternal aunt had sent notice to town that she would take care of her nephew. This was frowned upon by Le Firmin's father's side of the family, but the young boy managed to leave Bangui stealthily and joined his aunt in Kembe, where he enrolled at the Cécile Digo Lycée, the same school as Euloge. Le Firmin was very impressed by the atmosphere at the Lycée, where discipline was omnipresent and the pupils did not idle away their time chatting as they did in Bangui:

> So you see the little moments, the school breaks, the landscape is beautiful; you see every pupil is under the mango tree reading his notebook. (Interview with Le Firmin, Kinshasa, 13 February 2015)[241]

Misfortune struck again and Le Firmin's aunt passed away. Her house and land were sold and Le Firmin saw himself homeless for a second time. He met a hunter who taught him and his two friends how to bake bricks out of red mud. The boys built a one-room shack with their own hands. During the day, the boys would study; during the evenings, they would sell petrol in order to get by, as Le Firmin had done in the past. After nightfall, they cooked and studied by candlelight. Aside from meat, food in Kembe was cheap; with 300 FCFA[242] Le Firmin would have enough to fill his stomach for a day. He recalls this period of his life as one of extreme hardship, yet he reminisces about living on large juicy mangoes during the mango season and about his palm-oil-stained notebooks.

As time passed, the neighbours took pity on the three boys. When they heard that Le Firmin was among the best students in his year, they decided to take the boys in; and thus the three of them lived with this family until they graduated from school. Le Firmin managed to pass his baccalaureate at the first attempt,[243] and this was a due recognition for all his efforts. With a diploma under his arm, Le Firmin travelled back to Bangui. His siblings had wanted him to become a schoolteacher, like his father worked as a civil servant clerk, with a more or less stable income for the rest of his life. But Le Firmin's horizons had expanded and his ambitions grown, so he enrolled in the Faculty of Law at the University of Bangui.

Le Firmin had come a long way; he had made it to university, while none of his siblings finished secondary school. He was the pride of his family. When I visited his older brother on the outskirts of Bangui in 2016, I was surprised by their rudimentary house and lifestyle. I then understood that Le Firmin is a prodigal son, the one on whom the family had placed their hopes and savings, but who ended up leaving them behind (at least for the time being).

Like Euloge, Le Firmin was also admitted to rent a room on campus. Having both studied in Kembe, they came to frequent the same circles. Like Euloge, Le Firmin became involved in the student's association. Sweeping and cleaning made him visible. Having to provide for himself, Le Firmin divided

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[241] *Donc tu vois les petits moments de recréation de pause-là, le paysage est bon, tu vois chaque élève est sous le manguier en train de lire son cours.*

[242] About $0.50

[243] A rare occurrence. Le Firmin explains that only two other pupils out of 78 passed.

time between work and study. At night, he worked as a security guard for a private security firm. Through this job he met Maman Françoise, who would later host him in her house in Brazzaville. In addition to this job, and considering that the campus had a fairly stable electricity supply, Le Firmin owned a freezer, which he 'rented' out to keep water cool, which would then be sold by a Congolese petty trader during the day. But then, lightning struck …

3) Promises of education

> We had intellectual work to do, but when we don't have light, we don't have the Internet, we don't have means to communicate, well, we had to leave from there (Max, interview, Kinshasa, 3 May 2014)[244]

> We said to ourselves that our objective was to get to Kinshasa in the hope that in Kinshasa we can study. (Le Firmin, interview, Kinshasa, 13 February 2015)[245]

> And here we wish to have access to studies; that's our only concern: just access to education (Euloge, interview, Kinshasa 3 February 2015)[246]

The quotations above point to education as one of the main (yet not the only) motivations for the CAR students to move to Kinshasa. Fleeing came to be attached to a purpose, that of growing personally (Bredeloup 2008); and in Bangui in 2013 a logical way to realize this growth was by combining higher education with refuge. Therefore, it was not so much fleeing, but especially the destination of the flight, that became determinant for one's growth. The CAR urban refugees in Kinshasa considered this choice to be their right:

> A refugee has the right to put himself where he feels comfortable. (W. Focus group, *La maison blanche*, Kinshasa, 31 January 2015)[247]

Kinshasa was synonymous with growth through education. Education as a supposed path to emancipation and self-growth: this notion does not come as a surprise to anyone, anywhere around the globe. Yet it is interesting to look at how this desire takes shape among the CAR refugee community in Kinshasa.

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[244] *On avait les travaux intellectuels à faire mais quand on n'a pas de la lumière, on n'a pas de l'internet, on n'a pas les moyens de communication, ben, il fallait qu'on puisse partir de là.*

[245] *On s'est dit notre objectif est d'arriver à Kinshasa dans l'espoir que c'est à Kinshasa que nous pouvons avoir peut-être l'occasion d'étudier.*

[246] *Et voilà nous souhaitons vraiment avoir accès aux études, c'est ça notre seul préoccupation, ne fusse que accès aux etudes.*

[247] *Le réfugié a droit de se mettre là où il se sent à l'aise.*

In a very interesting article, Oldenburg explores the relationship between education, war, and youths' aspirations in eastern Congo. Moving away from descriptions of youth in 'waithood' or youth as being 'stuck', Oldenburg looks at the ways youth manages to create or at least to dream of, despite protracted war, opportunities for themselves. In order to do so, she dissects the comment once made by one of her informants: 'I am an intellectual.' She writes that being an intellectual epitomizes many things at once:

> 'I am an intellectual' […] It demonstrates first the agency of youths to position and label themselves strategically in a way that might help them to approach the powerful and the rich in order to enter beneficial networks with local Big Men or international organisations. Second, it brings on an elitist rhetoric which constructs a sharp division between the self and the other, a 'civilized urban' and a 'traditional rural' identity. Third, it carries on the one hand the nostalgic glimpse of past privileges and powers while on the other hand it alludes to generational tensions, demonstrating the students' claim to become part of the national elite and replace the old one. Fourth, it embraces an often neglected, yet very important issue, namely the belief in one's own mental capacities, therewith providing self-worth and preserving social value in times when nothing seems to be certain. (Oldenburg 2016, 3–4)

There are several parallels between the context of Congolese students in Goma and that of the CAR refugee-students in Kinshasa; hence, for analytical purposes, I will base my reasoning on Oldenburg's analysis of 'I am an intellectual'—not least because it is a phrase I often heard from the mouths of the refugee-students themselves. The idea of education as a way out, a passport towards modernity (Richards 1996), is not new and did not pop up with the besieging of Bangui in 2013. I will first look at the long history that links life chances to education. This idea undoubtedly accompanied Euloge, Le Firmin, and others along their life paths, but it goes well beyond the lives of these refugee-students to colonial times and the establishment of the universities in CAR and DR Congo.

Inspired by the above quotation, I will then turn to the alternative networks students need to establish during their time at university, networks which are often based on patrimonial relationships. Because the notion of education as a path of self-fulfilment has been nurtured since a young age, being a student influences the ways in which an individual self-identifies and positions her- and himself socially. Having access to education allows the students to differentiate themselves from those who have not studied and influences their personal status tremendously. Oldenburg contrasts the 'civilized urban' with the 'traditional rural', and we will see how in times of crisis this dichotomy can be transposed to CAR. It is interesting to note that even though education is not what it used to be, and especially does not lead to the same opportunities as it did in the past (but more

often to unemployment and underemployment), obtaining a diploma still carries an 'aura', 'allure', 'mystique' (Honwana 2012, 45). The reference to generational conflicts will be dealt with in Chapter VIII, while the belief in one's own mental capacities are brought to light in the section wherein the tactics of survival of the refugees are described. There is one addition to be made, however. While the Congolese students in Goma are citizens of the country in which they study, we cannot say the same about the CAR refugee-students in Kinshasa. Therefore, I need to add another layer to Oldenburg's analysis: that of refugee-ness and the ways in which being a refugee facilitates and obstructs, at the same time, the claim to the right to study.

a) Higher education and patrimonial networks

During colonial times, formal education was primarily in hands of Christian missionaries. In DR Congo, it was even part of the colonial tripartite system, as discussed in Chapter IV. However, the role of education was not so much that of forming real leaders or 'cadres'. These posts would be kept for the white *colons*—not for the politically awakened subject but rather to form an educated African class (*évolués*) that could assist these 'cadres' in administration. In fact, when the independence wave passed through Central Africa, the new colonies were unprepared to take over the tasks, one of the reasons being that they did not have sufficient numbers of educated people to steer the country.

Lovanium was the first university founded in Belgian Congo in 1954. Having undergone many changes (it first became UNIZA and then UNIKIN), it is still the only active state university (with different campuses around the country) until today. But there are many more universities in Congo, which testifies to a hunger for studies, knowledge, and diplomas. In Kinshasa alone, moreover, there are two state universities and many more private ones. In contrast, there is only one university in CAR: the Université de Bangui, which was established in 1969 by Bokassa. In the first years after the opening of the university, enrolling at university was synonymous with gaining a government state job after graduation. However, things have since changed, and a diploma does not lead necessarily to a job—on the contrary. Today things seem to be more politicized with regard to accessing jobs (Lombard 2016). Student associations play an important role in the politicization of the university. Le Firmin, for instance, explains that working with an important public figure, whose name I will not mention here, was a secure way to obtain a job in the humanitarian world after university. The condition was that you had to graduate with a distinction.[248] The university is thus also a breeding ground for politics and new connections.

[248] Interview Le Firmin, Kinshasa, 13 February 2015

Even though education rates seem to be improving in Central Africa—there are, for instance, more girls going to school now than in the past and literacy rates are generally on the rise—the quality of education has not improved (Honwana 2012, 40). Higher education, in particular, has suffered a lot in the past decades. Not only has the quality of the education gone down, but also the universities are faced by numerous infrastructural problems: old buildings, over-attended classes, unpaid staff, harassed students—to name just a few. Honwana argues that the problem lies, among other causes, within the low quality of teaching, the absence of skills-oriented curricula and, in particular, 'the unavailability of jobs' (Honwana 2012)—which together leads to both unemployment and underemployment. In Kinshasa, for instance, many university graduates, unable to find a job, end up entering the informal economy.

Considering, therefore, the fact that education often does not lead to a job and does not guarantee the locals a better life (Oldenburg 2016, 17), different scholars have asked themselves why it is that young Africans still perceive education 'as the only possible way to a "successful" future' (Tsakala Munikengi and Bongo-Pasi Moke Sangol 2004; Langevang 2008; Honwana 2012; Martin, Ungruhe, and Häberlein 2016; Oldenburg 2016).[249] The dream of accessing a state job (and thus secure income) with a university degree is enduring but does not concur with reality, not if the graduated student in question does not have good connections. The answer to the question of how to make a living, then, is a combination of factors: being able to access patronal and other relational systems (politics, militia leaders, NGOs and other paths of access to the outside world), obtaining personal status, and building up social capital. Yet this answer is not satisfactory, I suppose not even for the students themselves, who are forced to walk different paths at the same time—a practice that Johnson-Hanks has called 'judicious opportunism' (Johnson-Hanks 2005): looking beyond the jobs a diploma can offer one and forced to enter the, oftentimes unpromising, informal economy, as we will see in Section 4.

The intellectual

Being able to present and differentiate oneself as an intellectual, however, should not be underestimated. Obtaining a diploma in Central Africa seems to be a symbolic mechanism of social distinction by education à la Bourdieu; it involves social capital. To know that one belongs to the privileged few provides a basis for self-worth and pride but also involves symbolic power. Education is still seen as a powerful tool for emancipation. Even if education might not guarantee students a

[249] See Esson for a counter argument; he says that many youth in Ghana prefer to leave school and start a career in soccer instead (Esson 2013).

better life, it bolsters their imagination of a better future and provides the belief that, in any case, with a diploma in hand, opportunities to find work are better than without one (Oldenburg 2016, 17).

A diploma is an important asset in a society that publicly acclaims the social and cultural capital attached to school degrees (Pype 2015). As such, individuals who consider themselves intellectuals, such as the refugee-students, will try to obtain symbols by which they can self-label themselves as being intellectuals. One of these symbols is the knowledge of the official language; in the case of Central Africa, this is French. Language vehiculizes symbolic capital. What better way to make this capital visible than by the presence of a heavy Larousse dictionary? This is what Le Firmin did when I informed him I would be travelling to Brazzaville; he urged me to recover his dictionary and bring it back across the border. I felt as if I was transporting knowledge, visibly so. The mere act of asking for his dictionary, among all things, can be read as an act of self-identification with the intellectual. Who else would care about a dictionary to such an extent?

The use of French among peers stands in contrast with the use of other vernacular and youth languages. Urban youth language also involves symbolic capital, yet one of a different kind: the language of an anti-culture capital that is useful to get by in the informal sector, which encompasses the urban jungle, as will be discussed below (Kiessling and Mous 2004; Nassenstein and Hollington 2015).[250] In times of conflict, however, being able to self-identify as educated is a strong marker of differentiation from those who are not intellectuals, and in many cases (rightly or wrongly) from the easily manipulated youth in the countryside. On repeated occasions, Euloge and Le Firmin shared their astonishment at the fact that the Seleka rebels looted computers thinking they were televisions, pointing to the fact that because of their lack of education, but probably also of experience, they could not differentiate between a computer and a television. Were they (the rebels) to rule the country? And perhaps more worrying, as Euloge mentioned: is rebellion setting an example for the most certain way to access power in Central Africa?

b) The refugee

There is a fierce and tenacious belief that the UNHCR should take care of the refugees' studies (Clark-Kazak 2011). It is partly because of this belief that the students in Kinshasa undertake 'acts of refugee-ness' (to make a parallel with Isin's wording: 'acts of citizenship' 2009)—in other words, acts that help them to present themselves as being refugees, so as to make a claim on the 'right to have rights' (Isin in Innes 2016, 266).

[250] In Kinshasa, however, Langila is a slang used by artists and young intellectuals (Nassenstein 2015) .

Several of the Central African refugees in Kinshasa shared the common struggle for access to education. The right to education and, more concretely, their inability to access education in Kinshasa, became a topic in most of our conversations—being myself a junior researcher attached to a European university, I cannot contend this was a mere coincidence. When speaking about this right, Le Firmin and others repeatedly based themselves on the Refugee Convention (the 'Bible' of the refugees as they called it) to underline their belief to entitlement:

> It is also stated somewhere in the convention that a refugee has the right to education, and these rights also include the right to higher education, primary and secondary education. (Interview Le Firmin, Kinshasa, 4 June 2014)[251]

Here, Le Firmin makes reference to—while at the same time stretching the content of—art. 22 para. 2 in Chapter IV of the Refugee Convention and Protocol, which states:

> The Contracting States shall accord to refugees treatment as favourable as possible, and, in any event, not less favourable than that accorded to aliens generally in the same circumstances, with respect to education other than elementary education and, in particular, as regards access to studies, the recognition of foreign school certificates, diplomas and degrees, the remission of fees and charges and the award of scholarships. (UNHCR 2010)

De jure, the text holds a promise for the students. It is an argument on which they can base their claims at the doorstep of the contracting state, in this case DR Congo, supported by the UNHCR. In order to be able to make this claim, however, Le Firmin, Euloge, and others need to present themselves as refugees in the first place. The Central African students become refugees by performing like refugees, by employing artefacts that are related to refugees, and by referring to themselves as refugees (for a more detailed examination of this identification process, see Wilson Janssens 2018a). By 'becoming' refugees, they want to claim the rights that come with this status.

Utas challenges dominant discourses that focus on women as merely victims. He coined the term 'victimcy' in order to define this 'agency of self-staging as victim of war' (Utas 2005, 406 and 408). Clark-Kazak underlines that refugees engage cleverly with vulnerability discourses in ways that stand in stark contrast with the rigid categories and labels used by the UNHCR. For both authors, individuals present 'themselves in different ways at different times, to fit—or not—within particular

[251] *Il est dit aussi quelque part dans la convention qu'un réfugié a le droit à l'éducation et parmi ces droits figurent aussi le droit à l'étude supérieur, l'étude primaire, secondaire.*

“vulnerables” categories’ (Clark-Kazak 2011, 69) and in order to establish themselves as ‘legitimate recipients’ of humanitarian aid (Utas 2005, 409).

The categorization approach to vulnerability is politically useful for the Central African students, as it permits them to leverage decision-making (Clark-Kazak 2011, 77). Within a mobility regime dominated by the UNHCR logic and discourse, the association with refugee status has for Euloge and Le Firmin a specific purpose: it gives them an advantage. In the social context of Kinshasa, the students’ best chance to enrol at university is by making claims on the doorstep of the UNHCR. Making this claim enables the possibility of an opportunity. Thereby, the Central African students subject themselves to chance (Steinberg 2016, 140). Their subjection is performed by self-identification. ‘Seek[ing] ways of assimilating and of inhabiting’ the refugee (Malkki 1995, 3) empowers the students. Being refugees entitles the students, in their own minds, to a right to place the Congolese government and the UNHCR under the moral obligation to respect this right. As such, they maximize their ‘political opportunities by self-identifying in different ways at different times’ and are, as such, able ‘to access particular resources’ (Clark-Kazak 2011, 89). The Central African students position themselves as—and partly become—refugees in order to appeal to the obligation of the other and leverage their own need for assistance. Self-identification with the refugee is, thus, deployed as a tactic (de Certeau 1988, 37; Utas 2005, 408). The process of identification turns a seemingly desperate resort into a weapon of the weak (Scott 1985), one that makes sense in the navigation of opportunities in Kinshasa.

In order to reinforce their claim, the Central African students in Kinshasa make use of a past example that has resonance in Central Africa. Clark-Kazak, who worked among Congolese refugees in Kampala (Uganda), worded it in terms of the ‘historic support for Rwandese refugees’ (2011, 14; 148). As elsewhere, education turned out to be an aspiration of the majority of the urban refugees in Kinshasa (Clark-Kazak 2011, 25), who compared their situation to that of the Rwandese refugees in Bangui in the late 1990s. At the time, thousands of Rwandese fled the genocide and its aftermath. A couple of years later, when Zairians started fleeing during Mobutu’s fall, CAR, and in particular Bangui, received several refugees from both countries. Urban myth had it that, at the time, many of them had benefited from their refugee status and managed to enrol in higher education and finish their studies in Bangui. Even though it did not happen automatically, this myth seems to be partly confirmed by Émile’s experiences in the early 2000s (whose story has been discussed in Chapter IV). He managed to enrol at the University of Bangui and study geology.

> The biggest difficulty was to reconcile study and refugee status. There were no laws that guaranteed that. What I was able to discover during this refugee stage was that there was a certain solidarity. We came, for example, from the former Zaire/DRC at the time, we formed a team, we organized ourselves. There were Congolese (from Brazzaville), Angolan, Ivorian, Liberian, Rwandan, Burundian, and even Ugandan refugees. I have known some, some Angolans, yes, some. So it [solidarity among the refugees from different countries] allowed us to express ourselves, to be approached by the authorities. I remember the first few years that I was practically missing class because it was necessary to follow the files, CNR, HCR ... you had to try to negotiate to receive a little financial support, let's call it a scholarship ... (Émile, Bangui 15 August 2016)[252]

In the eyes of many Banguissois, and thus also in the eyes of the CAR refugees in Kinshasa, the UNHCR in Bangui at the time—and thus by extension the Central African government—had taken care of the studies of the refugees. Following the UN convention, one could argue that refugee-students had the right to student housing and scholarships. The stories that go round, such as the one of Émile, are in the eyes of the Banguissois evidence of this aid. Comparing their situation to that of the Rwandese refugees in Bangui in the late 1990s, the CAR refugee-students in Kinshasa hoped for a similar treatment. Thus, when Euloge, Le Firmin, and the others decided to flee to Kinshasa, their decision was coloured by their reading of this episode in the history of their country and the interpretation of what they had witnessed and heard about when they were young boys. Whether this image is real or not did not matter *per se*; it was real for them because it was felt as being real (Godelier 2015). Moreover, it had real consequences: fleeing and becoming a refugee. Euloge, Le Firmin, and others had hoped to transform their flight and refuge into an opportunity.

Unfortunately, there is a discrepancy between, on the one hand, the expectations and, on the other, the reality of formal education in refugee contexts (Clark-Kazak 2011, 151). *De jure*, the refugees felt entitled to education. Reality was another story. The UN convention places the responsibility for the refugees at the level of the 'contracting state'. The UNCHR assists the state (financially) in dealing

[252] *La plus grande difficulté c'était concilier étude-statut. Il n'y avait pas des lois qui nous garantissaient. Ce que j'ai pu découvrir pendant ce stade de réfugié c'est, on a trouvé une certaine solidarité. Nous venions, par exemple, de l'ex-Zaïre/RDC actuellement, on se constituait en équipe, on s'organisait. Il y avait des réfugiés Congolais-Brazza, Angolais, Ivoiriens, Libériens, Rwandais, Burundais, même Ougandais. J'en ai connu quelques, quelques, Angolais, oui quelques. Donc ça nous a permis de s'exprimer, de se faire approcher des autorités. Je me rappelle les premières années que je séchais pratiquement le cours car il fallait suivre le dossier, CNR, HCR… il fallait essayer de négocier pour avoir ne fus que, appelons ça bourse…*

with the refugees, but cannot take any decisions. But what happens when the contracting state, in this case DR Congo, is 'bankrupt' and unable to take care of its own students, let alone the refugee-students? The responsibility, then, at least in terms of finance, falls back on the UNHCR. But the latter seems to be equally unable to help these urban refugees, not because the UNHCR are unwilling, but because they repeatedly claim to have a lack of funding.

The UNHCR has to make do with 7 per cent of the envisioned budget. In order to better serve as many as refugees as possible, they choose to invest this meagre 7 per cent in the refugee camps, where they can reach more people (Wilson Janssens 2018b, 222). In fact, because of the lack of funding on both ends, financing the studies of the urban refugees turns out to be no one's responsibility. Should there arise any doubt vis-à-vis the UNHCR, their ineptness is certainly not intentional; rather, it is the result of a lack of funding, and the responsibility lies not on their shoulders, but on a 'world order' which is not preoccupied with urban refugee-students (Malkki 1995). In this way, humanitarian agencies and host governments alike are exempted from any responsibility. In a very interesting book, Theodore Trefon has described this play between the state and its humanitarian partners as a 'masquerade', where everyone knows what the other is doing, and not doing, without stating it openly (Trefon 2011; see also Lombard 2016). In any case, knowing about it does not help the refugees to reach their objectives; on the contrary, it only adds to their frustration and their experience of duress.

Access to education and literacy for all is the goal of many humanitarian agencies. What comes afterwards, however—that is, the access to the labour market or rather the inability to access that formal labour market—seems to be a growing concern. Those who do not have the right surname or useful connections ('*le bras long*') have serious difficulties obtaining a job, in the public sector in particular. The large majority of students cannot find a job as a civil servant after finishing their studies, which is true for both Bangui and Kinshasa (Nzeza Bilakila 2004; Lombard 2016, 122). They have to learn to fend for themselves in the fluid informal economy. In Kinshasa, for instance, many *diplomés*, as they are called, end up opening their *cabine* in order to sell mobile phone credit. They come to be part of the *société maboko pamba* (lit. the empty-handed society), a colloquial phrase to describe those who after studying cannot find a job, or those who have studied without gaining any knowledge owing to the poor quality of education.

Improvising a living in the informal market requires imagination and creativity, both of which have rightly been studied and acclaimed by an array of scholars. Education alone does not close the inequality gap. The present-day African city, Barber writes, is a place where luxury and excess are

juxtaposed with dire need. While Barber regrets the physical waste, on the one hand, and the abject poverty that accompanies it, what she really regrets is the tragic waste of human potential and human talent among the poor (Barber 2018, 137).

How is it, then, still possible that despite the limited opportunities after graduating, students continue to attach value to their diplomas? It seems that even if education might not guarantee the Central African youth, both in CAR and Congo, access to a better life, it still continues to bolster their imagination of a better future. Does it still hold that having a diploma in hand is better than having none? I will now turn to this imagined and at times dreamlike future—as well as to its corollaries of frustration, fending for oneself, and self-emancipation despite all odds.

4) Kinshasa, a school

> For me it is a training school. I am being trained by nature. What I didn't experience, I experience today. So, for me it's a school. (Interview Euloge with Sjoerd, Kinshasa, Kinshasa, 2–3 February 2015)[253]

When the initial feeling of being overwhelmed died down, the CAR refugee-students turned to interpreting their experience of refuge and in particular of Kinshasa through the metaphor of the school of life. I remember well the first time Tezman made reference to this, in May 2014, as we were strolling along the train tracks of Limete Industriel. He emphasized that what he was enduring in Kinshasa had transformed him into a man.

In line with Oldenburg, I look at education from an emic perspective and extend it beyond the formal context of school, college, and university. From this perspective, future employment, corruption, conflict and hopelessness, but also peace, hopefulness and 'modernity', and in particular a process of becoming—all find their place (Oldenburg 2016, 4). Going through the school of exile pushed Tezman and others to find alternative and diverse ways to fend for themselves, as we will see hereunder; but, at the same time, and perhaps more importantly, it turned them into men. Living in Kinshasa turned out to be a 'hidden path' into adulthood (Johnson-Hanks 2002, 868).

a) Duress

Elsewhere, I have described the different layers of violence the refugee-students have to deal with as the *palimpsest of violence* (Wilson Janssens 2018b). These layers include the structural violence, with its *longue durée* perspective (Farmer 2004a), that characterizes both the CAR and Congolese

[253] *Pour moi c'est une école de formation. Je suis en train d'être formé par la nature. Ce que je ne vivais pas, je vis aujourd'hui. Donc, pour moi c'est une école.*

societies: the social and everyday violence that flows out of this structural violence (Scheper-Hughes 1993; Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004b; Bouju and De Bruijn 2008; Lombard and Batianga-Kinzi 2015), as well as the recurrent conflicts through which even open violence, at times, seems to be normalized and becomes the everyday context rather than an exception (Vigh 2008). Added to this are the personal experiences of flight and separation, the travelling in difficult conditions and arriving in unwelcoming and foreign urban jungles where the law of the survival of the fittest applies (see Chapter V). And there are also the countless moments of aborted hope and frustration endured on the doorstep of the UNHCR, an institutional violence the refugee-students had not previously taken into account and which they felt as a block to their personal growth. The internalization of layer upon layer of enduring hardship becomes, then, duress (De Bruijn and Both 2018)—in other words, the personal experience of the palimpsest of violence which, conversely, colours the way in which the students look at the world and the individual decisions they make while navigating that world. Fear of losing face and not living up to their expectations and those of their society, for instance, influence decisions about whether to stay in refuge or to go back home, as we saw in Chapter V.

The palimpsest of violence is transposed onto the body of the refugee; distress is worn on the shoulders. The failure of the refugee-students to find assistance in the challenging Kinois environment fed Euloge's and Le Firmin's sentiments of duress. CAR refugees in Kinshasa repeatedly expressed their frustration and worry with regard to the future:

> I'm seeing my future drown in front of me; it's a big concern. I like to work and evolve like the others. (Kinshasa, Euloge 25 May 2014)[254]

> That's why we wanted to be in the DRC: to benefit from this moment, to do other trainings as well; and if there will be peace in our country tomorrow, we can also go home and change our country. (Focus Group Esatis, Kinshasa, 31 January 2015)[255]

The refugee-students joined forces to write an official letter, dated 20 August 2014, which they printed in threefold and handed personally to the UNHCR first, on August 25, and to the CNR and ERUKIN the day after (see Appendix II). Their letter, with the subject heading '*Grievances*', stated their joint worries about not having studied for two years and urged the UNCHR to enrol them at university in order to go back to their country with a degree in hand and to be of use in rebuilding

[254] *Je suis en train de voir mon avenir noyer comme ça mais, c'est un grand soucis pour moi. J'aime bien travaillé et évolué comme les autres.*

[255] *C'est pourquoi on voulait être en RDC pour profiter de ce moment, faire aussi d'autres formations, et s'il y aura demain la paix chez nous on peut rentrer aussi pour changer le pays.*

CAR. Their ambitions seemed to go beyond the personal and point towards a collective quest for well-being.

But the day on which I could really feel, almost touch, the students' frustration was when Le Firmin agreed, for the first time, to be interviewed. He explained:

> What will be the future of our country if we don't have the opportunity to study? Our future is already in jeopardy. During other crises, on the contrary, when people found refuge outside of their country, they were granted conventional scholarships in order to study and secure their future. This was not the case for us, and we live only in uncertainty, frustration, and anxiety. (Le Firmin 4 June 2014)[256]

As I transcribed the interview I was struck by how Le Firmin reiterated, almost word by word, Bouju and De Bruijn's definition of psychological suffering and social violence: 'anxiety, anguish, despair and fear' (Bouju and De Bruijn 2008, 5). In addition to the layers of violence described above, this psychological suffering impeded him from furthering his studies. Le Firmin claims that his future was '*déjà hypothéqué*' or already in jeopardy, a rather despairing statement that speaks of deep resignation, as if he really had given up (Wilson Janssens 2018b, 223).

Papa Afrique, an older Congolese refugee and who will be discussed in more detail in Chapter VII, equally expresses frustration, disillusionment, and a sense of a year-long, deep-rooted pain.

> Papa Afrique: Stress, on a daily basis, is, what we call it, decrepitude, moral, psychological decay.
> Euloge: Moral ulcers.
> Papa Afrique: And a life of absence of dignity and honour. (Interview with Papa Afrique and Euloge, 31 January 2015, Kinshasa)[257]

Given the eloquent bitterness of Papa Afrique's words and the fact that he had been living in Kinshasa for almost twenty years in 2015, this casts refuge in a rather worrying light. It seems that in Kinshasa, the refugees have not only left their homes and lost the opportunity of studying—with all the consequent feelings of temporal and spatial stuckedness that this involves—but they have also

[256] *Tant qu'on n'a pas cette opportunité d'étudier, quel sera l'avenir de notre pays ? […] Notre avenir est déjà hypothéqué […] Hors quand hier il y a eu des crises et les réfugiés se réfugient sur un autre territoire, on pouvait quand même leur octroyer des bourses conventionnelles pour sécuriser leur avenir. Tel n'a pas été notre cas, et nous on vit que des inquiétudes, des frustrations, des angoisses…*

[257] Papa Afrique: *Le stress, au quotidien c'est, comment on appelle ça, la décrépitude, la déchéance morale, psychologique.* Euloge: *les ulcère morales.* Papa Afrique: *Et une vie d'absence de dignité, et d'honneur.*

lost their sense of human value, dignity, and personal honour. Perhaps this is what Euloge means when he makes reference to 'moral ulcers'. In order to better understand this loss, food is an interesting case in point.

Dreams and nightmares

> I never dreamed Kinshasa, it happened; I find myself in Kinshasa today, I never dreamed about Kinshasa. (Euloge, Kinshasa, 5 June 2014)[258]

I was very surprised when, during a stroll, Le Firmin compared Kinshasa to the United States—an African version of the United States. In Kinshasa everything seems possible, he said. Le Firmin was looking for his 'African dream', one related to social becoming. Kinshasa is indeed a city where the stakes are high and where big dreams can be achieved, but the extremes (of wealth and poverty) are very pronounced, and big failures are more commonplace than big successes. Euloge and Le Firmin were looking for the 'African dream', pursuing their studies, and social becoming, a (perhaps unattainable) dream they could 'wear with flair' (Porter et al. 2010, 803). Papa Afrique explains the meaning of being a refugee in Kinshasa in the following words:

> In Kinshasa being a refugee is ... [calculates his words] it is really living inside ... dreams, we are dreaming. The life of a refugee in Kinshasa is a person who builds his future on dreams. He only envisions the reality in terms of dreams. That is, he doesn't do anything he really wants to do. He does what he doesn't want to do. (Interview, Kinshasa, 31 January 2015)[259]

Then, after some reflection, Papa Afrique added:

> One cannot live basing one's projects on others ... And thus the life of a refugee turns into a nightmare ... So here everything is about dreams, or nightmares. But it develops certain skills, like courage, but one that is based on dreams. (Interview, Kinshasa, 31 January 2015)[260]

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[258] *Je n'ai jamais rêvais Kinshasa, c'est une situation qui est arrivée, je me retrouve aujourd'hui à Kinshasa, je n'ai jamais rêvé Kinshasa.*

[259] *À Kinshasa être un réfugié c'est … c'est vraiment vivre dans … des rêves, on rêve. La vie d'un réfugié à Kinshasa c'est une personne qui fonde son avenir sur des rêves. Le concret il ne l'entrevoit qu'en termes de rêve. C'est-à-dire qu'il ne fait rien qu'il veut faire. Il fait ce qu'il ne veut pas faire.*

[260] *On ne peut pas vivre fondant ses projets sur les autres … Et donc la vie de réfugié, c'est une vie de cauchemar … Donc ici tout c'est des rêves, cauchemars. Mais il y a aussi certaines aptitudes que ça développe, c'est le courage, mais fondé sur quoi, sur des rêves.*

There seems to be a constant tension. Without opportunities for self-growth, without projects on the horizon … the dream soon turns into a nightmare. The Central African students were desperately caught between their expectations and their lived realities—that is, their aspiration to receive an education and other opportunities, on the one hand, and the idle waiting for education, on the other. This schism, already presented in geographical terms in Chapter V, resonates with Vigh's *presentia* (actual being) and *potentia* (possible and desired becoming) (Vigh 2009a, 99), as well as with Oldenburg's 'drop height'—that is, the discrepancy between high expectations and disappointed dreams (Oldenburg 2016, 11).

Nevertheless, the existential mobility and the blockage on personal growth push the refugee-students to look for creative alternatives and teaches them valuable lessons on survival, offering them at times the possibility to dream—even if, more often than not, these dreams turn into nightmares. Hope is never lost (Crapanzano 2003; Kleist and Jansen 2016).

b) *La débrouille*: Surviving the urban jungle

At the beginning, Euloge, Le Firmin, Max, and others did not expect Congo's educational system to be that different from CAR's, especially in terms of scholarships and study fees. In Bangui, they experienced studying as being relatively cheap: there are scholarships available, and students have access to cheap student housing and meals. This is also, probably, why they had expected the UNHCR to take care of their studies. But higher education is one of many public services in DR Congo characterized by the function–dysfunction paradox (Tsakala Munikengi and Bongo-Pasi Moke Sangol 2004, 82). Because salaries are low and often not paid, students and their parents are, in fact, 'the primary source of financing for what officially remains a state-run system' (Tsakala Munikengi and Bongo-Pasi Moke Sangol 2004; Titeca and de Herdt 2011). This becomes an extra burden for the students and turns studying at the state university into a de facto private and very expensive endeavour. Thus, in DR Congo, not even the local students enjoy 'favourable' treatment, let alone the 'aliens'—and therefore the UN convention is rendered meaningless. In the best of cases, the Central African refugee-students will get the same treatment as Congolese students: one through which the state seems to hamper rather than to facilitate the opportunity to study. The burden rests on the refugees' shoulders.

Escaping the social moratorium in Bangui, they arrived to a new version of a social moratorium, one that is alien, but especially one where they had no relatives. As Euloge often explained, in one of his characteristic phrases: 'Le HCR est notre père et notre mère.' When the refugee-students were forced out of the suburbs in November 2013, things started to become dire; yet, it also liberated

them, as they started taking matters into their own hands—not only in terms of education, by looking for opportunities in order to study, but also more generally, as a practice of survival. As this adoptive father and mother seemed unable to take care of its children, in order to survive the city the students learned to obey the infamous 'Article 15: *Débrouillez-vous*'. Article 15 means fending for yourself, and in the case of Congo, it has received wide attention from scholars (De Villers, Jewsiewicki, and Monnier 2002; AbdouMaliq Simone 2004; Trefon 2004; Ayimpam 2014). Le Firmin explains it in its own words:

> We live in a system of self-help initiatives. In other words, for the little we know, we try to apply it to its fullest. In my case, today, I [laughs] never took courses in photography, but today I am a photographer, because I am forced to do something in a new context, so I decided to adapt to it. (Le Firmin, 4 June 2014)[261]

In order to make ends meet, Le Firmin turned himself into a photographer. With money he had saved by selling phone credit, Le Firmin invested in buying a camera and portable photograph printer in Brazzaville, before crossing to Kinshasa. I still remember the day when, just after meeting, he had proudly taken the new printer out of the package to show me. He began strolling around popular sights of the city, taking street portraits of clients and printing them on the spot. Ambulant photography is a popular practice in Kinshasa. Because competition is high and his devices are not particularly sophisticated, Le Firmin needed to be strategic and soon had to adjust his tactics. He thus preferred taking pictures in the popular neighbourhoods close to where he lives, instead of the fancier parts of the city centre, so that his clients would not be too picky about his simple camera. A perhaps unexpected group of clients were Chinese stonemasons, whom Le Firmin photographed at the entrance to their building site early in the mornings, before work.

Those among the refugees who were more dexterous at learning Lingala, for instance, or who had some knowledge of the language before leaving their homes, optimized this advantage. Franchy, for instance, is a handyman who does not sit still. He managed to get a motorbike, personalized it, and found himself a job as a fridge repairer in a local store. I often saw him carrying two gas bottles on his motorbike. Next to fridges, he could repair air-conditioning devices and had knowledge about

[261] *Nous vivons dans un système d'auto-prise en charge, pour le peu de trucs que tu connais, tu essaies de faire beaucoup d'application. Donc, vous voyez, l'exemple en est qu'aujourd'hui, moi, je n'ai jamais appris à faire la photographie eh, aujourd'hui je suis devenu un photographe, parce que je ne peux que faire suite à une situation nouvelle, donc j'ai décidé de s'y adapter.*

electricity. Franchy is the kind of person who has 'strong eyes'. We met several times, but he always seemed busy and never stayed too long when he dropped by at my house. I visited him quickly at his working place once, in the hope of interviewing him, but the opportunity never materialized, despite my repeated requests to do so; he just did not have the time.

The examples are multiple: Another Central African young man I came across repeatedly on my way home, sometimes on a daily basis, worked as a cell phone repairer at a street stand on a fairly busy corner off Limete's Place Commerciale. One of the few refugee girls who had come by herself worked part-time as a street cleaner. Yet another became a motor-taxi driver. There was a pastor and even a self-proclaimed doctor in the very rural outskirts of the city. With a diploma in economics in hand, Ulrich was a small-scale ambulant businessman of second-hand clothing and perfume; he tried to expand this knowledge in Brazzaville. Willy, a very gentle, soft-spoken theatre player, became a busy hairdresser, even though he really wanted to act in a theatre group. Oscar, who will be discussed in more detail in Chapter VII, threaded beads into colourful purses and tapestries, which he tried to sell among his fellow churchgoers or on every occasion some official delegation would pay a visit to the Central African embassy.

His friends repeatedly advised Euloge to hire a driver, in order to use his motorbike as a motor-taxi (colloquially known as *wewa*) and generate income, a recurrent practice in different African countries (Kisaalita and Sentongo-Kibalama 2007; Ogunrinola 2011; Feudjio 2014).[262] Euloge preferred not to do so; and even if he was willing to lend his motorbike from time to time to others—to his younger brother, for instance—he preferred to keep it, stubbornly, for personal use.

La débrouille was more than managing by coping strategies such as those mentioned above; it amounted to an amalgamation of different tactics—a whole way of living. Keeping networks alive was another important element. Thus, in addition to generating one's own income, the refugees needed to look for support by knocking on different doors: the UNCHR; family members in the diaspora (Gabon, Europe, the United States); and patrimonial relationships (embassy). In an environment of extreme uncertainty, diversification is a vital strategy. Students who had already been in Kinshasa before the crisis had also turned to the UNHCR as refugees for help, even though they were already enrolled at university.

[262] Since 2010, the so-called *wewa* have become very popular among the Kinois and are omnipresent. *Wewa* means 'you' in the Luba language. It is believed that when the diamond-digging business declined in the Kasai, where the Luba people originate, many moved to Kinshasa in search of work and opportunities. They ended up driving motorbikes. Potential clients would hail them: 'You!' or '*Wewa!*' This pronoun became a metonym.

However, not all refugees were as needy, and a considerable number out of the 500 came from well-off families. I was repeatedly told that direct family members and other acquaintances of Bozizé were in Kinshasa. On public occasions, such as the Central African handball cup games or when the Central African 'peace' delegation came on an official visit to DR Congo and was received by the Ministry of Interior Affairs, I had the opportunity to meet the more wealthy refugees. There was a particular elder woman I grew very fond of. She had come to Kinshasa to keep an eye on her two grandchildren. The father of these two children was a successful businessman, and their mother was studying at university. The children went to a private school.

Esprit Kinois

Fending for oneself, in terms of livelihood tactics, was not enough to survive the Kinois urban jungle. CAR refugees, who at the beginning were gullible prey to Kinois tricksters, understood well that in order to survive life in the city they had to adopt the Kinois ways, which, as they learned, differed from those in Bangui. Next to studies and food, talking about the *esprit Kinois* became one of our favourite conversation topics. I realized the *esprit Kinois* was of importance when on one occasion Euloge, as we were riding on his newly acquired motorbike on a busy two-lane street, nonchalantly overtook a bus that had stopped in front of us to let down passengers. In a fast and risky bypass, he told me that in order to ride a motorbike in Kinshasa, you need to have the *esprit Kinois*.

In a questionnaire that was handed to about 25 refugees by Le Firmin, we questioned the CAR refugees about the meaning of the *esprit Kinois*. Some of their answers were the following:

	Gender, age and occupation	**What does *esprit Kinois* mean?**
1	M 28 yrs, university student	It is lack of respect, trust, a spirit that motivates the person to do what he wants and without reproach.
2	M 25 yrs, school pupil[263]	crook, adventurer, thief
3	M 49 yrs, carpenter	It is the spirit of injustice.
4	F 33 yrs, trader	Falsehood
5	M 24 yrs, school pupil	It's a spirit to eat off people.
6	M 33 yrs, hairdresser/artist	An example: someone who is recognized by the HCR and housed and then chased out of it with the help of the

[263] Someone who has not yet passed their final school examination and is still attempting to do so, or someone who has abandoned school but does not wish to identify themselves as being unemployed.

		police
7	M 20 yrs, school pupil	It is the Kinois way of acting that is often illogical. Take for instance the school director. At the beginning of the year he accepted 93 pupils into our classroom; three months later, he decided to send away 43 of them, despite their already paid school fees.
8	M 30 yrs, fisherman	The spirit of a Kinois who is alert
9	M 24 yrs, university student	Hard battle to find money

In the above table, I have divided the answers into three categories. Answers 1 to 5 tend towards a negative reading of the *esprit Kinois*. Answer 6 and 7 are equally negative, but are shaped by concrete cases in the daily realities and experiences of the refugees *as* refugees in Kinshasa. Answers 8 and 9 render a more positive interpretation of the *esprit Kinois*. Hence, in the first reading, the *esprit Kinois* is described in the following terms: lack of respect, recklessness, thievery, falsehood, and one that eats on top, read instead, of others. Adapted to experiences that stand close to the CAR refugees, the *esprit Kinois* points to the attitudes of police officers and even of a school director. The third and more positive interpretation sees the *esprit Kinois* in terms of alertness and the daily fight for survival. These, at first sight, contradictory definitions point to the complexity of the *esprit Kinois*: its two-sided power of creativity and of destruction, but also the ways it can be adopted into one's own experience of the city.

> Initially it was, well, we walked like blind people, but this time we see clearly! (Interview Euloge, Kinshasa, 16 February 2015)[264]

Surviving Kinshasa consists in tricking others in order not to be tricked by them. In order to survive in Kinshasa, the Kinois need to be shrewd and cunning—in a word, they need to be 'Yankees' (Wilson 2012). The Congolese Yankees 'are in the know' and they are never afraid, lost, or stunned—or at least will never admit that they are. Beyond street smartness, being a Yankee includes, among other things, dress code, posture, attitude, and language use (Wilson 2015a). Like the Yankees, the refugees need to dress, walk, and speak accordingly in order to embody the *esprit Kinois*. Mastering the local vernacular (Kinois Lingala) is a case in point (Wilson Janssens 2018a), as is developing the

[264] *Au début c'était, bon on partait comme des aveugles, mais cette fois-ci, on voit clair!*

practice of having 'strong eyes', seeing with clarity (as Euloge explains above)—that is, equally seeing opportunities and maintaining a wary attitude towards others.[265]

In the context of a public bar, the *esprit Kinois* was also present among the refugees. Every time Franchy would order a beer, for instance, he would do so by looking at the waitress with one hand covering one eye.

Figure 53 Nkoyi beer label

Esprit Kinois is one of the slogans of the popular *Nkoyi* beer brand (*nkoy* in Lingala means leopard), its bottles bearing a label representing a one-eyed leopard.

> [B]ars, pubs, and other drinking occasions [become] places and times of experiment […] where vernacular modernities are being constructed, defended, undone, where memories are told and retold, hopes and ambitions expressed, and where received categories […] are being evaluated and, in an endless mimetic process, re-invented. (Van Wolputte and Fumanti 2010, 17)

By drinking Nkoyi, Franchy tries to mimic the leopard. In DR Congo the leopard stands for power (think of Mobutu's emblematic leopard-skin cap), but also for agility and astuteness, qualities the refugees need to adopt if they are to survive the urban jungle. Hence, the label connects to the

[265] The antithesis of the Yankee is the Yuma. The Yuma is a country bumpkin, an outsider who does not know the ways of the city and is easily tricked by others. Along the same lines, the Yuma does not know how to dress fashionably, or how to speak properly. In the context of the law of the strongest, everybody wants to be a Yankee of some sort. The Yankee–Yuma division is readily transposed to the insider–outsider, Kinois–Centrafricain reality in which the Centrafricain refugees find themselves in Kinshasa.

strong eyes idiom and to the survival tactics to be applied in Kinshasa. If Kinshasa is the jungle (see Chapter V), the astute and fearless hunter, the leopard, is the Kinois—and, by extension, also the strong-eyed CAR refugee.

Van Wolputte and Fumanti suggest that beer and drinking are a means to access power and knowledge. In this sense, the refugees' drinking habits can be read as a means to acquiring knowledge of the city. Taking it a step further, through beer drinking categories present themselves as transgressible, and their dividing lines turn out to be paradoxical boundaries that open up a space in which to manoeuvre and negotiate (Van Wolputte and Fumanti 2010, 21). As such, the experience of drinking Nkoyi opens up a space for the non-Kinois, in this case the CAR refugees, to manoeuvre and to become (like the) Kinois. Beer, then, ceases to be a mere commodity, a mere marker of identity, and becomes a currency, a means to convert one value into another, a maker (instead of marker) of identity (Van Wolputte and Fumanti 2010, 5). Foreignness is converted into the adaptability to survive in Kinshasa, which consequently opens up potentially new avenues, as discussed above (dreams and nightmares). Another, perhaps less successful, slogan of Nkoyi beer is 'Yes we Kin!' (see picture below). The slogan 'Yes we Kin' makes obvious allusion to Obama's 2008 election victory speech. More than just a play of words, 'Yes we Kin' is a translation of an American dream to the Kinois reality.

Figure 54 YES WE KIN
Bracongo premises on Boulevard 30 Juin (Kinshasa, 28 April 2014)

Slowly but surely the refugee-students became fluent in Lingala and knowledgeable in the ways of the city. They opened their eyes. I was told that some of them even made use of their refugee IDs in order to avoid paying bus fares by quickly waving them at the conductor. What the refugees were

doing was copying a Kinois practice common among civil servants, who are exempted from paying for public transport in Kinshasa. This rule was applicable on state-run public transport during the Mobutu era. In the early 2000s, however, this rule was informalized and extended. Today, even in privately run public transport, civil servants show their cards in the hope of not being charged. Bus drivers may at times accept the cards, at other times they do not. In any case, the latter are not compensated by the state. Having a similar-looking card, clever refugees tried to copy this practice.

It was only after several field visits to Kinshasa, and especially after visiting some of the Central African students who had returned to Bangui, that I understood that daily life in Kinshasa was teaching the CAR refugee-students to be men. In fact, they tried to make the best out of their flight and refuge in Kinshasa; and instead of navigating towards a state of waithood (Honwana 2012) and stagnation, they imagined for themselves a development in the direction of a better future (Martin, Ungruhe, and Häberlein 2016). Not only had the journey from Bangui been a transition from citizen to refugee, but living in Kinshasa turned out to be a journey into adulthood. In this sense, Kinshasa was a site of hoping, of dreaming, and of becoming. It is to the latter that I will now turn.

5) Adulthood

> Moreover, neither the individual nor society are independent of nature, or of the universe, which is also subjected to rhythms that have repercussions on human life. In the universe too, there are stages and moments of passage, forward steps and stages of relative standstill, of suspension. (Van Gennep 1909, 4)[266]

In *Les Rites de passage*, Van Gennep describes how societies all around the globe have important rites to mark the entry into adulthood. For women, this passage is often related to marriage and giving birth. For men, he argues, the *rite de passage* that marks the passage from one 'situation' to another (1909, 4), from the status of youth to that of adulthood, can be subdivided into three stages: rites of separation, *rites de marge* (rites of transition), and rites of re-aggregation or incorporation. Even though one can argue that Gennep's book is outdated, and taking into account that one has to

[266] *En outre, ni l'individu, ni la société ne sont indépendants de la nature, de l'univers, lequel est lui aussi soumis à des rythmes qui ont leur contre-coup sur la vie humaine. Dans l'univers aussi, il y a des étapes et des moments de passage, des marches en avant et des stades d'arrêt relatif, de suspension.*

read it through a lens that is compatible with early 20th-century thinking,[267] some of the arguments Van Gennep made in 1909 continue to be insightful.

Writing about the secret societies from the Congo all up along the Gulf of Guinea, societies which Van Gennep never visited, he explains the stages of the *rites de passage* as follows: In the first stage, the individual is separated from his interior environment and brought to the forest, where he resides cut off from society. The second stage stands for a kind of death, where the food and the language are different from what the individual was previously accustomed to. Finally comes the third stage, the rites of reintegration into the world the individual initially left (Van Gennep 1909, 115–17).

Almost six decades after Van Gennep's book was first published in French, at around the time of the appearance of its English translation, Turner published an article entitled 'Betwixt and between: The liminal period in rites de passage' (V. Turner 1967). Basing himself on Van Gennep, Turner gets to the core of the second phase of Van Gennep's *rites de passage*: liminality. The liminal period is characterized by ambiguity. Turner argues that the individual who exists in this paradoxical category is a not-boy-not-man, but a transitional being who is invisible in his society (V. Turner 1967, 95). Moreover, during liminality, individuals are divested of their previous habits of thought and feeling and are encouraged to think about their society, their cosmos, and the powers that generate and sustain them. Liminality can be described as a stage of reflection (V. Turner 1967, 105).

The idea of death and rebirth characteristic of the *rite de passage* is interesting because it resonates with how the students describe their journey from Bangui to Kinshasa, as well as with the hardships they surmounted as refugees in the city. They had partly died, as citizens of CAR and as children of their households, to integrate into the forest. Van Gennep's description of the forest, where the food and language are different, resonates with Kinshasa's urban jungle, where the food is not the fresh food of Bangui and where the language is not Sango but Lingala. The Central African students 'died' to become refugees in a faraway land. Theirs was a journey into refugee status (Innes 2016). Can we then consider refuge as a liminal period and the refugee as a liminal figure? Just like liminality, refuge is defined by ambiguity and paradoxes. It is indeed a period where the students have to adapt to ways that are foreign to them, such as the street-wise skills needed in order to survive in Kinshasa. It is equally a period of reflection, because frustration often encourages the individual to review his life.

[267] Van Gennep employs the then dominant colonial discourse, whereby different groups are classified on an evolutionary scale. For instance, he writes about the 'semi-civilized' to describe different African groups, differentiates between the German and English Massai, and is fairly belittling towards women.

In the last decade, scholars seem to have picked up again the discussion on liminality (Thomassen 2016). In relation to Africa, important contributions include Honwana's concept of 'waithood' (2012) and Sommers' description of Rwandese youth as being 'stuck' (2012). Both refer to Van Gennep and Turner, and both refer to the period between youth and adulthood and stress the impossibility of entering the latter—in other words, the third stage of the ritual of passage, that of reintegration, is never concluded. I do not wish to argue against these scholars, though I do agree with the criticism that terms such as waithood strongly imply passive waiting, which is often not applicable (Martin, Ungruhe, and Häberlein 2016; Oldenburg 2016).[268]

There is a link between waithood (temporal) and the feeling of being stuck (spatial) that many refugees experienced in Kinshasa and which they acted upon. The trajectory of each student is contingent on the contexts they navigate, the relations they build up, and their personal backgrounds. Each student took different decisions and traced their trajectories in unique ways. In the previous chapter, we saw how some decided to stay in Kinshasa, others returned to their home country, and yet others took their chances elsewhere. It seems therefore that liminality means something different for each one of the students, or rather, that each one of them emerged from liminality in quite different ways.

What is interesting about Van Gennep's period of *marge* and Turner's liminality is the focus on the processual character of the rites of passage: liminality is a transition, not a state—and thus it takes time. Because the process differs per individual, one cannot pretend that all individuals go through these stages in the same manner. These decisions, or periods of choice, are best understood as vital conjunctures, which Johnson-Hanks defines as socially structured zones of possibility that emerge around specific periods of potential transformation in a life (Johnson-Hanks 2002, 871). Major life events are construed as vital conjunctures and are characterized by the 'experience of future orientation, extreme uncertainty, and the potential—but not guarantee—of radical transformation' (ibid.). Thus, vital conjunctures add individuality to liminality. Langevang returns the processual character to the vital conjunctures, as they do not entail so much moments in time but rather periods; she even observes that 'some conjunctures never seem to come to an end' (Langevang 2008, 2046).

[268] A close reading of Honwana's book, however, brings to the fore the fact that waithood does not imply passivity, as in the following passage: 'Amid the myriad difficulties that they confront every day, young Africans find opportunities for creativity as they fend for themselves. They are not sitting at home and crying over their sorrow; they are struggling to survive and even succeed as best they can.' (Honwana 2012, 59)

Transformation or growth 'well expresses how many peoples think of transition rites' (V. Turner 1967, 101). This growth is not necessarily visible; or, as Turner writes:

> The arcane knowledge or '*gnosis*' obtained in the liminal period is felt to change the inmost nature of the neophyte, impressing him, as a seal impresses wax, with the characteristics of his new state. It is not a mere acquisition of knowledge, but a change in being. (V. Turner 1967, 102)

In August 2016, I met Max and Tezman in Bangui. Max had already been back for two years, while Tezman had recently returned from Brazzaville. As we were sitting on the veranda of his house, sharing a meal and memories of Kinshasa and stories of our journeys, Tezman told me he now understood the meaning of work and the importance of earning his own income. He had taken up a job as a security guard in a private firm (two years later he was still working there and had enrolled at a private institute where he was studying management). Before fleeing Bangui, Tezman would thoughtlessly and carelessly depend on his parents, but the journey to Kinshasa, Brazzaville, and back had transformed him. For Tezman, his 'adventure' in Congo carried the aura of an initiation rite (Bredeloup 2008, 298), one through which, by going through the school of exile, he was personally transformed into a responsible man (Newell 2012, 192).

The refugees have managed to turn Kinshasa into a school of life, as they would often say, a site where the rite of passage into manhood takes place. However, it is not arriving in Kinshasa that has propelled Euloge and Le Firmin into adulthood; it is rather the process of navigating refuge and surviving the city that forms an individual rite of passage. 'Rather than a clear trajectory toward adulthood, there are multiple, variable, and often hidden paths' (Johnson-Hanks 2002, 868). Liminality offers

> a certain freedom to juggle with the factors of existence … But this liberty has fairly narrow limits. The neophytes return to secular society with more alert faculties perhaps and enhanced knowledge of how things work, but they have to become once more subject to custom and law. (V. Turner 1967, 106)

Is this why some refugee-students preferred staying away? In order to avoid subjection? In the following two chapters, I will attempt to provide an answer to these two questions.