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

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Chapter VII. Engagement and everyday politics

1) Introduction

This chapter deals with engagement, beyond self-growth, engagement that spreads out to society in general, and in particular the CAR university students in Bangui and the CAR community of refugees in Kinshasa. The engagement of the refugee-students touches upon official structures, the relation refugees have with these, and the ways they deal with them, sometimes embracing these structures, sometimes contouring them. This chapter illustrates political agency and being aware of this agency. In it I present the diverse and plural activities in which Euloge came to be involved, first in Bangui, then in Kinshasa. With time, I understood that the prolongation of Euloge's refuge in Kinshasa had different causes. In fact, he was not only worried about losing face, as discussed in Chapter V, but he was also fulfilling (partially) his personal ambitions with regards to politics and was therefore not ready to return home. Euloge was learning to juggle different balls and was very aware of doing so, and during my stay in Kinshasa I saw him grow politically. Euloge's, but also Le Firmin's, political awareness and engagement with their community did not stop abruptly with the 2013 events; on the contrary, these were adapted to fit a new environment, one in which they would grow.

2) Student leader turns refugee leader

When I was a kid, you see at school, every year the teacher gives an information sheet to fill in, and there are parts where they ask you if you know who you want to become as a grown-up? Sometimes I filled in president, sometimes I filled in military; so that's the way it is. [smiles] It's weird, I remember it very well. (Euloge, Kinshasa, February 2015)²⁶⁹

a) Inspiration

Euloge was born into a wealthy family. His father being the director of the national communication office meant a man with a certain level of education, perhaps the right connections, but in any case a steady income and thus the possibility to maintain three households. Euloge's father was a man of status. Being the eleventh son to his father, but the first to his mother, formed Euloge. On the one hand, he was inspired by his father and may have felt the need to impress him, while on the other, he acted as the responsible older brother vis-à-vis his younger siblings.

²⁶⁹ *Quand j'étais petit, tu vois à l'école, chaque début d'année le professeur donne une fiche de renseignement, et il y a des parties où on demande savoir vous voulez devenir qui? Des fois je mets président, des fois je mets militaire, donc c'est comme ça. [smiles] C'est bizarre, moi je me souviens très bien.*

Euloge seldom spoke about his mother, but he often spoke about his father. He seemed to have a special bond with him. He admired—and still admires—him. The love was mutual; Euloge was his father's confidante and as an adolescent often accompanied him on his trips. He recounts, for instance, how they used to visit a hunter in Mongoumba²⁷⁰ on the weekends, from whom they would buy dried bush meat, a delicacy. In Mongoumba, they used to sleep in Bokassa's former riverside villa. The food was delicious, the fish fresh from the river. This is how Euloge discovered many corners of his country and, during the long hours on the road, was introduced to politics.

Euloge's parental house is situated in a closed compound on the border between Sica II and Sica III. It was not spared during the heavy fighting of 2013/2014, with bullet marks now acting as silent witnesses. In the living room hangs a photograph of his late father. Out of all the children, Euloge is the one who most resembles his father, I was told. When I finally visited the house in 2016, the similarity between the two men indeed struck me. It was not only the physical traits; they were said to have a similar personality. Euloge's father was a quiet man, yet he knew how to bring people together to talk. According to Euloge, his father was loved by many, yet not by all—he died suddenly, poisoned, Euloge assured me. He must have had competitors; in politics, jealousy is never far away. Perhaps this is why in Kinshasa, many years later, Euloge would seldom eat outside the house.

After the death of his father and having passed his baccalaureate exams, Euloge fell seriously ill. In order to take better care of him, the family decided that Euloge should live with one of his elder brothers and so he moved to his brother's house in Bimbo, on the southern outskirts of the city. This house was spacious, well-equipped, and walled. In it Euloge had all he needed: a personal bedroom, three meals a day, and peace and quiet. Euloge's brother had also set up a chicken coop and envisaged Euloge taking it over one day.²⁷¹

Even if thankful for the good intentions and the car his brother allowed him to use, living at his brother's house without leaving the compound wore Euloge down. In Bimbo, he felt imprisoned. Enrolling in chemistry at the University of Bangui helped him escape from the fraternal yoke. But, instead of fully moving back to the parental house closer downtown, Euloge moved partly onto the campus, where he had been granted a room that he shared with others. His brother was not

²⁷⁰ South of Bangui, on the Ubangi river, Mongoumba lies just in front of Libenge.

²⁷¹ During the crisis, when leaving the compound posed a problem, the family used to eat chicken every day at first. When the situation turned really dire, they switched to eating the maize they used to feed the chickens with.

impressed by his decision—even less so when Euloge joined and became an active member of the national students' association.

The student association in Bangui advocates, on the one hand, for the intellectual and moral causes of the Central African students, by organizing public demonstrations, for example, while, on the other hand, it takes care of very practical student issues, such as the daily warm meals²⁷² subsidized by the government. The association consists of an executive board and several faculty boards. In order to take a decision, the former needs to consult the base and secure the approval of the faculty boards. Both Le Firmin and Euloge were members of the association. After being a class delegate for three years, Le Firmin was approached by the members of the association and was enlisted in the board of the Law Faculty. Euloge was the secretary of the executive board. In fact, it was here that Euloge and Le Firmin befriended one another and joined in the fight for a common cause.

When he joined the association, a new world opened in front of Euloge's eyes. He says that it is here that he was introduced to drinking; before that, he would rarely touch a bottle of beer. But drinking does not necessarily imply alcoholism; it can also be linked to access to certain (political) spheres (Van Wolputte and Fumanti 2010), and it is part of the world of the student association, very much like student associations elsewhere in the world. Euloge grew close to the association's president, whom he dearly admired. Like his father, the president was a source of inspiration, a *formateur*. Euloge recounts the sleepless nights they spent together talking about the future of their country, about leadership and CAR society.

As we saw before (Chapter V) and will pick up later, their activities as members of the students' association, how their actions were misinterpreted by the Seleka, and also internal rivalries forced/encouraged Euloge and Le Firmin to flee Bangui. But once in Kinshasa, Euloge did not stop his political engagement; on the contrary, his efforts on this front continued to grow. Euloge met a small, yet eloquent and refined man who went by the name of Afrique. In addition to his father and the president of the student association in Bangui, Papa Afrique became an important model for Euloge.

²⁷² *mouillé maillot*, a metaphor that stands for the queues students must join in order to receive a cheap meal (for 125 franc CFA, about \$0.22) at the university restaurant. One must be on time, but one must also fight for one's place in the queue. The pushing and shoving can become quite physical and cause one to perspire heavily—thus, *mouillé maillot* (wet t-shirt).

Papa Afrique is a Congolais from Brazzaville, a former partisan of the deposed Lissouba regime. During the civil war (1997–1999), Papa Afrique fled his country, crossing the river as many others did, and asked for asylum in Kinshasa, where he has been living as an urban refugee with his wife and children for almost twenty years.²⁷³ Papa Afrique used to be the president of the Congolese refugee community in Kinshasa and, like Euloge, he is until today an important and active spokesperson for his community. Refuge facilitated the first contact of these two men. They first met at the premises of the CNR and soon discovered that despite their differences in age and nationality—Papa Afrique is considerably older than Euloge—they shared a common goal: Euloge called it a *'souci pour la communauté'* (concern for the community). More seasoned and precise in his discourse, with the wisdom that comes with age, Papa Afrique refers to a *'quête d'épanouissement'* or a *'quête de dignité'*—in other words, a quest for personal growth and dignity.

Euloge is drawn to Papa Afrique because of his eloquence, his experience in refugee politics and, more importantly, his knowledge of the texts²⁷⁴ and his courage to speak out, or rather, to write. When asked about his sources of inspiration, Euloge explained:

I thought that the refugee had a limit, that he should only write to the UNHCR, to the CNR—period. He [Papa Afrique] sometimes writes to the prime minister; it is a very good example. (Interview Kinshasa, 16 February 2015)²⁷⁵

Papa Afrique is like dynamite in a small package, very pro-active. The elegant letters in which he deplores the suffering of the urban refugees are addressed to several representatives within the Congolese government, sometimes even to the president himself, and to the international community, such as the head of the UNHCR in Congo and personnel in the headquarters in Geneva (see for instance his letter 'The trivialization of suffering', which will be discussed under the Health Care section below). The sky is the limit, and such an attitude boosts Euloge's confidence no end. Like

²⁷³ Pascale Lissouba was ousted by Sassou Nguesso, who has been president of the Republic of Congo ever since. In 2016 he was re-elected for a third mandate, after amending the constitution the year before to allow him to present himself yet another time. He won with over 60% of the vote. But there has been brutal repression in the Pool area since.

²⁷⁴ These texts include the 1951 Refugee Convention and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as other legal texts pertaining to the refugees in DRC.

²⁷⁵ *Moi, je pensais que le réfugié a une limite, qu'il doit écrire seulement à l'HCR, à la CNR, point barre. Lui il écrit des fois au premier ministre, c'est un très bon exemple.*

Papa Afrique, he wants to air the frustrations of his community, to make their voices heard. Unfortunately, these elegant denunciations and pleadings usually fall on deaf ears.

b) Emplacement

Running away had a paradoxical effect on Euloge's political ambitions: it did not halt but rather strengthened his political endeavour. In Kinshasa, Euloge underwent the stressful living conditions of the CAR refugees in the city. He empathized with their suffering, which was part his as well. As an educated young man with a union past, Euloge was very aware that refugees had rights, as established in the Refugee Convention, and yet that these rights were oftentimes neglected. In his opinion, they needed to constitute themselves as an association in order to be heard. When I enquired how the association of CAR refugees in Kinshasa was born, Euloge replied:

When I went to the hospital, I saw that my brothers were suffering a lot. And when I went to the sites in Kimbanseke and Kingabwa, I saw my brothers suffering a lot too. I thought, well, the last source of strength of a refugee are the representatives of his community. I thought to myself: we need to set up an 'office' that will defend each refugee if they have a problem. That's when I called for a meeting, I invited everyone around a table; they saw that it was good to send a request to the UNHCR or the CNR, they took note, so this election took place on 25 January. (Interview Euloge, Kinshasa, 23 May 2014)²⁷⁶

On 25 January 2014 (Appendix III), the Central African bureau for refugees came into being with the CNR's and HCR's approval. In fact, Euloge had done what his father would have done in the past: he 'reassembled' people, brought them together. Euloge was voted secretary. The president was an older man, who by the time I came to Kinshasa, only a couple of months after the establishment of the bureau, had already been sacked for embezzlement.²⁷⁷ The vice-president was an older woman,

²⁷⁶ *Quand je suis allé à l'hôpital, j'ai vu que mes frères souffraient beaucoup. Et quand je suis allé sur les sites à Kimbanseke et à Kingabwa je voyais mes frères souffrir beaucoup. Je me suis dit, bon, la dernière force d'un réfugié c'est le bureau de sa communauté. Je me suis dit, il faut mettre en place un bureau qui va quand même défendre chaque réfugié, s'il a un problème. C'est à partir de là que j'ai convoqué une réunion, j'ai appelé tout le monde au tour d'une table, ils ont vu que c'est bon adresser une demande à l'HCR ou à la CNR, ils ont pris acte, alors cette élection avait eu lieu le 25 janvier dernier.*

²⁷⁷ He had embezzled money that the new interim president, Mrs Catherine Samba-Panza, had offered to the Central African refugee women and students in Kinshasa.

who suffered from breast cancer and, until the day she passed away, did not receive proper treatment.²⁷⁸ As a secretary, Euloge became de facto the head of the association.

Euloge (re)created in Kinshasa a position similar to the one he held in Bangui and committed himself more seriously to his cause: the pursuit of the students' well-being became the pursuit of the well-being of his fellow countrymen and countrywomen. Euloge transposed, as such, the morphology of the network in which he had navigated in Bangui and successfully filled it with new people in Kinshasa. New experiences were added to past insights, and Euloge was able to develop his own ideology. In this sense, fleeing is not synonymous with rupture but rather with continuity and even, contrary to Papa Afrique's assertions, self-growth. In Kinshasa, Euloge's political know-how and position in the eyes of the other CAR refugees grew. Following Vigh and Bjarnesen, one could say that, for Euloge, displacement from Bangui resulted in emplacement in Kinshasa. The dialectics of displacement and emplacement are mutually constitutive processes and point to the ways in which people seek to move into place despite being forced out of it (Vigh and Bjarnesen 2016).

The two photographs in Figure 55 illustrate Euloge's emplacement. The left photograph was taken in August 2012, when Euloge was at the student association in Bangui. The right photograph was taken precisely two years later, during a handball game that brought together many CAR supporters, both refugees and migrants, to cheer for their team. In both cases, Euloge stands on the left. Notice the similarity in his pose. Nevertheless, in the 2014 picture he radiates less stiffness and more self-confidence. Without losing any of his elegance, in two years Euloge had become a man of the world and found his own way of doing politics.

²⁷⁸ She passed away from cancer a couple of months after I left the field in 2015.



Figure 55 Student leader turns refugee leader
 (Left) Euloge in Bangui (2012), courtesy of Euloge. (Right) Euloge in Kinshasa (2014), photograph taken by the author

In Chapter VI I discussed how Euloge was granted a motorbike. The motorbike not only facilitated his physical mobility but also brought him symbolic mobility; it turned him into a legitimate agent in his community. The short trips he took around the city turned him into a more effective and present community leader. Moving freely around the city confirmed his position as a leader of the CAR refugee community and thus ultimately helped him to further his political goals. Even if the motorbike was not a precondition for being a secretary of the refugee community, it was an enormous asset towards these ends. And even if it was expensive for him to run, Euloge was never keen on renting his motorbike out for public transportation, as some of his fellow countrymen did and as is often the case in Kinshasa. The motorbike facilitated his own tasks.

3) *Souci pour la communauté*

At the moment I have no activities, except for the concerns of the community. So, if there is a case involving a refugee, I go to solve it ... Then, these occupations aside, I am free, because I don't have a job yet. (Interview Euloge, Kinshasa, 2–3 February 2015)²⁷⁹

Intervening when there are misunderstandings between two camps—that is my role. (Interview Euloge, Kinshasa, 16 February 2015)²⁸⁰

²⁷⁹ *Pour le moment je n'exerce aucune activité, sauf les préoccupations de la communauté. Donc, s'il y a un cas pour un réfugié, je me déplace pour aller résoudre. ... Alors, en dehors de ces occupations je suis encore libre, car je n'ai pas encore un boulot.*

²⁸⁰ *Intervenir au moment où il y a des malentendus entre deux camps, c'est ça mon rôle.*

When I asked Euloge about his work, his role within the community, he responded that except for matters related to the community of CAR refugees, he was not doing any work. He spoke as if his community work was a hobby that sporadically took up part of his time. The image he gave (me), however, stands in stark contrast with the description of a man who has a lot of free time because he is unemployed. In fact, it was oftentimes difficult to get hold on Euloge. He ran errands and paid visits on a daily basis from one side of the city to the other. He knew the refugees' whereabouts, their occupations, and their worries. He listened carefully to their problems and often acted as an intermediary, writing letters to the CNR, pleading for medical treatment and protection. The established CAR refugee board, in which Euloge was the most active member, acted as a voice of the voiceless, to use Firmin's phrase.²⁸¹

Euloge's *souci pour la communauté*, was expressed in Kinshasa through four different pillars. In what follows, each of these pillars will be discussed separately. The first pillar touches upon questions of security and protection. It is related to the implicit and explicit recognition of the refugee status, the issuing of the refugee identity card and the, albeit almost unattainable, coveted refugee travel document (TVC).²⁸² The second pillar touches upon what Euloge terms 'the social' and is mainly linked to housing problems and the creation of income-generating activities (IGA). The third pillar relates to the health care of refugee-patients. If one of the refugees fell ill, Euloge would visit him or her at the hospital to ensure, when possible, that the patient in question was receiving the right treatment and support from ERUKIN. This pillar will be illustrated through two in-depth study cases of chronically ill refugees, whom Euloge followed closely. However, what touched Euloge most, also on a personal level, was the fact that refugee-students were hampered in their study trajectories. The last pillar, thus, is related to education—in particular, tertiary education. Education has been discussed extensively in the previous chapter and will not be dealt with hereunder.

a) Pillar I: Protection

The opening words (of the introductory note) of the Convention and Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees (UNHCR 2010) reads as follow:

Grounded in Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of human rights 1948, which recognizes the right of persons to seek asylum from persecution in other countries, the United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, adopted in 1951, is the centrepiece of international refugee protection today.

²⁸¹ Interview Le Firmin with Sjoerd

²⁸² Titre de Voyage Conventionnel

The emphasis of the definition of a refugee lies, first and foremost, on protection of persons from political or other forms of persecution in their own country (UNHCR 2010, 3). UNHCR's main task, therefore, is to act as a source of protection for refugees. This is also clearly represented in their logo: two hands protecting an individual, turning him/her into 'a vulnerable', an individual who is by definition perceived to be in a particularly weak position.

Protection leads to recognition. In other words, in order to receive protection as a refugee, the person in question needs to be defined and categorized as being a refugee—that is, to be officially recognized as a refugee. The 'definition' of a refugee will be discussed in the next chapter (VIII), and this categorization is, as we will see, political (Clark-Kazak 2011, 72). After being defined, recognition then implies operationalization, quantification, and hence a database. NGOs and humanitarian agencies are frequently associated with list-making—lists that potentially lead to a distribution of support in the future (Both et al. unpublished, 44). The creation of this database takes place, ideally, in the camps or, as we have seen in Chapter V, at the border in transitory camps. This was not always the case; in fact, refugee camps are a relatively new phenomenon (Grayson 2017). However, not all of the refugees described in this thesis went through and were 'processed' in such camps. Those who did not have encountered difficulties in being recognized as urban refugees in Kinshasa. There are, nevertheless, always exceptions to the rule—exceptions the refugees base their hopes on.

The refugee ID

Far from being a given, formal recognition and its concrete expression—providing the refugees with refugee attestation IDs—is a hotly debated issue. Being, or rather not being, on a list that potentially leads to a distribution of support is the source of a lot of stress and distress among CAR students and refugees in Kinshasa. At the time of research, many of the urban refugees in Kinshasa were not (yet) formally recognized—that is, they did not possess refugee documents. Others were granted cards, but they worried because these cards would soon expire with no notice of renewal. And there were also refugees holding cards who did not appear in the database.

Such was the case of Mrs D. A mother of two children, and seven months pregnant, she went to the UNHCR premises in Kinshasa in order to ask for voluntary repatriation to the Mole refugee camp. On that day, she was accompanied by Euloge to explain her case. Even though it is the CNR's responsibility to distribute these cards, I was assured by a senior protection officer that they, the UNHCR, physically printed out the cards. I was even shown the printer from which the cards are

issued.²⁸³ This is not surprising; in fact, the CNR often lacked the ink to print their own documents. In any case, the name of Mrs D. did not appear in the UNHCR database. After some surprise and commotion, Euloge and she were taken out by force by two security agents. In the process, Euloge's watch was broken. But more than his watch it was the lack of respect that infuriated him. He wrote a letter to the UNCHR, filing a complaint about their rudeness. In particular, he could not come to terms with a documented refugee who did not appear in the database. What would that mean in terms of protection, he rhetorically asked himself:

Let's say she's arrested somewhere. We pick up the phone, we call the UNHCR: Do you recognize this name? They go through their database, her name doesn't exist in it. They say no, meanwhile she is a refugee ... It becomes a problem. Let them tell me here that I'm wrong! My question makes sense: someone holds a [refugee] card, but her name does not exist in the database. (Kinshasa, Conversation 5 February 2015)²⁸⁴



Figure 56 The refugee card
Mrs D. showing her valid refugee ID at the UNHCR premises in Kinshasa. 3 February 2015, Courtesy of Euloge. (See Appendix IV)

²⁸³ During an interview I held with the protection officer on 9 February 2015

²⁸⁴ *Admettons qu'elle est arrêtée quelque part, on prend le téléphone, on appelle le HCR, vous reconnaissez tel nom, on vérifie dans la base de données, son nom n'existe pas, on dit 'non', alors qu'elle est réfugiée. ... Ça devient un problème. Qu'on me dise ici j'ai tort ! Ma question a un sens, quelqu'un est détenteur d'une carte, mais son nom n'existe pas dans la base de données.*

In the eyes of several urban refugees, protection not only relates to protection in the country of origin but also is extended to protection in the host country. It includes, for instance, protection from xenophobic attacks (such as those experienced in mid-2014 after the Mbata ya Bakolo operation in Congo-Brazzaville, or in January 2015 during the demonstrations in Kinshasa against a backdrop of rising political insecurity), but also protection by, and ironically also from, the Congolese state services. A recurrent example is that of the Congolese traffic policemen who, looking for possible infractions (and a little revenue), often try to extort money from passers-by. Not carrying a valid ID counts as an infraction, as does not wearing a helmet, or riding a motorbike after dusk. This applies to both refugees and Congolese citizens. However, if refugees are caught without documentation, their foreignness places them in a more vulnerable position.

Regarding myself, I do not see how the UNHCR protects me as such. We were arrested, we had our own discussion, we took out a little money to negotiate with the soldiers, to free ourselves. So finding our own means always, no protection. (JN 31 January 2015)²⁸⁵

What would happen if Mrs D., after being stopped for a minor infraction, was not found in the list of names in the refugee database? Would she be protected? CAR refugees in Brazzaville would not even dare to buy bread around the corner without carrying their ID on them, owing to the fear of being imprisoned if they could not show their identity when asked for it.²⁸⁶ Clark-Kazak describes a similar situation for Congolese refugees in Kampala who, without a refugee ID card, are vulnerable to arrest in random police and revenue service checks (2011, 76).

Protection can also touch upon undesirable situations such as theft:

... yesterday a refugee was robbed, everything was taken away, clothes and all that. He sleeps almost 20 kilometres away [from here]. I went to the police yesterday, make inquiries, write complaints. (Interview Euloge, Kinshasa, 5 February 2015)²⁸⁷

In the urban jungle, where the rule of the strongest rules, where individuals are supposed to outwit their neighbours, theft from CAR refugees has been reported in several instances—in some cases

²⁸⁵ *Je ne vois pas la protection de l'HCR en tant que tel avec moi. On nous a arrêté, nous mêmes on fait les débats, on a sorti un peu de sous pour négocier avec les soldats, pour nous libérer. Donc trouver notre moyen toujours, pas de protection.*

²⁸⁶ Fieldwork notes

²⁸⁷ *... hier un réfugié a été victime d'un vol, on lui a tout ramassé, les habits et tout ça. Il dort presque à vingt km, je suis allé hier à la police, faire des démarches, écrire des plaintes*

organized with the collaboration of the police. This was the case in Kimbanseke, described above, but also at *La maison blanche* in Kingabwa, where the refugees were not monitored despite having received threats. They fell prey more than once to petty thieves and *kuluna*. In any case, Euloge considers it as his work to record these types of situations (also visually—see Figure 57) in order to file complaints by writing official letters.



Figure 57 Theft and its leftovers
Kinshasa 4 February 2015, Courtesy of Euloge

The list of fifty

Euloge, Le Firmin, and others often mentioned and referred to an infamous list of the fifty urban refugees eligible for support from the UNHCR. The list came into being after the refugees were forced to leave Kimbanseke. They would repeatedly express their concerns about whose names would get to be on the list, or what would happen with this list (Both et al. unpublished, 44). The fact is that among the urban refugees, there were some who did get support, in the form of the *garantie locative* and income-generating activities (IGA or AGR in French)—such as Euloge and partly Le Firmin—while others did not. A senior UNHCR protection officer underlined that each refugee has very different needs; there is no one-size-fits-all solution, and therefore each case is decided on an individual basis.²⁸⁸ This is what Euloge and the others would refer to as '*le cas particulier ou individuel*'—a roulette wheel that randomly benefited the lucky few while excluding most refugees from assistance. In order to access the wheel, the refugees needed to write convincing letters

²⁸⁸ It must be noted that this individual case approach stands in stark contrast to the encampment policy.

pleading for help because of their dire situation (see Appendix I). However, it was never clear to the refugees how the UNHCR would make the decisions with regards to eligibility. The protection officer admitted that, despite their efforts at communication, there were many rumours circulating. When asked about the ‘list of fifty’—the one that came about after the refugees were forced to leave the house in Kimbanseke (as we saw in Chapter V)—the protection officer denied the existence of such a list. It seems that, even if unintentional, opacity is omnipresent.

Miscommunication and opacity lead to mistrust. On the one hand, the refugees expected the UNHCR to recognize their sorrow and suffering—Le Firmin often suggested the UNHCR should visit the refugees to see how they lived, what they ate, where they slept, and so on—expectations that the UNHCR did not live up to. On the other hand, urban refugees were particularly apprehensive of sharing information about why they were refugees, fearing being tricked and getting cheated. This mistrust would even colour the relationship I had with many of the CAR refugees, at least in the beginning, as several among them thought I was a spy for the UNHCR. Someone to perhaps double-check contradictory stories? Why would I otherwise ask the same questions (and permission to record and film them) that they were asked by UNHCR/CNR agents upon arrival?

Their mistrust was revelatory of a fear summarized in a phrase I often heard from the refugees’ mouths: *‘Être réfugié c’est un marché’* (Being a refugee is a business). The rumour went that recorded stories of the CAR refugees were being ‘stolen’ (and even ‘sold’) to be used by Congolese employees in order to send their acquaintances abroad, who, with this valuable information in their hands, could present themselves as CAR citizens in the context of resettlement to a third country, often outside Africa. The Kinois, you see, Le Firmin once explained, *‘ils aiment trop voyager’* (they like to travel too much).²⁸⁹ The idea that someone is profiting from you and you are not receiving what is due to you is not uncommon to the region. In the case of northern CAR, Both et al. have observed that occasional visits that do not see any follow-up tend to cause anxiety about diverted aid and about being forgotten, while high expectations seem undiminished (Both et al. unpublished, 44). The same is true for CAR refugees in Kinshasa; they would not criticize the policies of the UNHCR *per se*, but rather its disengagement and lack of *suivi* or follow-up.

Resettling and the TVC

Protection and recognition are linked to questions of the very politicized and coveted practice of resettlement—that is, being sent to a third country for refuge, in many cases a country in the Northern hemisphere. This is not unique to Kinshasa, but has also been noted in other parts of Africa

²⁸⁹ See fieldwork notes, 3 June 2014.

(Grayson 2017). Some of the refugees awaited resettlement in vain, while others believed resettlement would be facilitated by their contacts in the CAR diaspora. Here again the experience of refugees from other countries in Bangui in the past played an important role in shaping ideas. Such was the case of Francis, who believed he was entitled to a TVC and voluntary resettlement. I met Francis during a handball match in July 2014. The national teams of CAR and DRC were playing against one another, and for this occasion many members of the CAR refugee and expatriate community had gathered around the sports field to support their team.

Francis is a big, tall, jovial and soft man in his early thirties. He has sported long Rastafarian dreadlocks since adolescence. Francis is the son of a *chef de quartier*, and prior to the conflict he was active in Bangui's car business (importing and leasing), going to the Douala harbour²⁹⁰ in Cameroon to pick up cars and drive them into CAR. Next to cars, Francis was a member, along with his father, of former president François Bozizé's Kwa Na Kwa (KNK) party. In the KNK he met a Muslim woman, whom he was dating when the crisis fell upon the country. Due to his involvement with the KNK, he fled Bangui. Francis fled into DR Congo and first found refuge in the Mole refugee camp, where he stayed for about a year. In the camp he acted as an intermediary between the refugees and the management of the camp. He said he had a particularly good relationship with the staff of the UNHCR office in Zongo, pictures on his mobile phone acting as a proof.

As the crisis endured, the refugees in the Mole camp were, according to Francis, encouraged to find relatives that would be able to support them 'anywhere in the world'. He decided to contact a brother who lives in France and who sent him all the necessary papers (a three-month valid invitation letter, proof of income, proof of housing) in order to start a visa application procedure at the Schengen House in Kinshasa. The only document still missing was the *Titre de Voyage Conventionnel* (TVC), the blue refugees' passport. Unable to ask for a visa in the north of the country, Francis planned his trip to Kinshasa well. He informed the UNHCR and the CNR about his departure, he said, and even printed out the documents, including the *feuille de route*,²⁹¹ at the UNHCR premises in Zongo! When everything was ready, Francis travelled to Gemena, where he took a plane to Kinshasa—not having to endure the long and tedious trip on the river was a relief.

In Kinshasa, Francis stayed in the one-room house of a cousin and his family (wife and two children); his cousin was a jeweller who worked in town every day. In the outside kitchen hung a huge poster of Bob Marley. When I met him, the invitation letter his brother in France sent him had just expired and

²⁹⁰ Being land-locked countries, CAR and Chad rely on Douala as an international harbour.

²⁹¹ An official letter stating he is permitted to leave the refugee camp and travel towards Kinshasa.

he was very frustrated: he smoked a lot, and besides waiting, he felt he had no occupation. He had written letters to the UNHCR and CNR pleading to speed up the procedure, and he had contacted the Voix des Sans Voix (VSV), a local NGO, famous because of its former head the late Floribert Chebeya.²⁹² It was all to no avail; like other refugees in Kinshasa, Francis felt stuck and his time wasted (Lucht 2012). He had no choice but to resign himself to his fate. The passport, a real *casse-tête* (headache), simply did not work out. A couple of months afterwards, defeated in a way, he crossed into Brazzaville; his cousin and family would soon follow him. I saw him the day before crossing, and since then we have kept in sporadic contact through Facebook. He seems to have found a job as a truck driver between Brazzaville and Pointe Noire—at least he is on the move.



Figure 58 Bob Marley on the outside kitchen wall

The plastic watering can is uncommon in Kinshasa, except perhaps in Muslim environments. In Bangui it is omnipresent, also outside Muslim contexts. (Photograph taken by the author, Kinshasa, 1 September 2014).

²⁹² A Congolese journalist who was murdered when investigating a politically sensitive case.

b) Pillar II : *Le social*



Figure 59 Funeral in Kitambo cemetery

The deceased was a woman, a member of the CAR refugee community, who had suffered from (untreated) breast cancer. Kinshasa, 29 November 2014 (photograph courtesy of Euloge)

The social aspect of refuge deals mainly with housing concerns (*garantie locative*) and some form of occupation (*IGA*). It can also touch upon social events such as marriages, births, and funerals, as well as the yearly celebration of International Refugee Day (20 June each year). As previously discussed in Chapter V, the first wave of refugees that began arriving in Kinshasa in mid-2013 were housed for a couple of months in a closed compound in the commune of Kimbanseke, on the outskirts of Kinshasa. After receiving a letter in November 2013 that encouraged them to return to the refugee camps in the north, the CAR refugees rejected this option. In the end, a dozen refugees who lived in Kimbanseke, two of them with their respective Congolese girlfriends and their babies, were housed in another walled compound in Kingabwa district. This neighbourhood lies closer to the city centre, but its swampy environment floods during every rainy season and is unnavigable—Kingabwa is colloquially referred to as Kinshasa’s Venice. The house where the refugees moved in came to be known as *La maison blanche* (lit. the White House), a place where they would gather to discuss heated issues and arrive at agreements.

After a couple of months, an expulsion notice forcing them to leave the White House fell upon their heads. The refugees found themselves again in limbo, not knowing whether to leave or to wait for the day of expulsion. I often heard from the urban refugees that those on the list of fifty were due to get housing assistance in the form of a *garantie locative*—that is, a sum of money that amounts to eight to ten months of rent. In Kinshasa, potential renters of a house need to pay up to eight to ten

months of rent in advance in order to move in—and oftentimes an additional 10 per cent of that amount to an intermediary or house broker. This sum of money is oftentimes used, by the owners, to invest in business, or just disappears, after which they try to look for a new renter who can come up with a similar amount. This does not lead to durable relationships between owners and renters; on the contrary, for those who do not own a house, constant moving is the order of the day, which adds to the daily allotment of distress that all inhabitants of Kinshasa, Kinshis and refugees alike, deal with in life.

Not all refugees had housing problems, however. There were those who could afford to rent comfortable houses; others who had received the *garantie locative* would pool resources in order to rent a more comfortable studio and put a little extra aside for the daily expenses; yet others would move in with family members and acquaintances, as in the case of Francis above; and others just managed by squatting or renting cheap rooms in unfinished houses with no facilities and no windows/doors, or by sleeping in Pentecostal churches when they were not holding services or prayer meetings. There was a group of 17 people—mainly, but not only, young men—who slept for months in the premises of the Lingwala district house, situated on a busy traffic artery leading to downtown, not far from the UNHCR and literally a couple of blocks away from the CNR. This *maison communale* would function during the day, while at night it was transformed into a dormitory in which the refugees laid their cardboard mattresses on a cold cement floor. There was indeed no policy for urban refugees; aside from opacity, improvisation was the order of the day.

Regarding the IGA, Euloge was among the lucky ones. In mid-2014 he was granted a motorbike by the UNHCR. Euloge was not the only one to receive a motorbike at that time; there were eight other CAR refugees who did too. Despite the challenges of not knowing the city well, nor speaking Lingala as a Kinshis, most of them used the motorbike as a *wewa*, in order to generate income. As we have seen before, Euloge refused to do so. Le Firmin, too, had filed a request; he wanted equipment in order to improve his photography skills and, of course, to attract more clients by offering more services (see Appendix I). Unfortunately for him, his application was never granted. Roulette-wheel rules apply here again.

c) Pillar III : Health care

The third pillar, health care, touches Euloge personally. Being chronically ill, Euloge was chosen to stay in Kinshasa with support from the UNHCR. Because he often attended the hospital, also for his own care, he soon grew acutely aware of the situation of his fellow patients and countrymen. Central African refugees, both urban and camp refugees, are assigned to be treated in the St. Joseph Hospital

in Limete (see Figure 26). Medical care is taken care of; however, the accompanying assistance in terms of food is often deficient. Health care of Kinshasa's refugees fell, in 2015, under the responsibility of ERUKIN. The implementation of this was, de facto, problematic. Patients are allocated a *per diem*, but these contributions often arrive too late or are incomplete. At times it is unclear where the (rest of) the *per diems* would go to. Late payments force sick refugees to consume medicine on empty stomachs, which can be detrimental for their recovery. Refugees would often receive the correct medicine, but no money to buy food. How can a sick man take medicine on an empty stomach? Here again, Euloge's task was to document:

When I visit the sick, it is to collect all their difficulties. If there are no medicines, I call the UNHCR to intervene; if there is no food, I call the UNHCR. And if God gives me at least one peanut, I share it with them. (Sjoerd interviews Euloge, Kinshasa, 5 February 2015)²⁹³

Case I: 'Prendre le mal en patience, pendant que le mal n'est jamais patient'

Such was the case of Manou. After being evicted from Kimbanseke, he found a physically demanding job at the Bracongo, one of Kinshasa's breweries. He noticed there was something wrong in July 2014 but did not take care of it until his inguinal hernia became critical in December 2014. Manou then decided to ask for help at the CNR. The CNR sent him to ERUKIN; ERUKIN sent him to the UNHCR; and at the UNCHR he was sent away. A week later he knocked again at the door of the UNHCR. Le Firmin explains that they told Manou:

... to wait while he himself had an ailment that has no patience with him. And suddenly he fell in front of them and that's when they understood that the matter had become serious. They took him in the UNHCR vehicle to drive him to the hospital. (Focus Group, Kinshasa, 31 January 2015)²⁹⁴

After the surgery, Manou did not improve. Refugee-patients in the St. Joseph Hospital receive an allowance every ten days in order to pay for extra medication and food. This allowance amounts to \$50/ten days and is allocated by ERUKIN. Having spent two weeks in hospital, Manou should have received \$75, but he received only \$20. It was not the only time I heard of such practices: in some

²⁹³ *Quand je rends visite aux malades c'est pour récolter toutes leur difficultés. S'il n'y a pas les médicaments j'appelle à l'HCR pour intervenir, s'il n'y a pas le manger, j'appelle au HCR. Et si Dieu me donne au moins une graine d'arachide je partage avec eux.*

²⁹⁴ *... de patienter pendant que lui-même il avait un mal qui n'a pas de patience en lui et brusquement il est tombé devant eux et c'est là qu'ils ont compris que l'affaire est devenu sérieuse, on l'avait pris dans le véhicule de l'HCR pour l'emener dans l'hôpital.*

cases, patients would not be visited regularly; in other cases, they were forced to sign receipts that they had received the financial assistance, even if the amount did not match reality. Manou explains:

When he [ERUKIN employee] visits people, he does it in a disordered way. Those who do not even have the possibility to sign the paper for themselves, he will take their hand and have it signed by force. (Le Firmin interviews Manou, Kinshasa, 7 February 2015)²⁹⁵

Were it not for his wife, Manou would have starved. His fellow housemates, dealing with their own misery, could not come to help. He was released only to return to the hospital the week afterwards. Fortunately for him, he did get better after that, but was asked the impossible task to rest for a period of six months. Being a young father, this worried him a lot. Manou tried to look for assistance several times, but:

Even by writing, or by calling on the phone—nothing, no answer [on the UNHCR’s side]. (Le Firmin interviews Manou, Kinshasa, 7 February 2015)²⁹⁶

This is not the only time refugees highlight the way in which the humanitarian staff, supposed to take care of their well-being, were often unavailable. Also Francis, who was discussed above, tried to prove the unavailability of the UNHCR staff by taking out his mobile phone as we sat down to have a drink in a bar during a stroll. It was a Monday in the early afternoon, 2:45 p.m. to be precise, normal office hours. As Francis dialled the number of an UNHCR officer, he explained:

Wait, wait until it he picks up [phone rings four times]. This man, he’s the one who registered me in the Équateur [Province] [phone rings one more time], he was an assistant. [Francis hangs up and starts redialling] That’s what I hate about these people. You see they don’t take things seriously, you see, they don’t take things seriously, [the phone rings again, five times, no response]. When we leave the house again, we’ll insist on calling him, always. (Kinshasa, recorded conversation, 1 September 2014)²⁹⁷

²⁹⁵ *Quand il [assistant de l’Erukin] part pour aller visiter les gens, il fait ce qui est de desordonné. Celui qui n’a même pas la possibilité de signer le papier lui-même, il va prendre la main de celui-là et le fait signer par la force.*

²⁹⁶ *Même par écrit, même appel telephone, rien pas de réponse*

²⁹⁷ *Attends, attends que ça décroche [phone rings four times] lui là, c’est même lui qui m’a enregistré à l’Équateur [phone rings one more time] il était adjoint [Francis hangs up and starts redialling] c’est ce que je déteste avec ces gens-là, tu vois ils ne prennent pas trop en importance, tu vois un peu, prennent jamais trop en*

The urban refugees felt, repeatedly, abandoned by the humanitarian agencies and especially by the UNHCR. Le Firmin expressed his disbelief in discussions and in writing²⁹⁸ when he heard that the refugees were told time and time again by the UNCHR, CNR, and ERUKIN to '*Prendre le mal en patience*' (Bear misfortune with patience). It is one thing to take one's misfortune patiently, but quite another to support the pain of an *untreated* illness, such as Manou's (and his was not the only case), patiently. Le Firmin and other refugees would continuously wonder: How can one '*prendre le mal en patience*' when '*le mal lui-même n'est jamais patient*' (misfortune itself is never patient)?

Case II: La Maison des malades

Besides the hospital, there were two houses in Kinshasa where chronically ill and longer-term refugee-patients lived. Most of them had passed through the camps and were referred to Kinshasa for further medical treatment. At the time of research, the houses were run by ERUKIN. One of the two houses is found in the lively and fairly central neighbourhood of Matonge. The house is inhabited by refugees from different communities, including the Central African community. The atmosphere in this house is ambivalent. On the one hand, it is reasonably well-appointed: there is more comfort than in the hospital, it is comfortable and secure, well-located, and so on; on the other hand, in addition to the comforts, the atmosphere is grim. The refugees are not in good health and feel abandoned. Being unable to work makes them even more dependent and hampers their possibility to buy adequate food to follow strict diets.²⁹⁹

Ruby (26) came to Kinshasa looking for medical treatment for her four-year-old son Eliezer. Eliezer had a tumour bulging from his eye, could not be cured, and sadly passed away. Annie too was evacuated from Boyabu to Kinshasa for the medical care of her daughter, who suffered from an eye tumour. They were later followed by her husband, who had been poisoned by a friend in the camp.³⁰⁰ When I met them, the firstborn had passed away, but they still carried a baby girl in their arms; the baby suffered from the same illness as her late sister and was following treatment. Two

importance [the phone rings again, five times, no response] même si on part à la maison, on va insister de l'appeler toujours.

²⁹⁸ For instance during the focus group on 31 January 2015, or in his notebook (n.d.) '*C'est malheureux la situation des réfugiés centrafricains à Kinshasa*'

²⁹⁹ Oscar explained he received \$70/month for his personal needs, including food. Unfortunately, this amount in Kinshasa is not enough to follow a healthy diet, especially one with fresh vegetables and fruits. Fresh meat—not the third-quality, deep-frozen meat from around the world that is stored in *chambres froides*—is also beyond the budget of a majority of Kinshais.

³⁰⁰ Visit to the home of the sick, Group interview 31 January 2015

other men, one from CAR and the other from Congo-Brazzaville, were losing their sight. Other patients were cured and sent back to the camps. There was, for instance, an elderly man who was evacuated to have his leg amputated. Patients slowly replaced one another, turning the house of the sick into a place to share stories, exchange points of view, and lament their refugee status and current state of affairs.



Figure 60 Local wheelchair

Gift to one of the CAR refugee-patients. I always wondered if he was able to take it along with him on the small humanitarian porters. Kinshasa, Maison des maladies (Photograph taken by the author on 22 November 2014).

Because of its centrality, the house of Matonge became a meeting point for the refugee community. Paradoxically, the refugees living in it still felt disconnected from the world, despite all the stories shared. They lamented, for instance, not having a TV or a radio. Being surrounded by too much illness, even if treated to a certain extent, must have worn them down, a feeling which was then translated into a feeling of disconnection. Nevertheless, Euloge would visit this house up to four times a week to see his friend Oscar and the others. Oscar suffers from a congenital heart disease; he was a cardiopathic patient before the crisis hit his country. Like Euloge, Oscar fled the Central African Republic in April 2013, leaving his family of a wife and three children behind. He remembers the day he had to run away, after his district had been attacked:

My disease changed in magnitude after these events, because I was forbidden to carry out physical effort. But during the events I had run more than 12 km and arrived at the riverside, because I couldn't continue, and the rebels were behind us, arrived at the riverside there were no canoes, there was no way for me to cross over, I was forced to dive in the water, I tried to swim and I clung to a rock that was a few metres in the middle of the river. By the time I got there, the rebels were already on the riverbank, they started shooting and they even shot someone who was there with us, we were swimming together, after that I had a fit and I found myself in DR Congo in a centre. (Interview Oscar, Kinshasa, 30 August 2014)³⁰¹

Because of his poor health, Oscar was soon transferred from Zongo to Kinshasa. During his stay in the city, Oscar was hospitalized many times—twelve in total, six of which included resuscitation with oxygen. Whenever he felt a heart attack coming on, he would call ERUKIN and ask to be taken to hospital. The vehicle at ERUKIN's disposal was multi-purpose and also served as an ambulance (see Figure 61). If ERUKIN's vehicle was available, he would be picked up at home and dropped off at the hospital; on other occasions he was less lucky and, since he could not afford a taxi, was forced to resort to public transport—managing as best he could, ailing, gasping for air, close to passing out.³⁰²

³⁰¹ *La maladie a changé d'ampleur après ces événements, parce qu'on m'avait interdit de faire les efforts physiques. Mais pendant les événements j'avais parcouru plus de 12 km en courant et arrivé au bord du fleuve, parce que je ne pouvais pas continuer, et les rebelles étaient derrière nous, arrivé au bord du fleuve il n'y a vait pas de pirogues, il n'y avait pas de moyen pour moi de traverser, j'étais obligé de me plonger, au fleuve j'ai essayé de nager et je me suis accroché d'une roche qui était à quelques mètres au milieu du fleuve. Au moment où j'étais arrivé là, les rebelles étaient déjà sur le bord du fleuve, ils commencèrent à tirer et ils ont même tirer sur qui étaient avec nous, qu'on nageait ensemble, c'est au-delà que j'ai piqué un crise et je me suis retrouvé en RDC dans un centre.*

³⁰² Interview with Oscar, 30 August 2014



Figure 61 UNHCR vehicle
'PROPRIETE HCR SOUS USAGE DE ERUKIN' Kinshasa, 29 November 2014, Courtesy of Euloge

The physical pain the ill refugees had to endure was exacerbated by institutional neglect, as pointed out and reported over and over again by the refugee leaders. There are dozens of pictures in Euloge's smartphone that can attest to this, as well as letters and reports written by the refugees. The report written by the Collective of urban refugees in Kinshasa (i.e. by the representatives of the different refugee communities, such as CAR, Congo-Brazzaville, Uganda, Rwanda, and others) is a case in point. The report dates from 11 November 2014 and is entitled:

**Medical insecurity among the urban refugees in Kinshasa
resulting from the trivialization of the suffering of illness**

EXPLANATORY NOTE TO

THE REGIONAL REPRESENTATIVE OF THE UNHCR

Regarding the '*véhicule ambulance*', for instance, the report states that refugee-patients often miss their doctors' appointments and laboratory tests, as they are scheduled to take place in the mornings

from 9 a.m. to 11 a.m., yet the ambulance leaves the ERUKIN premises only at 10 a.m. and hence does not arrive on time. In other cases, the vehicle is not always used for ambulance purposes and is at times not available at all.

Because the UNHCR/ERUKIN support would not provide Oscar with all his needs, he had to learn to fend for himself. During one of his hospitalizations, a Congolese lady taught Oscar how to thread beads and he became very dexterous at this. Soon he started making purses, keyrings, and tablecloths with welcoming texts for official visits at the CAR embassy or the UNHCR. One of his favourite patterns was his country's five-coloured flag.



Figure 62 Threading colours

Oscar threading a handbag in the colours of the CAR flag. Kinshasa, 30 August 2014, photograph taken by the author

Oscar would sell purses to fellow churchgoers and offer tablecloths to members of international delegations paying visits to the refugee community in Kinshasa, in the hope of attracting attention to the suffering of the refugees. But he could not hope to eke out a living from this activity. Life in Kinshasa was hard, even though Oscar seemed to manage and spoke fluent Lingala. He had hoped for heart surgery outside Africa, but all he received were sedatives and, in his eyes, inadequate medical care. He could not tolerate the agencies' inconsistency and neglect, as well as the doubts the humanitarian staff had about his 'supposed' illness. They did not believe Oscar. I wonder if it is

possible to feign hospitalization, not once but 12 times? Or resuscitation up to six times? Can one feign one's heart beating?

The daily experiences and complaints of the ill refugees stand in stark contrast with the medical treatment expatriates and, in this case, UNHCR staff have access to. The first time I entered the UNHCR premises in Kinshasa, I briefly met the head for Gender Violation Issues who had recently had a car accident with one of the many *esprit de mort*.³⁰³ I must have seen her for a couple of seconds, enough to exchange some words, to thank her for putting me in contact with the communication office.³⁰⁴ She seemed a nice lady, pretty, energetic, my age; she was wearing one of those thick white cushion bands people wear to protect their necks. She told me she was travelling to Europe for treatment. I do not know who paid for it, perhaps her own insurance, or perhaps it falls under UNHCR's terms of risk coverage—being flown back in case of calamity. I cannot help but compare her case with Oscar's. On the one hand, there is the immediate response to her accident, the swiftness of the decision taken (she needs good treatment asap) as well as the ease with which she flies across borders, almost neglecting them (implying possession of the right type of passport). On the other hand, there is the tedious and endless waiting Oscar has to endure (for more than a year) in order to get the medical care that could save his life.

My purpose is not to criticize the humanitarian staff but, in line with Louisa Lombard, rather to point at the 'foundation of immense inequality' on which humanitarian practices rest (2016, 168). In her book Lombard writes about DDR, underlining the difference in money allocations. She writes:

Moreover, there is a gross difference between what DDR participants would receive and what DDR staffers and leaders would receive, with the latter claiming the vast majority. This might seem like a cheap point. After all, it simply is the way of the world that expatriate staffers make orders of magnitude more money than 'local' or 'national' staff, who in turn make more than people benefiting from the projects [for whom these projects are designed in the first place—*my addition*]. (Lombard 2016, 168)

³⁰³ This is how the most common means of transport, the unregulated blue-and-yellow refurbished-to-fit-local-purposes 207 Mercedes buses, were called. *Esprit de mort* refers to their reckless drivers and the countless accidents they had. Kimbuta, the governor of Kinshasa, introduced his own transport enterprise—regulated, new, clean, and one had to pay upfront and was given a ticket instead of waiting for the *receveur* to collect. The buses were colloquially known as the *esprit de vie*.

³⁰⁴ In fact, she was very surprised that I was carrying out research on refugees, which she considered impossible without my having contacted the UNHCR. She expressed her disbelief in a personally addressed e-mail.

Researchers, too, do not escape these inequalities. In fact, they are in a position to enjoy the best of both worlds: authenticity, (some) comfort, and financial security. I did a large part of my research with a growing belly, but chose to return home (to Europe) for the birth of my son—pregnant CAR refugees in Kinshasa do not have that choice. Oscar could not be operated on in Kinshasa, as the hospitals were not equipped for this type of operation; neither could he be operated on outside the country, as there was no budget (and perhaps no willingness) to send him abroad.

These inequalities are exacerbated in a context such as that of the urban refugees in Kinshasa, which Catherine-Lune Grayson describes in her book on Somalian refugees in the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya. In a chapter entitled ‘A World in Movement’, she argues that refugees in refugee camps are not static, but that, on the contrary, refugees who had never left the camp were rather atypical. In fact, she continues, it is not only the camp that visits the world (to different degrees, from Nairobi to cities in the United States), but also the world that comes to the camp, through Internet and media, and through the presence of humanitarian staff and the occasional visit from dignitaries from all over the globe (Grayson 2017, 116).

Thus, while the world is accessible through others and the media, mobility is not necessarily higher for everyone. The refugees in Kinshasa have to deal with this inequality. Imagined paths reach far, but real movement is limited. Access to information and interaction with people from across the globe increases the refugees’ awareness of their own conditions and are a source of deep frustration and discontent (Grayson 2017, 117). Discouraged, Oscar reflected:

We have been through difficult times; we thought that the UNHCR here could boost our morale, but it is moral torture that we are undergoing here. (Interview with Oscar, Kinshasa, 30 August 2014)³⁰⁵

Physical pain added to moral torture became too much for Oscar. When he heard that his son in Bangui was not well, he opted for voluntary repatriation and returned to Bangui in spring 2015. He had already lost his first daughter during the conflict, after he fled, and was unwilling to lose yet another child. Oscar went back to his family and his two children. I visited him a year later in Bangui in August 2016. He was happy to show me his neighbourhood and house. Oscar seemed in good health, surrounded by his family; he commended his decision to return to his home country,

³⁰⁵ *Nous avons traversé des moments difficiles, nous pensions que l’HCR ici pouvait nous ramener le morale, mais c’est la torture moral qu’on est en train de souffrir ici.*

because, as I heard repeatedly from almost every refugee, *'on n'est mieux que chez soi'* (there is no better place than home).

4) Formal and everyday politics

a) CAR Minister of Reconciliation's official visit to Kinshasa

In the last days of January 2015 a remarkable visit took place. An official CAR delegation, headed by the Minister of Reconciliation, travelled to Kinshasa to meet the Congolese Minister of the Interior.³⁰⁶ During this trip, an official encounter with the refugees was held in the amphitheatre of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The main purpose of this encounter, at least in the eyes of the refugees, was to express their grievances—to let their voices be heard.

The ceremony was attended by a considerable number of CAR refugees,³⁰⁷ both women and men of all ages. There were even a couple of children present. I knew many of the refugees, but certainly not all; in any case, it felt very familiar to be in this surrounding, and no one denied me access. The CAR refugees spread out in the amphitheatre; families sat upstairs, and the refugees' representatives, Euloge and the more well-spoken refugees, such as Le Firmin and Francis, chose seats in the front row. Le Firmin had given himself the task to control the door and hence the passage of who could walk in and out of the amphitheatre.

On the other side, on the elevated podium and behind a long wooden table, sat the official delegation, which consisted of the CAR Minister of Reconciliation and Political Dialogue; two Congolese vice-ministers (of Interior and Security, and of Congolese Foreigners); the CAR ambassador to DR Congo; the regional adjoint representative of the UNHCR; and a representative of the CNR.³⁰⁸ The purpose of the ceremony was stated as follows: 'A meeting between the Minister of Reconciliation and the CAR refugees living in Kinshasa in the presence of members of the Congolese government and the representative of the UNHCR.' After this introduction, the ceremony began with a song written by two hands, one Congolese and one CAR artist, and performed by Esatis. He was

³⁰⁶ The Ministry of Interior is responsible for all refugee matters.

³⁰⁷ There were about 130 refugees present, a number that does not come close to the alleged 500 urban refugees in Kinshasa at the time. Of course, those who were ill or hospitalized were not present. Many children were probably also missing.

³⁰⁸ *Excellence, Madame la Ministre Reconciliation nationale de dialogue politique et de la promotion de la culture Siriri de la RCA; Excellence, Madame la vice-ministre de l'intérieur et Sécurité de la RDC; Excellence, Monsieur le vice-ministre des Congolais étrangers de la RDC; Excellence, Monsieur l'ambassadeur de la RCA; Monsieur le Représentant regional adjoint de l'HCR; Madame, secretaire de la CNR.*

holding a microphone in one hand and a little laptop in the other hand for the rhythm which could impossibly fill the room. The song was entitled '*Plaidoyer du peuple Centrafricain*' (Plea of the CAR People) (Esatis Le Bon 2015).³⁰⁹

Ala ma nga toto, ba ngoule ti è si ma

Ala ba nga passi so eyeke ba nga si ma

Ala ngbounga li na ndo Beafrika si ma

Ala pensèe nga na acentrafricain si ma

I yeke ba ala

I yeke ma ala

I yeke kou ala

I yeke hounda ala na siriri

Listen to our cries, at least look at our tears

Consider at least our suffering

Think at least about the future of CAR

Think at least of the people in CAR

We are looking at you

We are listening to you

We are waiting for you

We are asking you for peace

³⁰⁹ Fieldwork notes, 29 January 2015. It is interesting to note that as I asked Esatis to translate the song for me, he added a phrase in brackets to the fourth verse: 'Think at least of the people in CAR (who you swear to always protect).' By this small addition, Esatis voices his expectations: he expects the international community to listen to his pleas; yet he also voices his criticism, with a touch of disdain (through the use of 'always'), of the international community, the latter failing to think about CAR—at least in the eyes of Esatis.

After the opening, the Congolese vice-Minister of Interior spoke, followed by the CAR Minister of Reconciliation (both women). All in all, both ladies talked for about 15 minutes. The Congolese minister underlined the hospitable nature of her country, which has opened its doors to its neighbours in times of trouble. After expressing the pain she felt talking to her compatriots in terms of refugees instead of citizens, the CAR minister underlined that the purpose of her mission was to enforce the second phase of the three-phased project that leads to the true reconciliation of the country. The three phases are as follows :

- 1) The dissemination of the agreement on the cessation of hostilities, signed by the political-military groups
- 2) Grassroots popular consultation throughout the country and also in neighbouring countries, to gather the concerns and expectations of all CAR citizens as well as possible solutions for a genuine social cohesion and reconciliation
- 3) Identification of the representatives of the different entities outside the country

After her speech, the Reconciliation Minister stood up and presented the sum of one million Congolese francs to be distributed to the 500 urban refugees (including myself, as my name appeared on the attendance list—I kindly declined; the number also includes the refugees who were not physically present), urging the refugees to take it as a sign of love and solidarity on behalf of the president. One million among 500 people amounts to 2,000 FC per person, just over \$2. The minister was well aware that it would help the refugees for just one day. What she might not have considered is that the 2,000 FC barely covered the transportation costs from the *cit * to the Ministry of Exterior downtown and back.

To the surprise of many, however, after speaking, bringing out the money, and receiving the undeserved applause of the refugee public, the minister abruptly excused herself and together with the other representatives, Congolese vice-Ministers, HCR and CNR representatives included, left the hall. She had an important invitation to attend to and could not afford to arrive late. As they walked out of the amphitheatre, the atmosphere of the meeting changed. A team of three people was left with the refugees to note down the grievances and concerns. The language also changed from the more formal French to the informal Sango. Unfortunately, this team could not offer the refugees any answers, as many had hoped.

On the one hand, the refugees were satisfied with their audience with such important people and the fact that an official representation had come all the way from Bangui. On the other hand,

however, they regretted that their voices had not been heard and hoped that the document they had prepared for the occasion would be read. Their satisfaction was less than full. Had the delegation not missed the purpose of their visit, I wondered? Had they not come to consult the people? What appointment could have been more important for the Reconciliation Minister than listening to the grievances of her own people? Le Firmin expressed his frustration in the following terms:

What I wanted to say in the presence of the Interior Minister, who was present, the Minister of Social Affairs, the UNHCR representative who was also present, and Mrs Berthe (with whom getting an appointment requires a battle, which often also leads to desertion), we wanted to say certain truths in their presence, which, unfortunately, I can say, was an organized disorder, so that we could no longer say certain things. (Focus Group, Kinshasa, 31 January 2015)³¹⁰

If I have taken space to describe this official meeting, it is because it tells us a great deal about how politics works. Formal high-level political processes undeniably shape the context in which the urban refugees in Kinshasa move. However, in line with Christina Clark-Kazak, rather than looking at politics from a conventional point of view—that is, as limited to the formal processes of governments—I am more interested in politics as practised by the decision-making individual (Clark-Kazak 2011, 15). In other words, instead of focusing on Politics with a capital ‘P’, I try to discover how politics with a lower-case ‘p’ finds its expression from day to day (Chabal 2009). Through this example, I am not looking at such ceremonies from the Ministry point of view, but rather what it might mean for a politically engaged individual such as Euloge. By doing so, I investigate the links that exist between the two: *Politics* and *politics*, and if and how practices from formal (governmental) politics penetrate into the practices of the informal politics of everyday life.

b) Language use: The power and hollowness of words

One of the first elements, regarding form, that catches one’s attention is the use of language. During the ceremony described above, every refugee was aware that the speeches, even if emotional, consisted of hollow words and empty promises. Yet everyone listened carefully to them and genuinely applauded when appropriate. It seems that even devoid of any real meaning, words continue to have a powerful effect on people. I often noticed Euloge employing the same type of

³¹⁰ *Ce que je voulais dire en présence du ministre de l’intérieur, qui était présent, du ministre des affaires sociales, du représentant de l’HCR qui était aussi présent, et Madame Berthe que pour la voir c’est toujours le parcours d’un combattant, qui aboutit souvent aussi à un abandon-là, on voulait dire certaines vérités dans leur présence, qui malheureusement, je peux dire, c’était un désordre organisé, qu’on ne peut plus dire certaines choses.*

speech: calm, dry, composed of mechanically fixed phrases and sayings. This type of speech contrasted like night and day with the sassy rumours he used to tell me off the record. Hereunder follow several examples of fixed phrases as pronounced by the ministers, in the one column, and by Euloge, in the second:

| Ministers (both CAR and Congo) | Euloge |
|---|---|
| | |
| The willingness of our Head of State to take all his daughters and sons back to CAR | You're better off at home |
| Our constant concern to integrate the human dimension into the numbers, because behind all this there is you, dear refugee sisters and brothers | We have our backs to the wall |
| I would like to present a support to our brothers, I know that it will serve you for ONE day, but it is a sign of love, a sign of solidarity | If God gives me at least ONE peanut, I will share with them |
| I kindly request you to comply with the texts and the law | I like that the texts are respected |
| May the fraternity between CAR and DRC live on | Facing challenges with others (neighbouring countries) |
| We have come to listen to you | I am a peace officer |
| We care about the other | Moral ulcers |

There is certainly a dissonance between the first and the second column. However, this dissonance is in terms of content, not in terms of form. In terms of the latter, there are clear overlaps: take for instance 'ONE day' and 'ONE peanut' to emphasize the willingness to make an effort.

c) Doing politics outside one's country

A second interesting parallel touches on the transnational nature of politics: doing politics across the border outside one's own country. Central African politics, also on a micro level, takes place not only within but especially outside national borders. It is as if crossing an international border fosters and amplifies political processes. Think for instance of all the successful coups d'état that have come from across the border (see Chapter IV).

Despite UNCHR's upheld policy of prohibiting refugees from engaging in political activities (Clark-Kazak 2011, 17), refugees' representatives, such as Euloge, are by definition political. In Kinshasa, he has grown to be well informed about the working of politics in general, and the working of his society in international contexts in particular, which makes him even more dedicated to becoming who he wants to become (De Bruijn and Wilson 2014). Refugee associations with a pronounced political character are not unique to Kinshasa (for other examples see Malkki 1995; Sommers 2001; S. Turner 2010; Clark-Kazak 2011). Euloge not only presents himself as a representative of the refugees, but on occasions such as the ceremony described above, he is treated as such. At the end, he was the one to receive the 1,000,000 FC, and it was he who was responsible for its distribution—a task he carefully documented by taking photos with his smartphone.

Being politically active outside his country expands Euloge's experience and leverage (i.e. base of people), which may become useful in the future. One can say that outside his country, Euloge builds up political capital by expanding his network far beyond the borders of the student community in Bangui, where he had been active before refuge. This capital became particularly palpable in our conversations after the minister's visit. Euloge was convinced he would be chosen to represent the CAR refugee community in Congo in the upcoming Bangui Forum:³¹¹

So I don't know what the future holds, but if I had gone back, if I had gone back, I wouldn't have been told today, well, you have to go to the dialogue, for example. If the dialogue takes place today, I will go to the dialogue. So you have to see all this, you have to see all this part. Destiny exists. (Interview Euloge, Kinshasa, 16 February 2015)³¹²

Unfortunately for Euloge, he was bypassed and ended up not assisting in the forum; somebody else had been sent. This is not the first time he was excluded from such an opportunity. The year before, the former president of the student's association had wanted to invite him to the 2014 Forum of Brazzaville, which he missed owing to lack of funding. The trip across the river, from Kinshasa to Brazzaville, had proven, ironically, too expensive. Even though Euloge cultivates a political competence and is recognized by many in his community, one should avoid romanticizing his political experience of migration. Political capital and experience do not seem to suffice; in the end, Euloge is part of a web of structural constraints and asymmetric power relationships which, if he wants to

³¹¹ The forum took place in Bangui from 4 to 11 May 2015.

³¹² *Donc je ne sais pas ce que l'avenir réserve mais, si je rentrais, si je rentrais on allait pas me dire aujourd'hui, bon tu dois aller au dialogue, par exemple. Si le dialogue aura lieu aujourd'hui, je vais aller au dialogue. Donc il faut voir tout ça, il faut voir toute cette partie, il y a le destin qui existe.*

continue on his political path, he will not be able to avoid (Clark-Kazak 2011, 20). Euloge will have to abide by the rules of the game and play his cards well.

d) Networks : Playing different cards

In his article 'Crisis as Opportunity', Akin Iwilade argues that young people in Africa define themselves by seeking to work within and at the same time around the corrupt system (Iwilade 2013a, 1058). I believe Euloge is part of a new generation of upcoming politicians, who, like him, both reject and embrace the system of patronage that governs their country. Euloge, like many youngsters, is very well aware that the patronage system has eroded his country:

For a time now CAR has become like a personal garden, an inheritance, a personal business for the members of parliament: 'It's just me with my family and that's it; others are forced to look at me.' That's how CAR works. (Interview, Kinshasa, 2–3 February 2015)³¹³

He is also genuinely preoccupied with his community and repeatedly criticizes the fact that in order to become a politician in his country, one needs to either join the patronage game or have walked the path of rebellion. However, on the other hand, Euloge underlines his respect for the elders and subjects himself to existing institutions (such as the CAR embassy or the UNCHR). Moreover, his background and upbringing suggest continuity rather than change. Being the son of a high-ranking civil servant during Kolingba's regime, Euloge was privileged in many ways—most notably in terms of access to education and having a decent living standard. However, despite his deep-felt respect, Euloge grew uncomfortable within his family and tried to gradually break loose. As we will see in the following chapter, fleeing to Kinshasa would be only the last step in that process.

Euloge's acts and zealotry when it comes to the community also tell us something about him. In any case, his political position, first in the students' association at the university in Bangui and later within the CAR refugee community in Kinshasa, is ambivalent. A born diplomat, Euloge learned to 'work within and around the system' (Iwilade 2013a) and to navigate different networks (Chabal 2009). In Kinshasa, he not only navigates within the circle of refugees, but also in the broader community of Central Africans that includes the Central African ambassador in Kinshasa. Thus, even if Euloge was fully aware that going too often to the embassy could bring him trouble, to the point of risking his refugee status, he equally made an effort to stay on good terms with the ambassador.

³¹³ *Il fut un bon moment la RCA est devenu un jardin personnelle, un patrimoine, une entreprise personnelle aux parlementaires: 'ce n'est que moi avec ma famille et voilà, les autres sont obligés de me regarder.' C'est comme ça la RCA.*

At the time of my research, the CAR ambassador was a proud Gbaya who advocated that working the land (i.e. agriculture) was the only path towards peace. A loaded political stance. Euloge would often visit him and help him out with small errands. His motorbike and access to the refugee services were an asset in this regard. Euloge thus tried to keep doors open to potential possibilities, personally and politically, and he learned to juggle with several worlds: sometimes he was a refugee, at others he was a CAR citizen, and yet at others he was Kinnois. Contextually, embodying hybrid identities is one of the tricks for getting by in the urban jungle (Wilson Janssens 2018a), and it also helps to position oneself strategically and usefully for others. At the end of the day, one does not know which network will be activated in the future.

Trying not to give away too much information about oneself, keeping one's reputation clean, and knowing one's adversaries are all equally important in the interface between formal and everyday politics. Euloge had learned his lesson in Bangui:

We were with [the president] when we were elected. After a while he starts seeing the money, he becomes untouchable,³¹⁴ so I withdrew. Automatically there were errors from my side. He had been scared. At night I was called to negotiate, I was told '*petit*, you see this is how it is'. At one point it didn't work [between us], I was taken out of the group. Automatically I had received [Seleka] elements. (Interview with Euloge, Kinshasa, 16 February 2015)³¹⁵

When the Seleka came, they were the ones who had distorted this information ... our own brothers, we knew each other! (Interview with Le Firmin, Kinshasa, 13 February 2015)³¹⁶

Euloge was very much aware of the darker side of politics, which was also played out at the university premises. Taking distance from an older generation, but especially from old and detrimental practices such as 'seeing money' (which points to embezzlement), remained a challenge. One had to be strong-headed, yet at the same time, Euloge needed to deal with these practices too. This darker side of the political machinery did not deter Euloge from his involvement. As we will see

³¹⁴ On another occasion, Euloge mentioned that the president had started driving a big car.

³¹⁵ *On était avec [le président]. Quand on était élu, après quelque temps il voit l'argent il devient intouchable là, alors je me suis retiré. Automatiquement j'ai eu des éléments d'erreur. Il avait eu peur, la nuit on m'appelle pour négocier avec moi, on me dit petit tout ça, tu vois c'est ça. A un moment ça ne marchait pas [entre nous], moi j'étais retiré du groupe, automatiquement j'ai eu des éléments [Séléka].*

³¹⁶ *Quand Seleka est venue, c'est eux qui ont déformé cette information ... nos frères qu'on se connaissait!*

in the next chapter, it is part of the revolutionary fight against the older generation—or rather against the mentality of the older generation.