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

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Citation
Wilson Janssens, M. C. (2019, September 11). *Conflict (im)mobiles : biographies of mobility along the Ubangi River in Central Africa*. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/77742

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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Title: Conflict (im)mobiles : biographies of mobility along the Ubangi River in Central Africa
Issue Date: 2019-09-11

Chapter VIII. Freedom, revolution, and creativity

1) Introduction

I have dedicated the last three chapters to spatial mobility and social becoming. In them I have illustrated how Euloge, Le Firmin, and other conflict mobiles left Bangui and moved to Kinshasa. Through this journey they have been transformed from students to refugees, from Banguissois to Kinois. They learned to fend for themselves, and it also formed a path into adulthood. These youngsters have become conflict mobiles. Euloge, who was an apprentice student leader in Bangui, became a committed refugee leader. His 'becoming' has been not only of a social, but also of a political nature: political becoming. In the future, Euloge envisions translating his experience in Kinshasa, added to his years as a student leader in Bangui, into political capital (which includes network building) that could be useful within the political context of his country. Adulthood is, hence, not an final destination, nor does the growth path stop when the refugee-students turn into responsible, self-sufficient, and engaged adults.

Building upon the last three chapters, I will now illustrate how the CAR refugees reflect on their paths in terms of continuity, revolution, and art. The focus here is on the ways out of stuckedness. In choosing to focus on these, rather than on the static nature of 'liminality' or 'waithood' (Utas 2005; Honwana 2012; Sommers 2012) , I prefer to underline creativity despite waithood and despite its more spatial translation, stuckedness. My purpose is not to enumerate possibilities in constraint, but through the narrative of the refugee stories, I want to celebrate the creativity and do justice to the time the refugees spent sharing their empowering stories with me. Despite the hardships, Kinshasa became a site of ambivalent opportunities, of stuckedness, certainly, but one that is informed by active as opposed to idle waiting (S. Turner 2015). Euloge, and others, found in it a '*nouveau souffle de vie*' (a new breath of life) and managed to turn uncertainty into an asset (S. Turner 2015, 190). Their paths thus became, as it were, filled with a sense of freedom, while stemming from the interaction between conflict and mobilities.

2) Continuity: Escaping the fraternal yoke

When I asked Euloge why it would not be better to return to Bangui, even empty-handed, in order to continue studying, instead of suffering in Kinshasa, Euloge agreed hesitantly. And then he added:

> That's a very good question. That's true. It's better to go back and evolve in Bangui, it's true... Except that in my conception, it's my own decision. If I had the chance to have a diploma in hand, it wouldn't be that hard to go back. I could today, I could also tell my parents. Several times I

> have been told to go home; my parents, they don't want me to stay like this, they told me to go home. But I refused, I said no! You can't go back in this way; I'd like to have it organized. Maybe it's destiny .... I think that all I do, all I say, it is really in God's hands. (Interview, Kinshasa, 16 February 2015)[317]

There is another level, perhaps a more transcendent, even spiritual, level of growth. In the quotation above, Euloge refers to a higher being, one to whom he devotes his life. Yet, simultaneously, Euloge proclaims his determination and self-will in the two phrases: 'It's *my own* decision'; 'I *refused*, I said *no*!' For Euloge, leaving the comfort and family ties behind, moving away from a secure, yet suffocating, environment, was a journey of self-affirmation—and a quest for freedom.

Being one of the youngest in his family, Euloge felt overprotected, in particular by his elder brothers. As we have seen in Chapter VII, soon after finishing his baccalaureate (high school degree), Euloge fell seriously ill and was taken care of by one of his older brothers in Bimbo. As he recovered and waited for the results of the high school exam—which in Bangui can take up to a year, forcing many youngsters to lose time waiting—Euloge decided to move back to town, not to the parental house, as his sisters had wanted, but to the university campus. Even though Euloge stressed how deeply he respected his elders, he did not feel he had to comply with their rules any longer. He was hungry for freedom; leaving the house of his brother was his first step towards that freedom, but certainly not the only one.

Fleeing, like migration, is a path of self-fulfilment, one that can turn the individual into a person of respect (Bredeloup 2008, 298). Refuge was for Euloge a way of escaping the familiar, or rather fraternal, yoke. Interestingly, refuge did not form a rupture with the past. In line with Klute and Hahn, Euloge's departure from Bangui cannot be conceived as a complete break (Klute and Hahn 2007, 9); on the contrary, it seems that the rupture with his family had taken place before fleeing to Kinshasa, especially in his mind, though not yet completely in the physical sense. In the following excerpt, Euloge describes the relationship with two of his older brothers in Bangui and tries to draw a comparison with his situation in Kinshasa:

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[317] *Ça c'est une très bonne question. C'est vrai. C'est mieux de rentrer et d'évoluer à Bangui, c'est vrai… Sauf que c'est ma conception à moi, c'est ma décision à moi, si j'avais eu la chance d'avoir un peu de diplôme en main, ça n'allait pas me couter cher de rentrer. Je peux aujourd'hui, je peux dire aussi à mes parents, plusieurs fois on m'a dit de rentrer, mes parents, ne veulent pas me voir rester comme ça, il m'ont dit de rentrer. Mais moi j'avais refusé, j'ai dit non! Il faut pas rentrer de cette manière, moi j'aimerai à que ça soit organisé. Peut-être ce que je dis est un destin. … Moi je pense que tout ce que je fais, tout ce que je dis vraiment c'est un programme de Dieu.*

CW: *But then, if I understand correctly, in Bangui you are really comfortable?*

Euloge: I'm fine in Bangui.

CW: *You eat well, you don't have a problem with clothes …*

Euloge: Yes, yes.

CW: *You told me that the motorbike …*

Euloge: Well, it's not my motorbikes, or my cars; it's the parents', my older brothers'. [The first brother] has two bikes; it's with these bikes that I ride around. But [the second brother] he had paid for the car so that we could rent it out as a taxi. He has his own car which he uses to go out in the evenings and a car from work. So he bought it just so he could rent it out as a taxi. But I didn't have a car or a personal motorbike; it's for my older brothers.

CW: *But the bike was at your disposal?*

Euloge: At my disposal, yes.

CW: *So it is in Bangui where you learned to ride it?*

Euloge: Uh-hum

CW: *But here in Kinshasa the bike is yours, right?*

Euloge: Yes, yes, it's mine. [laughs]

CW: *You like that?*

Euloge: I like it; it is a continuity, right?

CW: *You were telling me that in Bangui you don't pay for petrol?*

Euloge: I don't pay for it. [The first brother receives 5 litres of fuel at work]. I only use their fuel. [The second one works in an oil company]. So it's [laughs], it's always taken care of [*prise en charge*]. Even to cure myself, sometimes I cure myself on their account. [The second] often gets treated at the Institut Pasteur, he and his whole family. The older one goes to a clinic in town. So, I get medically treated like that.
(Interview, Kinshasa, 16 February 2015)

As Klute and Hahn have described, Euloge perceives his experience of refuge as personal growth, in terms of *continuité* (continuity). Both in Bangui as in Kinshasa, Euloge had driven a motorbike. In Bangui, one of his older brothers owned two motorbikes and received five litres of petrol a day. His other brother worked for an oil company and was able to move around as he wanted. Consequently, Euloge never had the need to own a motorbike nor to pay for petrol. Moving around the city did not pose a problem for him. Moreover, he did not need to pay for medical fees either, as he would use the work-privileged treatments of his brothers. As long as Euloge complied with his brothers' rules

and wishes, he could make use not only of their motorbikes, but also of the petrol they were granted through their jobs. This was no doubt comfortable.

The situation in Kinshasa, however, was the exact opposite: here Euloge rode his own motorbike instead of a borrowed one and had to pay for petrol, maintenance costs, and unofficial contributions to the army and traffic police—a considerable expenditure. When, during our interview, we underlined the contrast, he laughed. He was proud he managed to obtain a motorbike through his own efforts (granted by the UNHCR) and not through his brothers. It is here where the continuity lies: by moving from the family home to campus, first, and then from Bangui to Kinshasa, Euloge was *continuing* his path towards 'personal freedom' (Sommers 2012, 230). He emphasized:

> There are no parents here [in Kinshasa] to control me. I was already a grown-up boy, but I was afraid of my parents, of my older brothers .... Here [I have] all the freedom; I became a parent, I can lead my life as I want. My responsibility is in my hands. (Interview, Kinshasa, 16 February 2015)[318]

In August 2016, I followed up Euloge's family in Bangui and met his older brother, the second one. He was happy to receive me. From our conversation, I could gather that he had lost contact with Euloge. Euloge's decision to leave seemed to still hurt his brother. Even if he could not agree with his decision—nor could the rest of his family—he understood his younger brother needed to spread his wings in his own way. I often tried to picture Euloge while crossing the river to Zongo and wondered who had taken Euloge to the waterside on that early morning in April 2013—certainly not his brother. What did he see during those last minutes standing on the right riverbank of the Ubangi? Had he looked behind or not? Had he stared into a horizon that promised uncertainties and opportunities at the same time? It was only when Euloge neared Kinshasa, after weeks of hardships on the road, that he called Bangui to say he had arrived safe and well. As Euloge's brother told me this, I tried to explain how hard the road had been, how courageous his younger brother was, and how meaningful his work in the community is. Telephone calls from Kinshasa to Bangui were expensive at that time. Whatsapp, Messenger, Imo, and other social media were not as widespread as they are today. Knowing I would go back to Bangui, Euloge and Le Firmin had urged me to describe in detail how difficult life in Kinshasa was. It would have been too expensive to share that by phone. I am not sure I accomplished this mission. There are things that are just too difficult to explain.

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[318] *Il n'y a pas un parent ici [à Kinshasa] pour me contrôler. J'étais déjà grand garçon mais j'avais peur de mes parents, de mes grands frères. … Ici [j'ai] toute la liberté, je suis devenu parent, je peux mener ma vie comme je vois, ma responsabilité est entre mes mains.*

But let us return to the symbol of the motorbike. In Chapter VII I argued that moving around the city on his own motorbike was an act of symbolic mobility, in the sense that Euloge becomes a more efficient, credible, and better-connected community leader. Continuity seems to add another layer to this symbolic mobility. Just as for '*benskineurs'* (motor-taxis) in Douala (Cameroon), '[c]irculation is also about acquiring a facility to operate everywhere, and to not be known as a specific son or daughter of a specific family coming from a specific place with specific ethnic origins and professions' (Abdoumaliq Simone 2005, 520), for Euloge the facility to operate, by his own means, in Kinshasa reinforces his independence from the comforts his family can offer him in Bangui. The continuity resides in a continuous journey of personal growth. Had Euloge stayed in CAR, he would have been physically, and perhaps also socially, mobile, but he would have been existentially stuck (Hage 2009). Escaping Bangui meant for him existential mobility and freedom in its most ontological sense.

In no way do I question the gravity of the conflict in CAR, nor its deep-felt consequences for the CAR refugee-students in Kinshasa. However, I cannot claim that insecurity was the single cause that triggered the students to leave Bangui. It intrigues me, how in contexts of conflict some decide to leave while others decide to stay put (Both, Mouguia and Wilson in preparation). Euloge managed to turn the timing of the crisis to his own advantage; he had no strict responsibilities (children, for instance) and was hungry to study. Fleeing from war meant, for him, fleeing towards new potential (yet risky) opportunities—as if *running away from* something held in it the promise of *running towards* something else.

Just as economics seems to be only the visible surface of travelling motives for so-called economic migrants, fleeing conflict is also only one out of many motives for the CAR refugees to be in Kinshasa. Beneath the surface there is not only a sphere of ambitions to learn and a curiosity about the discovery of new people and places (Klute and Hahn 2007, 21), but also the potential to bypass and surmount the hierarchy of age order (Klute and Hahn 2007, 22). New rules stem from new migrations (Abdoumaliq Simone 2005, 529); and for Euloge, seeking refuge in Kinshasa—where fraternal structures and family roles could be turned upside down—opened up new spaces. Instead of being looked after by his brothers, it was actually Euloge who was taking care of himself. And more: he was dealing with his own younger brother's capriciousness and caring for the community.

3) '*Nous avons un esprit révolutionnaire*'

> So we had to choose between rejoining the rebellion or dying under the cursed trees of the neighbourhood. (Landry Kassaï, in preparation)

The quest for freedom is an expression of being against the established order, a manifestation of feeling limited or suffocated by this order. This quest and the forms it takes in engaged artistry, as we will see hereunder, can be read as revolutionary acts. Revolution, however, takes different forms. There are revolutions that topple long-standing oppressive regimes, such as the Burkinabé revolution (as we saw in Chapter II). There are other revolutions that take on more *emic* and personal meanings, yet are no less politically significant. The context of Kinshasa exemplifies how the macro and the micro level feed one another. Inspired by the events in Burkina Faso, the Congolese stood up against their own government; the urban CAR refugees, too, were going through an awakening. As if motivated by the context, they too saw themselves as revolutionaries.

On more than one occasion the students pointed to their ‘revolutionary spirit’. In fact, all the inhabitants of *La maison blanche* (see Chapter VII) seemed to possess this spirit. As a Western researcher, I often struggled to understand their revolution. At times, I would link it to Euloge’s grassroots endeavours and caring for the community, yet this did not seem to clarify it all. Likewise, neither going through the Kinois school—successfully learning how to fend for oneself—nor escaping the family yoke seem to suffice as explanations. I then understood that their revolution was no less than the revolutionary struggle grounded in a human striving for renewal and rebirth (Hannah Arendt in M. Jackson 2008, 60). This rebirth was to take place vis-à-vis the older generation and *their* established order. The older generation was doubtlessly represented by the family the refuges had left behind in CAR, but also by the older and inefficient representatives of the refugees in Kinshasa—and by the UNHCR, in the sense that, as we saw in Chapter VI, this institution replaced the function of parents. Just as circulating through the city connotes for *benskineurs* a set of tactics that attempts to elude a range of political controls whose purveyors are often content to maintain youth in a state of developmental suspension—so as to better manipulate them (Abdoumaliq Simone 2005, 520)—so too the refugee-students became well informed about the working of politics and about the working of their societies in international contexts, in order to circumvent, or rather hope to bypass, the patrimonial order. Their new knowledge and experience encouraged them to become who they wanted to be in their own eyes (De Bruijn and Wilson 2014), and especially in the eyes of the generation that preceded them.

The CAR refugees were tired of the way their country had hitherto been managed—as a personal garden (see Chapter VII)—and also of the ways in which youth had hitherto been excluded. This exclusion is the result of a policy of mis-education: youth are not educated to take on responsibilities; on the contrary, they are looked upon with disdain. Revolution, thus, meant a fight to include new blood in a rigid gerontocratic order. For Le Firmin, writing was a revolutionary act that could

> raise awareness among young people and to make sure that young people stop seeing themselves the way they are seeing themselves. It could also incite young people to revolution—not a negative revolution, but a positive revolution. That is, a revolution in meritocracy [...] my concern is that young people grow to have the capacity. Because today elders still despise this new generation, because we don't have the level and all that. So I would like us young people to be aware, to try to do something serious and that can still give us a certain value.[319]

In addition to war, CAR refugee-students also escape a political and patrimonial order that plunged them into a social moratorium (Vigh 2006a; 2006b). Once in Kinshasa, they found themselves in yet another moratorium. They were thus confronted by a double moratorium, from which escape in merely spatial terms was not possible—that is, there was no escape possible by moving, migrating, or fleeing. Euloge's and Le Firmin's revolution was one of value, of merit—a move away from the patrimonial relationships that have destroyed the workings of their country and their society. Even if respect for the elders is a fundamental principle, they felt ready to contribute in a lively way and actively (these are the words Euloge used) to the development of their country, which is in dire need of breaking the political carousel (Day 2016), the system of elite recycling (Oldenburg 2016, 5), in order to make room for a new political mentality. The fact that Euloge was a recognized leader of the refugee community, above people who were older than him, is also an act of revolution. Recognition through merit. The double moratorium in which the CAR refugee-students found themselves pushed them to fight a mindset that revolted and excluded them. In this sense, they were not in search of opportunities elsewhere—at least not permanent opportunities; they were striving to change their country.

Euloge often complained that in order to be a political leader in his country, one needed to walk the path of rebellion first. And indeed, fluid loyalties, and politico-military entrepreneurs who move between different rebel groups and government assignments (Debos 2008) are omnipresent where he comes from. The growth of rebel groups is a result of preventing youth from having a say in the country. The latter fill the lower (and most vulnerable to risk) ranks, only to be manipulated by the entrepreneurs in the race to their own prosperity. Disenfranchised youth, both in the cities as well as

[319] *sensibiliser les jeunes et à faire de sorte que les jeunes arrêtent de voir comme ils sont en train de voir, exciter aussi les jeunes à la revolution, mais pas une revolution negative, mais une revolution positive. C'est-à-dire une revolution de la méritocratie […] mon soucis est que les jeunes aient la capacité. Parce qu'aujourd'hui les gens méprisent toujours cette nouvelle generation parce qu'on n'a pas le niveau et tout ça. Donc j'aimerais bien que nous les jeunes, nous prenons la conscience, nous essayons de faire quelque chose de sérieux et qui peut quand même nous donner une certaine valeur.*

outside, will look for other paths to make themselves heard. Rebellion is one—revolution another. But in fact they are not that different. They are both an expression of and a claim for a vital need to make oneself heard. Even if the means available in the city (Kinshasa, Brazzaville, N'Djaména, and why not also Bangui) are different from those available at the margins of the margin (northern CAR, north-western Congo), the plea to be integrated within the state, and also within a global economy without global shadows (Ferguson 2006), remains the same. We should be more attentive to these calls.

4) *'La création est un atout majeur'*

Revolution is also expressed in more creative terms. In this sense, Euloge was not the only one to have found a new breath of life in Kinshasa; there were others too. In Chapter VI, for instance, we saw that for Le Firmin Kinshasa held the promise of an African version of the American dream. Even if he had not been able to continue his studies in law, he established a family in Kinshasa and became a responsible man. Other refugees turned to art; think of Oscar and his beadwork, or Willy, who, despite being an actor, used his creativity as a hairdresser and became successful in that (both are described in Chapter VII). I will dedicate this sub-section, however, to more explicit art forms, as represented by the young slam poet Esatis, the returned blogger and writer Max, and the older actor Papa Koyabade—all embody the capacity to transform exile into an artistic experience.

Slam poetry

Perhaps due to his taciturnity, I must admit that at the beginning I did not really take much notice of Esatis. Yet, from an early stage, he made an effort to interest me in his artistic projects. Slowly but surely, Esatis grew to be a friend and an inspiring counter-voice. One of the youngest sons of a late army officer, he was born into a large family. As we saw in Chapter V, after the failed coup d'état by the fallen president Kolingba in 2001, Esatis was forced to leave Bangui with his family and found shelter for two years at Mole refugee camp. He was just a boy at the time, yet he remembers the camp well—and retains these bad memories. As he became a refugee in 2013 for the second time in his life, these memories coloured Esatis' decision to circumvent Mole and head towards Kinshasa instead. Like other refugees, Esatis keeps close ties with the UNHCR, yet he found ways, through familial ties and other patrimonial relationships, to not depend solely on the UNHCR.

Just before the 2013 crisis, as Esatis was in *première*, the year before graduation, he had grown fond of language and envisaged becoming a writer. The crisis and refuge did not cause him to abandon his dream; on the contrary, in Kinshasa he managed to enrol at school and pay for his own school fees, graduating in 2016 from the Latin–philosophy stream, after which he enrolled at the public yet

expensive University of Kinshasa (UNIKIN), where he opted to study journalism. The political atmosphere around the highly contested third mandate of Kabila and the recurrent protest demonstrations and strikes on campus dissuaded him from studying and encouraged him to focus fully on his art, with which he had already started in 2014. However, in early 2019, after elections took place in DR Congo and were won by Tshisekedi, Esatis picked up studying again and enrolled at the Université Libre de Kinshasa (ULK).

Perhaps inspired by the thriving music scene in the city, Esatis gave a twist to his writing aspirations. He first moved from writing to rap and, subsequently, from rap to the more literary genre known as slam poetry. It is in this new cultural expression form that one can situate Esatis. Throughout my research I have seen this young man grow. Esatis pressed me to go along with him as he navigated the scene of Congolese musicians with whom he could collaborate. I followed him to different improvised studios in the city, from Kingabwa to Masina, from N'Djili to Ngaba. At times he introduced me to potential sponsors and new collaborators. Through him I discovered the slam scene in Kinshasa; and partly through him, as well, I was triggered much later to learn more about the slam poetry scene in CAR. In both countries, as elsewhere in Central Africa, the slam scene has been growing in the last five years.

A slam poet masters the spoken word which she or he proclaims or sings with a minor musical accompaniment; one is something between a poet and a rapper. The roots of slam poetry have been accredited to the American poet Marc Smith, who started the poetry slam in Chicago (USA) in 1984 (Mattern 2013, 89). In France, slam made its appearance in the mid-1990s, only to be spread a decade later through the Western Francophone world: Belgium, Switzerland, and Quebec. In Central Africa, it started appearing in the mid-2000s; it is thus a fairly recent form of artistic expression there. Slam often takes the form of a protest song against the wrongdoings of politicians (De Bruijn et al. 2017; Pajon 2017), and in many African countries it seems to have taken over this function from rap. Slam poets inscribe themselves in the register of African orality and are considered to be 'modern *griots'*, even though their performance is built on the co-existence of orality, writing, and digital media (Aterianus-Owanga 2015). In the last decade slam has spread out to other countries too: Chad, DR Congo, Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Mali—all have established communities of slammers. In November 2018, the first Africa Cup of Slam Poetry took place in N'Djaména.[320]

[320] For more information, see the official website https://www.casp-acsp.org/ [Accessed 24 February 2019]

After completing fieldwork in 2015, I continued following Esatis—and in particular his musical development. Since then, he has managed to write dozens of songs and is working on an album entitled '*Sergent au service*' (Esatis Lebon 2017). We keep in contact through Messenger and WhatsApp, through which from time to time he sends me some of his work, and in November 2017 we met in N'Djaména on the occasion of the *Ndjam s'enflamme en slam* festival.[321] In his poetry, Esatis proclaims his love for his country, speaks of the joys and pains of exile, the recent conflict in CAR, and African politics and poverty. At times he pleads for help at the doorstep of the international community; at other times, he wants to reinforce a sentiment of pan-Africanism. Even though he uses French and, in many cases, Sango in his texts, Esatis' style differs from that of the slam poets in CAR. Having learned the art in Kinshasa, his style is rather closer to Kinois slam poetry, a form that is often accompanied by acoustic guitar. This is particularly clear in the different appearances he has made together with Congolese artists, such as Maxel Muya, Nackson, and Isongo.

Figure 63 Esatis becomes a slam poet
From left to right: Esatis looks at the *échangeur* from the studio 'La capital du crime' in Kingabwa (26 August 2014). Esatis records '*On a du mal*' at a studio in Ngaba (5 February 2015). Esatis proclaims at the *N'Djam s'enflamme en slam* festival (24 October 2017). The first two photos were taken by the author, the third by Sjoerd Sijsma.

Here is an excerpt from one of the poems Esatis proclaimed in N'Djaména (2017):

[321] Follow this link for one of his performances: https://vimeo.com/242830206 (accessed 24 February 2019)

La vie nègre et le vinaigre sont aigres	The life of a black person and vinegar are sour
Ma vie de nègre est maigre c'est vrai	My black life is thin, it's true
Nos dirigeants nègres sont des tigres je crois	Our black leaders are tigers, I think
C'est pourquoi la vie nègre et le vinaigre sont aigres	That's why black life and vinegar are sour
Le quotidien d'un nègre, convient à un nègre	A black man's day to day is suitable for a black
Il suffit d'avoir ventre plein, nègre content	A full stomach is enough, for happy black
J'aime cette vie de nègre, même si cela est maigre	I love this black life, even if it's skinny
Pourvu qu'elle soit stable!	I hope it's stable!
Nos dirigeants nègres l'on rendue pénible	Our black leaders have made it dreadful
Malgré qu'elle est minable	Despite the fact that it's pathetic
Goûte un peu le vinaigre, tu sauras la vie nègre	Try some vinegar, you'll know the black life
Si tu me vois maigre, tu vois que je suis nègre	If you see me skinny, you will see I'm black

Theatre

More seasoned than Esatis, Papa Koyabade, father of five children and grandfather of two, was an accountant in Bangui. His motives for coming to Kinshasa, once again, cannot be reduced to a flight from violent conflict. Similar to the Fulani described in Chapter II, Papa Koyabade found himself caught between two fires. The Seleka, on the one hand, mistook his name for that of one of Bozizé's close collaborators, while the Anti-Balaka did not trust him because he was active in the diamond sector, as an accountant, and thus by definition friendly to Muslims. In addition to this, his family-in-law accused him of witchcraft and of causing the death of his wife, who had passed away a couple of years prior to the crisis, after he had bought a plot of land in order to dig for diamonds.[322] After his house was pillaged and moving (literally sleeping) around town became untenable, Papa Koyabade and his family fled to Kinshasa in different waves. In the first half of 2014, they all found themselves in the compound of their aunt in the Makala district, who had moved to Kinshasa a long time before. It is at this point that I met the family, before they split up again, each leaving on his or her own path.

Next to his responsible side, Papa Koyabade hid an artist in himself. In the past, Papa Koyabade had written religious songs and toured around his country, and it seemed that refuge in Kinshasa was

[322] Success in life is often related to the spirits of the underworld.

offering him an opportunity to express himself in that way again and even to expand his interest in the domains of theatre, playwriting, and film. Throughout history, Kinshasa has been a magnet for artists, and musicians in particular (Stewart 2003; Kubik 2007), and Papa Koyabade was particularly aware of this. He thus came to the conclusion that Kinshasa, more than Bangui, was a more suitable environment in which to develop his artistic skills—even just considering the city's sheer size in terms of potential members of an interested audience. In contrast to many young CAR refugees who expressed their willingness to move back to Bangui, Papa Koyabade envisioned from the outset a future in Kinshasa and was actively looking for someone who could support his work. With this in mind, he had presented himself to the local television and theatre groups as a script writer (he rehearsed, for instance, weekly at the Cinarc housed in Franco's 123 Building in Matonge. See photos in Figure 64). Papa Koyabada acted like a *sapeur*,[323] always carefully dressed, always elegant and gentle in his movements and his words. Even if he may have seemed ridiculous to some, and even if his plays were not always well written, he was inspirational in his resoluteness. It is never too late.

Figure 64 Collage '*La creation est un atout majeur*'
(Creation is a major asset), composed with pictures of Papa Koyabade during rehearsals at the Cinarc (26 May 2014), at the compound in Makala and the local TV studio 'Numerica' (29 May 2014).

[323] Société des ambianceurs et personnes élégantes. The *sape* is a cultural movement in both Congos composed of *sapeurs* or Congolese dandies. By dressing up (there are different styles ranging from classic and elegant to extravagant) and buying expensive clothing, the *sapeurs* defy societal rules and transform failure into apparent victory. *Sape* was turned into a verb, *saper* (to sape), which means to be conscious about one's clothes and to dress well.

Literature

In comparison with Esatis and Papa Koyabade, Max did not find his new breath of life in exile but once he was back at home. However, I would argue, his experience in exile, together with growing up through decennia of conflict and duress, did inform his artistic project. As a young boy studying in the seminary with the priests, Max learned to keep a diary. He kept short pieces of text with him, which he had lost during his flight in 2013. Before leaving Kinshasa in 2014, however, Max had shown me some of his remaining and newly written texts and poems. As he had previously worked as a journalist, he wanted to take up blogging. After a couple of attempts, he managed to start writing consistently from January 2016, at the time of presidential elections in CAR, a year-and-a-half after voluntarily repatriating.[324]

Even though he felt relieved at being back in Bangui, Max had a hard time making ends meet, and his gaze is turned outside the country. As previously mentioned, Max knocked on different doors in search of a job, but he grew disillusioned. In the meantime, he became a devoted father, which requires him to care not only for himself but also for his daughter. Nevertheless, Max still cherishes the possibility of studying abroad. In fact, one of the first administrative steps he undertook upon arrival back in Bangui was to get a passport.[325] When I last visited him in May 2018, four years after his return, he showed me the passport, still unused and due to expire in 2019. One way or another, writing has kept Max afloat. Writing and gardening. As he inherited land from his grandmother, together with a group youngsters he has turned to local agriculture. Max cultivates cucumbers. Unfortunately, even if state assistance exists on paper for these types of projects, which do not require major funding, it is difficult to be selected and to actually receive the funding.[326]

As regards writing, Max chose not to join the journal for which he used to work prior to his refuge—at least not fully. Instead, he has opted to become more visible within the blogosphere. He is, for instance, part of the association of CAR bloggers (ABCA) who are very active in social media. In contrast with the neighbouring countries, the bloggers in CAR still enjoy relative freedom of expression. As they explain, they are not persecuted for what they write, even though at times they need to subject themselves to the system of patronage in order to survive. It is his blogging that laid

[324] Max's blog Le chroniqueur centraficain: http://lechroniqeurcentrafricain.over-blog.com/

[325] The CAR passport is issued only in Bangui. CAR embassies in other African countries can issue only a *laisser-passer* to its citizens.

[326] Esatis' cousin also set up a similar cooperation, based not on agriculture, however, but on fishery. He too struggled to get funding.

the basis for the book he is writing, which is an amalgamation of prose, fiction, political analysis and opinion, report style with recommendations, blogging, of course, and poetry. It is partly autobiographical, yet at the same time it combines a range of voices. Not everything written here has been experienced by Max in person, though elements from his own life are woven into the text. Perhaps the book in process is best read as a product of auto-ethnography (Khosravi 2018) and popular culture, a genre which develops perspectives on topics that people themselves feel are interesting, attractive, or important (Barber 2018, 3).

Here, I wish to share an excerpt from a poem Max wrote together with Tezman. It is entitled 'The cry of hope' and deals with refugees, war, and peace. Max and Tezman first read and performed this poem for us in June 2014 in Kinshasa. The full poem will be published in his forthcoming book (M.-L. Kassaï in preparation).

The cry of hope

(written with E.T.)

Crack crack crack crack boom

Crack crack crack crack boom

A weapon, a sound, a man, a death.

Crack crack crack crack boom

Crack crack crack crack boom

Suffering, violence, movements,

Refugees.

Crack crack crack crack boom

Crack crack crack crack boom

My name is war, I'm meant to destroy,

rape, massacre.

I leave nothing in my path

Men, women, children

I slaughter them

Ah ah ah ah ah ah ah

But who has deceived you?

My sufferings are as sweet as honey

Behold, I create rebellions, I invade cities

And humanity is waiting to be delivered

Ah ah ah ah ah ah ah