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

Wilson Janssens, M.C.

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Part Three

Discussion and concluding remarks

Chapter IX. Conflict mobiles and immobiles

1) Categorizing moving people

a) Ambivalent refugee-ness

Rather than a stark division between the two countries, the Ubangi River between CAR and DR Congo is a zone of contact. This connectivity and communication highway has fostered not only commerce but also foreign penetration for many centuries. People have crossed from one shore to the other in order to buy and sell goods and to visit relatives; but at times of conflict, they have also crossed the river looking for protection on the other riverbank. Throughout this thesis I have followed some of these mobile people who have crossed the border as a consequence of the recent conflict in CAR. Yet, their mobility patterns are not solely informed by conflict, nor are their trajectories necessarily new; rather, they are embedded in a context of previous waves of flight.

Even if the bulk of this thesis focuses on a group of urban refugee-students in Kinshasa, it contests and questions the definition of *the refugee*. Defined as any person who flees the country of her nationality owing to a well-founded fear of persecution, this thesis invites the reader to look beyond reductive labels. The definition of a refugee is not exclusive, meaning that an individual cannot be reduced to being only a refugee. There is not one kind of refugee. Nor are refugees either passive victims on the one hand, nor resilient actors on the other. The reality is more layered and nuanced. Among the people who fled CAR after 2013, some found refuge in refugee camps; others found refuge in towns along the border (which often are situated relatively close to the refugee camps); others made their way to larger cities and even to the capitals of neighbouring countries (the urban refugees); and yet others have found themselves in improvised limbo zones, such as the group of fishermen who settled on an island in the middle of the river.

Fleeing to another country does not automatically turn an individual into a refugee; in addition to fleeing, one needs to self-identify with being a refugee. Some categorically refuse to become or see themselves as refugees. This is, for instance, the case of several CAR citizens who found refuge with host families, or lived as merchants around markets. Maman Dorothée, whose story I have presented in chapters II and IV, refused (at least partly) to become a refugee. Even if she and her family were housed at the refugee camp in Lanza (Republic of Congo), she could not comply with the camp policy of inactivity. Refugees were not supposed to engage in agriculture, to conduct business, to cross the river. But if she had not done so, she asked herself rhetorically, how would her children have eaten? Pregnant with her fifth child, Dorothée started the risky business of selling palm wine to armed men

along the riverbanks; as is the case with many others, she too does not fit the image of a dependent refugee.

But the list of people displaced owing to conflict is not complete with camp refugees, urban refugees, town refugees, IDPs, and people who resist the refugee category. Almost as an alliteration, the *retournés* (returnees)*, repatriés* (repatriates)*, refoulés* (expelled), and *réinstallés* (resettled) add themselves to the list of people who, not being *refugees* in the strict sense, move because of conflict. Even if I have discussed all these categories above, bringing them together here conveys a sense of how ridiculously puzzling the overlap of these categories can be. My purpose is to reflectively question the usefulness of these overlapping categories, to perhaps un-categorize (and un-border) them.

In Chapter II, I described the paradoxical situation I encountered in Libenge, in which CAR refugees crossed into DR Congo in order to flee conflict in CAR at the very same time that Congolese refugees were leaving CAR to return to their home country. Official repatriates are given a survival kit by the UNHCR to restart their lives; this can be money, blankets, pots and pans, sometimes even a house (as in Gemena or Dongo). Unofficial or voluntary repatriates, such as Max, who was fed up with refuge, do not receive any benefits; and at times they retain their refugee cards in case of a pending official repatriation, during which they can go back to the camp and present themselves as a refugee in order to profit from the potential repatriation benefits. Drawing a line between the refugee and the repatriate is not always that easy. As we have seen, in 2013 and 2014 it was not uncommon to see repatriated Congolese refugees in CAR becoming CAR refugees in their own country.

The returnees are those people who hold the citizenship of the country they flee to. In this thesis, returnees are, for instance, the Chadian citizens by affiliation (second and third generation) who were forced to leave CAR. In many cases, Chadian returnees felt more Centrafricain than they did Chadian. The paradox lies in that living in their own country, the returnees are considered neither refugees, repatriates, nor IDPs and thus do not fall under anyone's responsibility. Uprooted from their daily lives, they are forced to learn to fend for themselves. The *refoulés* are foreigners in the country from which they are forcibly expelled. *Refoulés* are those Congolese (DRC) who were expelled by force by the Congolese (RC) authorities from April to September 2014. Even if they held Congolese (RDC) nationality, many of them came from the rural north, had crossed the river from DR Congo to Congo (RC) in the north, and had never set foot in the capital (Kinshasa) of their own country before. In fact, many of them experienced living in Brazzaville before living in Kinshasa. Thus, in addition to being *refoulés*, these people from the north are also rural migrants to the city.

Finally, resettled refugees are those who have fled their country and, after having been received by a second country, are resettled to a third country—where they become, for instance, asylum seekers. Even though protracted displacement has become the rule rather than the exception in many African countries, resettlement has a permanent character. Being resettled is a hoped-for category, especially if the resettlement takes place in a Western country—often in Canada or the United States. Within the group of CAR refugees I have followed, I am aware of only one person, who had fled from Bangui to Kinshasa, crossed from Kinshasa to Brazzaville, and from there on was resettled in Canada. Canada is in fact not the third but the fourth host country in this particular trajectory, which I have followed both physically and digitally. While resettlement brings with it much hope, this hope is often enveloped in despair. The places available within the resettlement policies are scarce and thus highly coveted. This scarcity finds its expression in mistrust. The unwillingness to share information with others (including a researcher from a European university) is linked to an ontological fear of missing one's opportunity to be resettled. In the eyes of the CAR students in Kinshasa, *être réfugié c'est un marché* (being a refugee is a business). Rumours have it that Congolese humanitarian workers and government officials 'use' the stories of the CAR refugees, 'selling' them in order to send brothers and sisters to resettlement in the global North. This of course has been refuted publicly by the authorities. In an environment with limited opportunities, this mistrust should be read as an explanation for why so few refugees are resettled. Many believe themselves to be victims of (invisible) others who profit instead.

From a *longue durée* perspective, as Dennis Cordell suggests, forced migrations, especially those informed by a political conflict, date from long ago. Refugees *avant la lettre* have moved within Africa long before the 1951 UNHCR Refugee Convention and definition of a refugee. Writing about the nineteenth-century razzias that depopulated what is nowadays north-eastern CAR, Cordell notes that the humanitarian crises that resulted from them were no less severe than those we know today—they are simply less well documented. Historical flows of people in Central Africa can teach us a lot about contemporary refugee movements. The most important lesson, Cordell claims, is that Africans have been able to manage these types of calamities for centuries without the intervention of the West and its supposed humanitarian ethos. One of the strategies of fleeing, for instance, was to regroup in fortified villages where security could be provided. In essence, this does not differ from the clustering in refugee camps. These ancient and endogenous strategies of survival counter, once again, the 'dependency syndrome' discourse, as well as the perpetuation of stereotypes that nourish prejudices against so many Africans refugees (Cordell 2012).

Regarding the urban refugees, Kinshasa not only is an unwelcoming city to refugees, but constitutes a challenging living environment for its own inhabitants too. Kinshasa has been described as a 'city of refugees'—also in relation to the Kinois themselves. This phrase should be understood in the emotional sense, meaning that in order to survive Kinshasa, people look for escapisms, such as religion, the pleasure of beer and music, witchcraft, or violence—because in Kinshasa, nobody is really at ease (De Goede 2015a, 275). I often tried to confirm this general uneasiness in living—in the eyes of refugees who had come from elsewhere, such as Papa Afrique and Euloge—but in vain. Even if they acknowledged Kinshasa as a difficult place to live in, they underscored their particularly disadvantageous and vulnerable position: neither Papa Afrique nor Euloge possesses the right language knowledge nor did they have close-by family members on whom to rely when they first arrived. In this sense, the refugees in Kinshasa could be considered as being double refugees. They are refugees, on the one hand, because, feeling threatened in their country, they left in order to look for safety elsewhere. On the other hand, they are refugees because they too are prey to the escapist Kinois mentality—in order to cope, they too are forced to escape into music, religion, and other diversions.

Finally, in this thesis, refugees are not only refugees in the sense that when a particular situation arises, the group of CAR individuals whom I met in Kinshasa prefer to present themselves as cunning Kinois urbanites (when dealing with the traffic police), devoted students (during our conversations), or fervent citizens of their country (during official visits or public holidays, which they celebrate together at the CAR embassy). In addition to these roles, the CAR refugee-students are also brothers, sisters, sons and daughters, parents, friends, politicians, and artists. One identification does not exclude the other but is rather added upon the other. Just like Malkki's urban refugees, the CAR refugee-students in Kinshasa are cosmopolitan: they mix, they erase boundaries, and they refuse to be fixed within one categorical identity—they subvert identification (Malkki 1995, 4).

b) The humanitarian caravan

As we saw in Chapter IV, since the early 2000s CAR and DR Congo have both hosted refugees from one another on different occasions. Refugees, however, are not the only ones to dance back and forth across space. Humanitarians, too, join the refugee tango in search of work and opportunities. Their jobs depend, if not to say exist, on the presence of refugees. Refugees can be considered as resources that serve the international labour market. One could even argue that the humanitarian enterprise follows the political culture of concessionary politics discussed previously (Hardin 2011). Thus, the three key phases of concessionary politics also apply to the workings of the humanitarian agencies: (1) by identifying and documenting refugees, humanitarian agencies prospect for

resources; (2) by fixating clear-cut refugee camp sites, they map boundaries; (3) by redistributing monthly food supplies and paying out monthly cash grants, they negotiate the circumstances of redistribution of wealth (within the refugee camps). Researchers, too, in a way, prospect, map, and redistribute knowledge.

Despite the differences between refugees and humanitarians, I challenge the reader to consider the humanitarian as another avatar of the conflict mobile, individuals whose movements and mobility—and lack hereof—are induced by conflict.[327] Humanitarians do not travel alone, however, but are followed by a caravan that includes NGO workers, logistics employees—cooks, cleaners, security guards, drivers, mechanics—representatives of the state, soldiers and police forces, journalists, and researchers—the list is not exhaustive. All of these, including the researcher (!), are avatars of the conflict mobile.

However, insofar as movement is not mobility—in the sense that the latter is imbued with meaning—the differences that exist between the refugee and the humanitarian, especially the expatriate humanitarian, cannot be denied or diminished. Even if both are on the move, the motivations and conditions of movement, its velocity, and the mobility regimes that foster or hamper it differ. Refugees, repatriates, and returnees move, but their options are restricted. These restrictions result at times in resilient practices—leaving the refugee camps by one's own means—while at others they result in immobility and feelings of stuckedness. Yet, the humanitarians, too, are in a way restricted to their compounds. Strict curfews apply to them, and loneliness is a common emotion. Even if physically *stuck* in the compound, however, the humanitarians, especially the expatriate ones, are not existentially stuck.

The humanitarian world, in fact, follows a pyramidical hierarchy, and throughout this thesis I have pointed to its different layers. The top of the pyramid, more often than not, is occupied by expatriate workers who work especially, yet not exclusively, in headquarters in a capital city in a country or in other humanitarian hubs.[328] These expatriate workers conduct field-site visits in the interior of the country every so often but usually do not stay for more than a couple of days. The middle layer is constituted mainly of nationals, yet nationals who come from elsewhere in the country. Many of the

[327] I am not implying that *the* humanitarian exists; like the refugees, humanitarians cannot fall under a single stereotype. I draw, for instance, upon the distinction made by several of my informants: the *humanitaire de nom ou de profession*, on the one hand, and the *humanitaire de coeur ou de vocation*, on the other. The former is in the field to further his own career and personal interests; the latter engages with local people.

[328] Goma in eastern Congo, for instance, is such a hub.

Congolese NGO workers present in north-western DR Congo, for instance, had come either from Kinshasa, the capital, or eastern Congo, in particular north and south Kivu. In the aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan genocide and the Second Congo War, eastern Congo has both received and expelled thousands of refugees. Simultaneously, it has attracted humanitarian agencies and workers from all corners of the world. More than twenty years after the Rwandan events, the 'benefiters' of humanitarian assistance have learned its intricate machinery and idiom. Former refugees and other 'vulnerables' use this expertise to lead programmes on the other side of the country, where recent waves of refugees have arrived. These former Congolese refugees have experienced mobility due to conflict, from a care-receiver perspective—that is, as displaced persons in their own country, having been taken care of by a proliferation of NGOs in eastern Congo. Yet, these former refugees have also experienced mobility as care-takers, becoming national NGO staff sent to other regions of the country. Herein their experience as a displaced person turns into an asset, and thus also a form of expertise.[329]

Finally, the bottom level of the pyramid is constituted of local people—in the context of this thesis, from within the Équateur Province itself. Former Congolese refugees in CAR, who had become repatriates in their country, for instance, hoped to make use of their refugee experiences in a new context of urgency. Such was the case of Papa Pascal, introduced in Chapter IV, who moved from being a Congolese refugee in Batalimo (CAR) to being a repatriate in Libenge. Looking for work, he came to Libenge to knock on the doors of the NGOs that had arrived in town. His curriculum vitae includes refugee camp experience as a refugee, but also as a voluntary, for which he proudly carries a pin on his shirt.

But when a crisis subsides, what happens to the humanitarian caravan? The answer to this question is also hierarchically layered. For those high on the pyramid, they will probably move on to a faraway destination. Expatriate humanitarians, especially Western ones, will hop from country to country, as if checking off a list of crises and disaster regions around the world. During my last fieldwork in Libenge, from December 2014 to January 2015, for instance, the head of the UNHCR in Libenge left to Mali. In August 2016 in Bangui, another humanitarian worker complained about having spent too much time in CAR; he was ready for the next adventure. It is as if humanitarian agents, as conflict mobiles, do not move because of conflict but thanks to it. Borders and possessing the right documents do not pose a problem to them. Similarly, national staff will be posted in other parts of

[329] Of course, there are more than two perspectives (care-taker versus care-giver); there are, for instance, the perpetrators as well—they too are mobile.

the country. If successful in their work, they will be sent abroad to other countries in Africa, or they might decide to start an organization of their own.

From the perspective of the bottom of the pyramid, however, the departure of the humanitarian caravan leaves a feeling of abandonment. In Dongo, for instance, the once refurbished mud roads and provisional bridges built during the presence of the humanitarians began to erode as the first organizations started to leave the town at the end of 2014. A similar erosion took place in human terms. Maman Dorothée—whom we met in chapters II and IV, and who worked for one of the partner organizations of the UNHCR, a job that offered her a good, yet not stable income with which she nevertheless was able to extend her house—was worried. She knew that not only would she lose her job, but also she would become the mockery of the town. A higher salary had not only enabled her to pay old debts, but also, envisaging potential payments, pushed her to enter new debts. The short-term wealth had enabled her to sport expensive hairstyles she grew accustomed to. By the end of 2014, Maman Dorothée commented how other women talked and laughed at her behind her back; her hair was not as fancily made up as it had been in the months before. Maman Dorothée was looking immobility in the eye. Even though she, like many others, is very aware of the difference between short-term and long-term investment—that is, between short-term investment by the international community in humanitarian work, and long-term state investment—the short-term development and economic growth related to the former did feed her sense of mobility and hope of a better life. When these hopes begin to erode along with the roads, regimes of mobility that apply to the different conflict mobiles—especially within the humanitarian pyramid—become very clear and their consequences on individuals, poignant.

2) Final note

Inspired by the trajectory approach and following the strategy within the mobility turn, I have followed in this thesis the lives of different conflict immobiles in Central Africa. However, in addition to following the conflict mobiles 'physically', I have extended this strategy in two ways: firstly, by following them from a distance and with genuine interest: keeping up with their lives through social media and phone calls, sharing frustrations, memories, and new (joint) projects; secondly, by following the conflict mobiles longitudinally—that is, through time, more precisely over a lapse of five years—and thus combining mobility with temporality. This layered and more holistic following strategy reveals that one form of mobility is related to other forms of mobility (Khosravi 2018).

Through the conflict mobile, moreover, I have come to learn that mobility has a central place in the social life of the region and that borders, more than being barriers, are there to be crossed. From a

perspective of mobility, dichotomies do not hold: autochthony versus foreignness, refugee versus non-refugee, one nationality versus another nationality, and so on. In order to understand what happened in Bangui, or with the Banguissois, it is impossible to limit oneself to the national borders. The life histories of conflict mobiles have been drawn by movement and cross borders. There exist multiple mobile links between CAR and DR Congo, links that do not limit themselves to, but go beyond, the different waves of refugees. Throughout history, the movement between these two countries has been triggered by different reasons: movement can be related to education and becoming, or to the incessant search for opportunities; and movement can be the result of conflict.

Combining the conflict mobiles described in Chapter IV with the CAR refugee-students discussed in Part Two, and taking into account that they are from different generations, social backgrounds, and nationalities, many of the important topics that are discussed in Chapter IV are also central to the refugee-students' lives today. These topics include, but are not limited to: (formal) education, freeing oneself from the parental yoke, coming of age, revolution, uncertainty, moving around in search of better horizons, fleeing war, and the fear of going back home empty-handed and of losing face. Regarding education, parallels can be drawn from the colonial to the present times. It is because of education (in an encompassing sense, education in terms of becoming) that the likes of Lumumba and Boganda could stand up and rebel against the colonial regime. Education, too—or at least the hunger to learn—was one of the drivers in the many journeys of Yaya Rico, Espérance, and Émile, as it is also a guideline in how these three individuals bring up their (grand)children today. It is the hope to be able to study, finally, that, in contrast to hanging around in refugee camps, thrust the CAR refugee-students to go to Kinshasa against all odds.

Ironically, many of these conflict mobiles have escaped conflict in their own respective countries only to find themselves caught in conflicts in the countries in which they found refuge. Yaya Rico, for instance, never witnessed conflict personally in his own country, but found himself in a situation of conflict in the neighbouring countries; he twice 'survived other people's war' (Maindo Monga Ngonga 2001). Espérance too was driven by the desire for a future elsewhere that could replace an unpleasant past (Khosravi 2018). In her case, even if she did not personally live through the unpleasant past her parents suffered, she did grow to embody it through their memories—so strongly that it drove her to leave Chad in search of greener pastures in CAR. The irony, again, lies in the fact that Espérance has witnessed almost three decades of conflict in CAR; in other words, she too has witnessed 'another people's war', yet stays put and refuses to leave Bangui. Also, Kinshasa is probably not a safe refuge for the CAR refugee-students in the long term. Since politically inspired demonstrations against the political leadership have become more and more common in the city,

grudges can be easily misplaced and translated into xenophobic practices which are then transposed to the refugees (as we saw in Brazzaville). Both conflict and mobility are part of the long history that has shaped societies in Central Africa.

Within the mobility paradigm, Kinshasa is not only a point of arrival, but constitutes equally a zone of transit and a point of multiple departures. In line with Johnson-Hanks, who questions the life cycle, in this thesis I, also, question the migration cycle. Thus, from a mobility-inspired perspective, just like vital conjunctures form nodes of decision-making moments, or periods of time, so do vital conjunctures inspired by migration. Faced by a decision-making moment of where to go next, every individual, depending on his or her accumulated experiences (and duress) will make unique decisions. This thesis brings together a theory on vital conjunctures, with mobility studies and readings on duress. Interestingly, in the case of the refugee-students, we learn that even if the environment changes abruptly, their aspirations may not, and that fleeing from their home environments in fact forms rather a continuity than a rupture in the process of social becoming.

By combining conflict and mobility in the concept of the conflict (im)mobile, I link the mobility paradigm to identification processes. Conflict and mobility inform a vision on the self, in which duress and the internalization of violence play an important role. Yet duress does not need to limit the conflict mobile. As we have seen in this thesis, in a process of social becoming informed by duress, the CAR refugee-students look for ways of connecting and belonging to a wider world, of claiming freedom, of expressing themselves artistically with the tools they have at hand. Agency, in combination with duress, does not limit itself to survival strategies and practices of resilience; it is a quest for freedom. While this is universal and as ancient as humanity itself, the structures and regimes of mobility that shape it today, and through which the CAR refugee-students must navigate, differ and are in constant change—more so in a digital age where a so-called global village is in fact a world filled with global shadows.

I have followed the students' paths in becoming meaningful global citizens, who dream, who envision, who want to change not only themselves (micro), but also their surrounding community (meso), and even their society (macro). Change is happening, and not only through arms. There are certainly many reasons to be pessimistic, but there are also reasons to be optimistic. Not all conflict mobiles in Central Africa want to leave their continent. In fact, this thesis shows how many prefer to fight in their own countries and societies. Conflict mobiles in rural DR Congo, such as Maman Dorothée and Papa Popol, understand that a better future lies in their own hands and do not wish to depend on international humanitarian agencies that will end up leaving the region anyway. They do

not want to live in refuge; they call for their own government to invest in infrastructure in order to encourage agricultural and semi-industrial companies to invest in their region, so as to step out of isolation, to open up to the world, and to earn their living with decent salaries.

Through a mobility lens, I thus claim that conflict mobiles are not only victims of their systems but they also contribute to the social fabric. The Central African youth is in need of a more profound and structural engagement, in the first instance by the humanitarian agencies, but ideally also by the Central African states themselves—so that many more young people in a context of uncertainty and distress, such as refuge, can profit from self-established, grassroots initiatives.

Even though it seems that we, as academics, remain rooted in a system that is fundamentally unequal, I would like to round off this thesis by encouraging academics, despite the constraints, to apply a mobile mindset to methodological practices and epistemological processes—in other words, to do and write up research more inclusively. Unfortunately, advocating for other types of knowledge is too quickly branded as emotional, activist, and unscientific. The problem runs deep in academia. So-called objectivity stands in the way, and transparency pays the price; cognitive knowledge takes the upper hand and trumps all others. But what if we play down objectivity for the sake of transparency? What if we could include more varied and comprehensive types of knowledge? What if we were to complement cognitive with emotional and embodied knowledge? What if we were to complement cognitive with mobile knowledge produced by nomadic minds, who also find themselves outside the walls of universities? Opening up to sensory understanding, daring to instrumentalize the senses, leads to an opening up towards others. A sensory methodology opens the door to see these others not as mere informants, nor research participants, but rather recognizes their roles as co-creators of knowledge.

During my ethnographic fieldwork and writing, I hope I have recognized and acknowledged moments of co-creation, and I hope that the people with whom I worked have experienced it this way too. It was clear that from the outset this study was to be an inter-disciplinary study. What I did not forecast, however, was that it would end up being a pluri-disciplinary study, in the sense that it has forced me to look beyond the walls of academia and to embrace knowledge*s*, in the plural, that are created outside university. I would say that this is the most valuable lesson of my doctoral years. Mobility, rather than rooting us in a new paradigm, should *route* us to explore mobile, inclusive, creative, imaginative, and open-ended paths. Just like the river, university does not need to be a barrier; it can be a contact zone, a space that invites mobile individuals of all walks of life to un-border together.