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

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Summary in English

Conflict mobiles are individuals whose mobility—and lack of mobility—is informed by violence and conflict. Based on personal narratives of those who move across borders within and beyond the Central African region, this thesis is an ethnography of mobility. By taking mobility as its axiom and placing the lives of people on the move at its centre, the goal of this thesis is twofold. On the one hand, it contests fixed (national) borders and defies static historical readings of Central Africa. On the other hand, it investigates how the multiple trajectories of individuals in Central African give form to the mobility paradigm. For many people in Central Africa, mobility stands at the core of their existence. Escaping conflict and calamity is just one out of many reasons to move. Mobility not only shapes the life paths of individuals, it has also shaped the region. This thesis challenges sedentary and static understandings of the field and invites the reader to ‘un-border’ by looking at the field through a mobile lens.

The combination of the above two goals gives birth to the conflict mobile (and sometimes conflict *immobile*). There are many avatars of the conflict mobile, including the following: refugees and internally displaced people, humanitarian agents, merchants and business (wo)men, armed groups, road bandits, university students, and other individuals looking for better horizons. The CAR (Central African Republic) refugee-students in Kinshasa (DR Congo), on whom the empirical part of this thesis is based, form only one avatar of the conflict mobile. It is these students’ journeys, their life stories and means of fending for themselves, as well as their dreams and frustrations, that stand at the core of this thesis.

Chapter I sets out the theoretical framework in which the conflict mobile is understood. This framework combines readings of mobility (migration, transnationalism, and refugee studies) with concepts of violence (in particular the experience and internalization of violence—i.e. duress) and social theory around social becoming and youth. Vital conjunctures, important moments of decision in the life paths of individuals, stand at the intersection of duress and social becoming. These conjunctures are also viewed from a historical perspective; hence the importance of the biographical method, which places the individual life stories in dialogue with macro-historical events. Throughout, the river, the Ubangi River in particular (which forms the border between CAR and DR Congo), serves as the background against which these stories are placed, but also as a metaphor of mobility, connection and disconnection. Dead bodies are thrown into the waters of the Ubangi, decisions are made by traversing it, and history has been shaped by the navigation on its waters.

After the theoretical introduction, Part One of this thesis presents the mobile nature of the field of study through a geographical (multi-sited), methodological, and historical lens. It questions established boundaries between national states and their colonial pasts, but also the 'hard borders' between different types of knowledge within and outside academia. The chapters in Part One contest, complexify, and complement static perspectives. Chapter II introduces mobility and multi-sitedness visually. By the use of maps and other visuals, the reader is invited to look beyond national borders. This chapter deals with the multiple geographical field locations, in the most literal sense, in Central Africa visited during the fieldwork research, yet is not limited to geography only but includes historical, digital, and (mass and social) media perspectives. In addition to these, Chapter II touches upon the conflict which started with the 2013 Seleka coup and introduces some of the methods employed during fieldwork.

Building on Chapter II, Chapter III deals with methodology but goes beyond an enumeration and description of methods. While 'methods' are the actual building blocks of data collection, 'methodology' refers to a philosophical approach towards doing research and being in the field, especially in relation to those on whom, and 'with' whom, we do research. Beyond fieldwork, this methodology informs a more inclusive approach towards academia. Here too, mobility (especially in the mind) stands at the core of the methodology. The chapter begins with a description of physical moving as a way of collecting data. Slowly but surely physical mobility makes room for more non-physical types of mobility. Moving methods, then, encapsulate being emotionally 'moved' or touched by what we encounter in the field. This emotional reading of mobility opens up alternative ways of thinking about more inclusive research practices, as well as pursuits of 'moving' in the same direction with others and creating artistic and academic outcomes with others.

Building upon biographical narratives and the description of life paths that weave back and forth among countries and across boundaries, Chapter IV presents the history of the region from both a subjective and micro-historical point of view, on the one hand, and a mobility-inspired perspective based on these personal trajectories, on the other hand. Added together, the life stories in this chapter cover four countries in Central Africa: CAR, DR Congo and, to a lesser extent, Congo-Brazzaville, and Chad. They set the historical scene of this thesis and are connected to macro-historical events and national histories. The chapter covers the history from pre-colonial times up to 2011 (more recent history is treated in Chapter II). In it, I explore how mobility shaped the region in the long term: from as early as the establishment of forest communities during the Bantu expansion; to the different slave-raiding incursions in pre-colonial times; the violent colonial penetration and oppression; the critical decade around independence, followed by decades of dictatorship and

military rule; the age of so-called liberalization and democratization, which then gave rise to different forms of rebellion and violent expressions at the turn of the millennium. Because it is based on life stories, Chapter IV follows a subjective chronology, one that is unchronological and coloured by memory. The main purpose in doing so is to underline that even if arbitrary borders deeply impacted and undeniably shaped the region, they never managed to completely divide it.

Part Two deals with the CAR refugee-students in Kinshasa and is based on the life stories of these students (their family members, relatives, friends, neighbours) in Kinshasa, Bangui, and Brazzaville. The term refugee-students serves to accentuate their (im)mobility status, on the one hand, while on the other hand it makes an attempt to demarcate a particular group of youth. Not all are students in the strict sense of the word, however; some were still finishing high school, while others had studied for some time before. Nevertheless, they are all urban and educated; and because they moved due to conflict across an international border and make use of the UN Refugee Convention, the adjective 'refugee' describes them best—they even self-identity with this label. Part Two comprises four empirical chapters, which can be read on their own—that is, horizontally—even though I encourage the reader to read them vertically: as layers one on top of the other, wherein each chapter digs deeper and adds a new layer of analysis to the former one. This part of the thesis illustrates, through the example of the refugee-students, how youth find a place in their own communities and beyond. All the chapters in this part deal with movement and the lack thereof. Movement is understood in physical, symbolic, and existential terms. Taken together, the different chapters examine different layers of the CAR refugee-students' multiple journeys.

Chapter V deals with the physical journey—that is, the plural geographical itineraries of the refugee-students. The point of departure for all is Bangui. The point of arrival, on the other hand, is multiple and different for every individual; and, as time evolves, it keeps on moving and changing. Chapter V also takes into consideration the lack of movement, the pauses during journeys, the detours, and the various moments of immobility and of being stuck. Chapter VI touches upon the quest for becoming—in other words, on the envisaged horizon to which the journey leads: access to education. In this chapter, education is understood in its broadest sense: in terms of schooling (going to school) but also in terms of upbringing (education outside school, both within the family and the wider society). In a first instance, this chapter goes back in time to the Bangui of the refugee-students' childhood, which is set in the turbulent decade of the 1990s. By digging deeper into their pasts, the chapter helps to contextualize and nuance the decisions the students take as young adults later in their lives. Schooling and upbringing, however, are not limited to the context of Bangui but are then transposed to their 'growing up' in their newly adopted home, the hostile city of Kinshasa,

and the necessity to develop a whole array of coping strategies. Kinshasa is transformed into a site of education in terms of survival, a school of life.

In Chapter VII, the quest for becoming spreads beyond the self to the wider community of CAR refugees in Kinshasa. Even if this chapter draws, again, on multiple experiences of the different refugee-students, the story of Euloge—and most importantly, his political engagement and growth and hence social and political mobility—stands at its core. By means of concrete examples, in which Euloge deals with the problems of members of the CAR refugee community in Kinshasa, the rooting of this engagement is illustrated. This engagement is not new, however, but forms rather a continuation of Euloge's endeavour as a student leader in his university years in Bangui prior to the 2013 crisis. It is here where continuity, rather than rupture, in migration and flight must be understood. Chapter VIII builds on this continuity, but turns to personal and spiritual growth, as well as to creativity and artistic expressions. It illustrates how the refugee-students defy established social norms and explore the limits of their personalities.

Considering the different avatars of the conflict mobile leads to a reflection on the definitions of the refugee, on the one hand, and on the humanitarian agent. The movement of both avatars, and many others, including the researcher, are informed by conflict, yet the itineraries follow different mobility regimes. While the refugee suffers in a state of stuckedness, the humanitarian agent is ultra-mobile. The conflict mobile helps to underline these differences and inequalities. This thesis argues, moreover, that conflict and mobility are part of the long history that has shaped societies in Central Africa. But as the conflict mobile incorporates outsiders, intruders and explorers, these have also played a role in shaping the region and its history. It is this common endeavour, for better and for worse, that feeds a nomadic mind, one that looks for ways to bring together different practices of knowledge production in order to better understand what mobility means along the shores of the Ubangi River.