

**WITCHCRAFT, VIOLENCE AND EVERYDAY LIFE: AN  
ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF KINSHASA**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF  
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## Abstract

The inhabitants of Kinshasa, who call themselves *Kinois*, deal with insecurity and violence on a daily basis. Cheating and thefts are commonplace, and pillaging by street gangs and robberies by armed thieves are everyday occurrences. The state infrastructure is so poorly regulated that deaths by accident or medical negligence are also common. This, and much more, contributes to a challenging social milieu within which the *Kinois*' best hope is simply to 'make do'.

This thesis, based on extensive fieldwork in Kinshasa, analyses different forms of violence which affect the *Kinois* on a daily basis. I argue that the *Kinois*' concept of violence, *mobulu*, differs from Western definitions, which define violence as an intrinsically negative and destructive force. *Mobulu* is for the *Kinois* a potentially constructive phenomenon, which allows them to build relationships, coping strategies and new social phenomena. Violence is perceived as a transformative force, through which people build meaningful lives in the face of the hardship of everyday life.

Broadly speaking, this thesis contributes to the Anthropology of violence which has too often focused on how violence is imposed upon a population, often from a structural level of a state and its institutions. Such an approach fails to account for the nuances of alternate perspectives of what 'violence' is, as evidenced in this thesis through the prism of the *Kinois* term *mobulu*. The concept of *mobulu* highlights the creativity of those forced to 'make do' on the streets of Kinshasa, to negotiate not only every day physical needs, for food and shelter, but also to navigate the mystical violence of witchcraft. By exploring the coping mechanisms across all sections of society, I analyse how the *Kinois* not only have built their lives in the wake of the violence of the state, but they have also found means of empowerment within it, using *mobulu* as a springboard for the development of some social phenomena.

Whereas the anthropology of violence has focused mainly on physical and material violence, this thesis also argues that *mobulu* in Kinshasa is a total social fact that combines state violence with everyday violence, and physical violence with the invisible violence of witchcraft. This thesis seeks to enrich discussions on witchcraft in Kinshasa and in the African context in general, by analysing in depth how the cosmology of Kinshasa has differentiated itself as a result of the politico-economic events of recent decades. As witchcraft and material insecurity go hand in hand, a detailed analysis of the mechanisms of witchcraft is necessary, if we are to grasp the complexity of the concept of *mobulu* and how material and invisible violence inform each other.

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## **Notes on currency and terminology**

Congolese francs (CDF) and US dollars (\$) were both used in circulation in Kinshasa, the currency quoted varying according to the amount of money spent. For small everyday purchases such as transport and food, Congolese francs would be used, whilst larger payments were often made in US dollars. The exchange rate at the time of fieldwork was 910 Congolese francs for every \$1.

Throughout this thesis, mentions of 'Congo' specifically refer to the Democratic Republic of Congo, as opposed to the nearby Republic of Congo. Words quoted in the vernacular language of Kinshasa, Lingala, shall be italicised and translated accordingly throughout this text.

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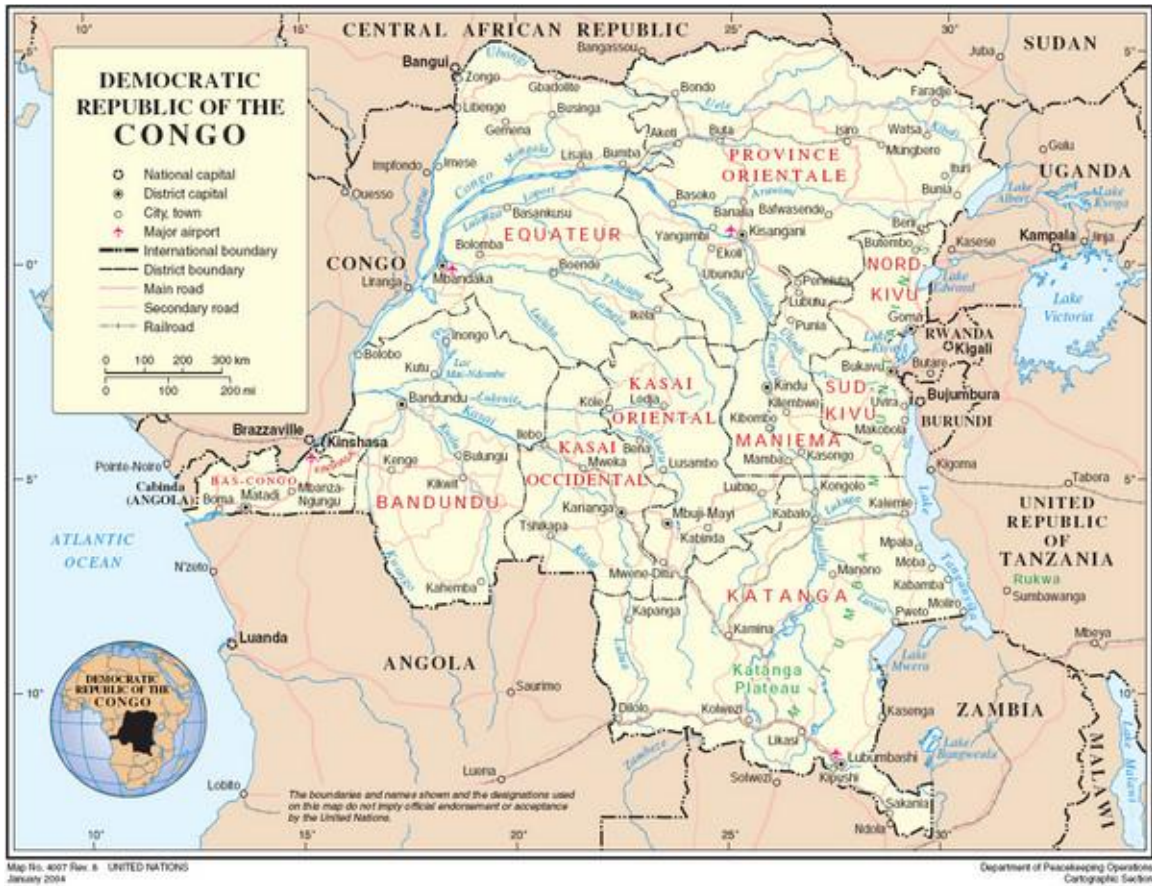
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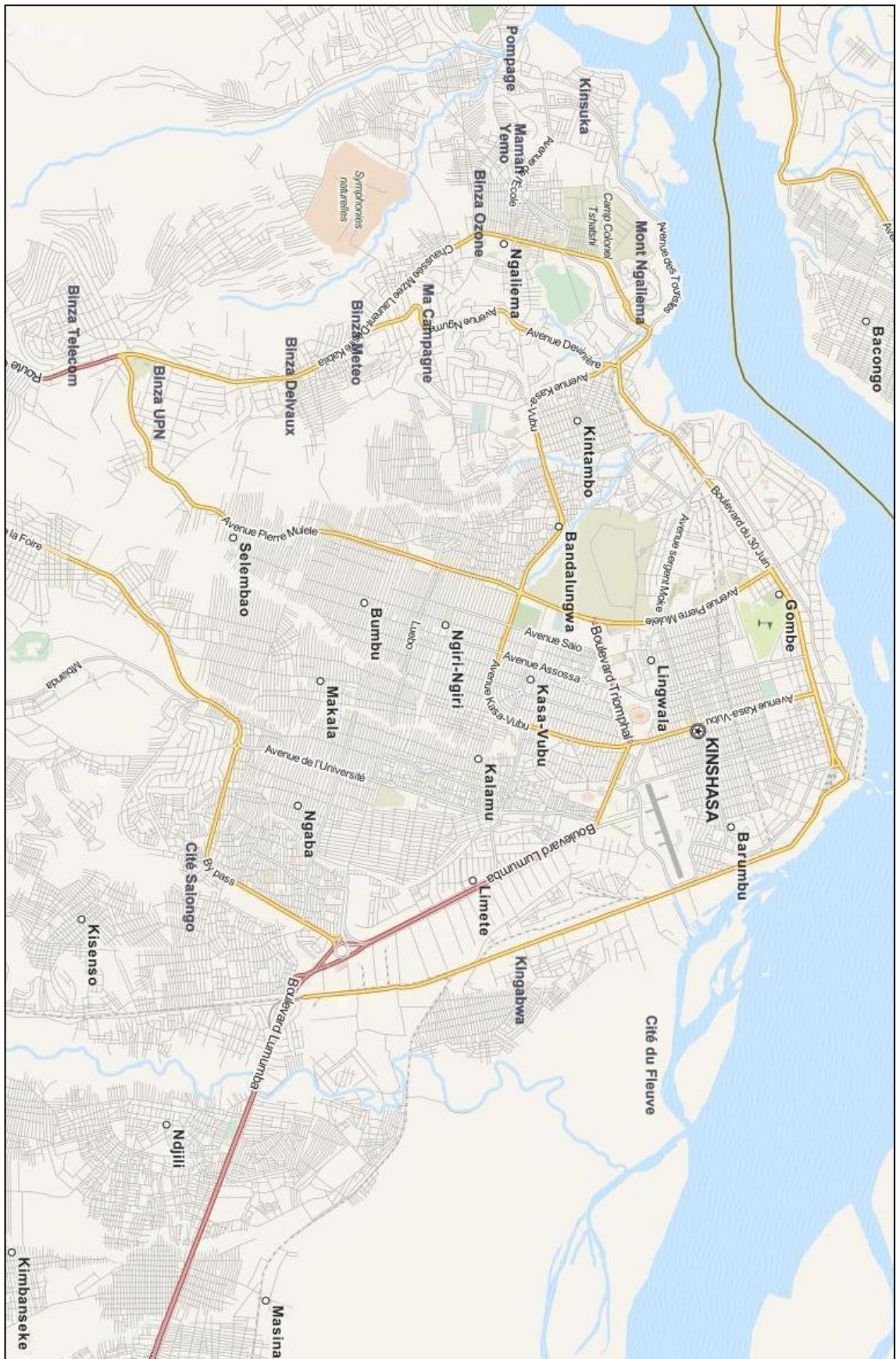
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# MAP 1. Regional map of the Democratic Republic of Congo



Source: Mappery.com.

MAP 2. Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo



## - CHAPTER ONE -

### INTRODUCTION

This thesis offers an anthropological investigation into the lives of the inhabitants of Kinshasa (who call themselves *Kinois*) and their everyday experiences of violence, which they conceptualise through the notion of *mobulu*. In particular, I aim to describe the constant interplay which exists between the violence perpetrated by the state and its institutions, and the violence which affects the everyday lives of the *Kinois* at the local, community level. At the same time, because much of the violence which takes place in Kinshasa is fomented by rumours and gossip on witchcraft (*kindoki* in Lingala, the vernacular language in Kinshasa), I aim to describe the interplay which exists also between material violence, and the invisible violence of witchcraft. Material and invisible violence, and state violence and everyday violence, are interconnected in such a complex way that a study of the multi-faceted notion of violence (*mobulu*) in Kinshasa is at the same time necessary and urgent, if we are to understand the choices and strategies of the *Kinois* in their everyday lives – choices dictated by necessity which nonetheless have resulted in original and creative social phenomena.

In 2012, the Congo regained the last place (out of 186) in the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Index. Recent estimates suggest that there are around 70% of people living on under a dollar a day in Kinshasa (Lamb 2013; Ouayoro 2013) which constitutes the highest such population within a singular city in the world (De Boeck 2011a). There is an unemployment rate of 73%, and a life expectancy of 50.4 years for women and 47.2 for men (UN Statistics Division 2013). According to statistics, 4.3% of the Congo's population is HIV positive (UNAIDS 2009) and the infant mortality rate stood at 109.4 per 1000 births in 2011 (UN Statistics Division 2013). These values are the result of a complex array of factors such as ill-fated state policies and the malfunctioning of a number of state institutions, ranging from the health system to the economic sector.

During my fieldwork I had the opportunity to witness how the malfunctioning of such institutions created an uncertain terrain within which the *Kinois* negotiated their everyday lives – a terrain of violence (*mobulu*). Moreover, the corruption which reigned at the political level meant that wealth was concentrated in the hands of few, while the rest were obliged to cope with economic insecurity by themselves. The jobless citizens of Kinshasa were forced to find alternate means of income – however

fluctuating and precarious. Others preferred to make do through robbery, pillage and fraud: street gangs attacked the population and fought against other gangs in the streets of Kinshasa; thieves in military and police uniform robbed people's houses and killed those who resisted them; while unpaid soldiers and public officials harassed the population through fictitious taxations, blackmailing and scams.

Violence also affected people's lives within the more intimate circle of the family and the household. Solidarity networks among kin have started to alter, with many young people unable to afford the customary bridewealth necessary to marry. Moreover, household members have started to steal from each other in order to make do and feed their children. The unity of the family and the trust between household members were at stake. Tensions within the family circle not only resulted in physical and psychological hardship for many *Kinois*, but also in witchcraft accusations. Indeed people started to accuse each other of impeding them to progress in lives, or simply trying to get rid of them through witchcraft for jealousy, tension and misunderstandings.

These different forms of violence on the ground can be read as the response of the *Kinois* in the face of the macro-level violence of the state policies and institutions. However, rather than being considered merely as a destructive and negative entity, the *Kinois* used violence as a social catalyst, transforming it into a coping mechanism in several fields: members of street gangs were able to create a different form of sociability in the face of the gerontocratic rules of society and to establish a new model of manhood through their violent fights; people working in the informal economy managed to take advantage of the faults of the state, and some of them exponentially improved their income through illegal dealings, scamming and cheating; and young people created alternative forms of romantic unions in order to bypass the obstacle of the bridewealth and demonstrate their independence to the elders of the family. All of these phenomena and more will be dealt in depth in this thesis in order to illustrate to the reader that violence (*mobulu*) in Kinshasa was a very complex term, perceived as a generative rather than a destructive force. Thus, an in depth description of the multiple shades and shapes of violence across different fields of society is necessary if we are to understand the role of *mobulu* in Kinshasa, and how the *Kinois* found this abstract and flexible notion to be a social space where they could carve out meaningful social lives on the fringes of a state, within which they perceived themselves to be largely neglected and forgotten.

In the next section I will provide an overview of the anthropological literature on Kinshasa in order to situate my thesis within the scholarly context of the region. Following this brief overview, I will introduce the reader to the concept of violence (*mobulu*) as the *Kinois* describe it. An understanding of this complex term will allow us to understand how the *Kinois* have been able to transform the violence they were subjected to into a powerful element of cohesion able to create new social phenomena and develop existing ones.

The discussion over *mobulu* will lead us into the anthropological literature on structural violence. Taking Paul Farmer's (1996, 2004, 2005, et. al. 2006) descriptions of structural violence as a starting point, I will analyse how discussions on violence in anthropology have lately shifted towards an approach 'from below', in order to understand how people have unwittingly incorporated structural violence into their everyday practices, gestures and choices. In the following section I will address the gap inherent to anthropological discussions on violence, explaining that scholars have so far missed a crucial catalyst of violence in society, which is witchcraft. I will introduce the reader to the anthropological literature on witchcraft and site my thesis within the scholarship. Because witchcraft is propagated within the community through 'word of mouth', in the following section I will analyse the power of rumours and gossip in influencing everyday life and relationships within a given community, and I will explain the ways in which witchcraft rumours and gossip in particular contribute to insecurity in society.

Finally, I will outline the setting and methodology during my research in Kinshasa, introducing the reader to the world of mistrust, suspicion and paranoia which characterised everyday life in the suburb where I lived as well as throughout the city.

### **Siting my thesis in Kinshasa**

Kinshasa is a rich and kaleidoscopic social space. From whatever angle one looks at it, the city reveals urban phenomena and rituals which continuously transform and evolve. As such, it has been a privileged locus for research within the social sciences, and has attracted the attention of numerous scholars from different branches of the discipline.

The development of the city from early colonialism to post-independence has been extensively described elsewhere, most notably within the works of two French urban geographers, Pain (1979, 1984) and de Maximy (1984), and in those of two

professors of the University of Kinshasa (UNIKIN), Lelo Nzuzi (2008, 2011; Nzuzi & Beaujeau-Garnier 1989; Nzuzi & Mbuyi 2004) and de Saint Moulin (1969, 1970, 1976, 1977, 2007). These authors have analysed the demographic trends of the city, its urban development and that of its public services in different historical epochs.

Until 1971 the city was known as Leopoldville, named in honour of Belgian King Leopold II. During the colonial encounter this urban environment was a place where a new identity was born – that of the neo-citizen. Anthropologists such as La Fontaine (1970a), and later on Gondola (1996) and the sociologist Yoka (1995, 1999) started to explore the question of the identity of the citizens of Leopoldville – who have called themselves *Kinois* after President Mobutu changed the name of the city to ‘Kinshasa’ in 1971. Being citizen was more than transposing the rural life to Kinshasa, but rather shaping one’s own identity within the new practices proper of the urban space. The city was the place where people defined their identities in the spheres of religion, sport, the arts, music, fashion trends and *l’ambiance*, the party atmosphere of the capital.

Several authors have focused themselves on the artistic scene in Kinshasa – one of the most bubbling and fruitful in central Africa. White (1999, 2008), Stewart (2000) and Trapido (2013) have focused on the musical scene of the capital, while Bogumil Jewsiewicki (1991, 1993, 1996, 2003), Fabian (1996) and Biaya (1988, 1996) have introduced the reader to the painting tradition in Kinshasa. Artists in the city denounced the inequalities of society, offered multiple solutions, expressed class consciousness and social malcontent. Political malcontent and dissent during colonial Leopoldville were also expressed through the body and the culture of clothing of *les sapeurs* (see chapter 2), people who wore expensive European brand clothes as a means of appropriating colonial power before Independence, and as a critique of power in its aftermath. Authors such as Gandoulou (1989a, 1989b), Gondola (1999a, 1999c), and MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga (2000) have analysed *les sapeurs* in depth, which are still present in Kinshasa and in Brazzaville, the capital of the neighbouring Republic of Congo – although much less than in the past.

The world of religious practice also became a privileged field of resistance to colonial rule for the Congolese. Kimbanguism, a prophetic movement which emerged in 1921 thanks to Prophet Simon Kimbangu, preached the liberation of the soul from all forms of oppression, including colonial authority (Asch 1983; Kodi 1993; MacGaffey W. 1983, 1986; Martin M-L. 1983; Nzongola-Ntalaja 2002). Following the arrest and

the death in captivity of Kimbangu in 1951, after thirty years of prison, the movement increased in popularity. Today, the 'Church of Jesus Christ on the Earth by the Prophet Simon Kimbangu' (EJCSK) is one of the most popular religious movements in Kinshasa, alongside Catholicism and Protestantism. Moreover, since the 1980s the city of Kinshasa has seen the establishment of hundreds of Pentecostal 'awakening churches' (*églises de réveil*), in which elements of Christianity and of the local cosmology have come to coexist. Pastors in these churches preach the presence of the Devil and witches within the community, and exhort followers to undergo exhausting prayer vigils and exorcisms in order to be freed from the evil (see Devisch 1996a, 1996b; Pype 2006a, 2006b, 2012).

The changes in Kinshasa's social context went hand in hand with the politico-economic changes of the country as a whole. The endemic corruption and criminality which characterised Mobutu's reign between 1964 and 1997 were followed by the armed clashes, rapes and pillages which took place at the east of the country during, and in the aftermath of, the two Congo Wars (1996-1997, 1998-2003)<sup>1</sup>. This has had heavy repercussions on people's lives and led to more insecurity and violence in several fields of society: economic hardship went along with an increasing number of witchcraft accusations and Pentecostal churches in which people sought refuge from the insecurity of everyday life.

Surprisingly, most of the anthropological literature on violence and insecurity in Kinshasa deals either with material *or* with 'spiritual' insecurity and doesn't reflect upon the relationship between the two. On one hand, many anthropologists<sup>2</sup> have focused on the hardship of 'making do' and survival strategies in the informal economy, which have arisen in spite of, and in response to, deep-rooted and multifaceted crises. Other approaches have focused on how some young *Kinois* have found a fruitful means to make do through joining street gangs and gain social prestige among their peers (La Fontaine 1970b; Geenen 2009; Gondola 2009). At the same time, poverty, insecurity and the malfunctioning of the health system have resulted in a normalisation of death across *Kinois* society. De Boeck (2005b, 2006, 2008) analyses

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<sup>1</sup> On the two Congo Wars see Prunier (2006, 2009), Turner (2007), French (2009), Lemarchand (2009) and Jourdan (2010).

<sup>2</sup> See MacGaffey J. (1986, 1987, 1991), De Herdt and Marysse (1996, 1999), Gondola (1997), wa Mwanza (1997), Emizet (1998), MacGaffey & Bazenguissa-Ganga (1999, 2000), De Herdt (2002), Nlandu (2002), Trefon (2002a, 2002b, 2004), Petit and Mulumbwa (2005) and lately Ayimpam (2014).



how dead bodies have literally invaded the streets, as mourning practices started to take place in public squares or in the street.

On the other hand, studies have focused on the invisible violence of witchcraft, and on the role of diviners in divining the cause of witchcraft and fighting it. Devisch focused extensively on Yaka divinatory practices (Devisch 1991, 1993; De Boeck & Devisch 1994; Devisch & Brodeur 1999), while Tonda (2008) and De Boeck (2004, 2005a, 2005b) analysed in depth the imaginary of violence and killings of the world of witchcraft in Kinshasa, especially in regards to the phenomenon of the witch-children (*bana bandoki* in Lingala).

Amid all the works which analyse violence in Kinshasa either from a material or from a mystical point of view, a notable exception would be Devisch (1995), who attempted to address the interplay between changes in everyday life and in the cosmology of the *Kinois* from Independence until the 1990s. Devisch illustrates how people have been able to position themselves “between an alienating colonial past, modernity, and the predatory State” (*Ibid*: p. 593) by creating strategies of survival and social affirmation in a number of different fields. One of these strategies was the development of new spaces of socialisation, like the church, following a revival of village-like solidarity ties among the community – a phenomenon which Devisch labelled as “villagisation”(1995, 1996a). The churches that have been established across Kinshasa since the 1980s were a response to the colonial intrusion and the modern state. As Devisch (1995: 626) explains:

[H]ealing churches offer a plural aetiology of the vices and dangers of contemporary urban life. The coming of the Holy Spirit represents healing and an end to misfortune. In this way these churches transform a situation of failure and suffering into an opportunity for grace.

Although Devisch’s account addresses the relationships between colonialism, violence and new coping mechanisms in the face of the contradictions of modernity, it does not go beyond the rise of charismatic churches to explore how the witchcraft discourse promulgated across the everyday lives of people under the church’s influence. This has been later analysed by De Boeck and Plissart (2004) in their book, “Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City”.

De Boeck and Plissart (2004) analyse the urban reality of Kinshasa alongside its ‘double’, an invisible, mirroring reality lurking underneath the visible world. The

authors highlight how despite the colonial and post-colonial projects of modernism and civilisation of the city, which left the Congolese as mere spectators and subjects of the colonial project, the *Kinois* have been able to put the interplay between modernity and tradition, Christianity and traditional cosmology, and between the city and the village to their own benefit, creating original paths and resources for survival and social recognition. Such reworking of the urban landscape has also taken place in the invisible world of witchcraft: the new market economy and its perceived mysterious mechanisms promoted rumours of accumulation through witchcraft, while an increasingly number of churches in Kinshasa have taken up the role of expurgators of witchcraft through the word of God and exorcism procedures. It is through the invisible world underneath the physical reality that the *Kinois* are infusing the city with their own moralities, praxis, values and temporal dynamics (De Boeck & Plissart 2004: 34).

The aim of this thesis is to contribute to the anthropological scholarship of Kinshasa by offering an in-depth account of how material and mystical violence interrelate. My research develops upon Devisch (1995) and De Boeck and Plissart (2004) inasmuch as it analyses how the relationship between everyday life and the invisible world of witchcraft has changed in recent years, also according to politico-economic developments. In order to do so, I shall analyse in depth some social phenomena which have not been analysed in the scholarship so far, such as street gangs known as *kulunas* as well as circulating rumours of uses of witchcraft powers in order to become rich – a phenomenon the *Kinois* call ‘magic’ (*la magie*). At the same time, I will ground this analysis within the shifting familial context and the new forms of union in contemporary Kinshasa, as witchcraft accusations were highly dependent on the tensions such unions created across generations.

To summarise, I aim to provide a comprehensive, in-depth analysis of material and mystical violence, how the two are linked, and what they create at the everyday level. I specifically pose the questions: How does the violence of the state correspond to the violence of everyday life for the majority of the *Kinois*, and how does the latter relate to the violence created by witchcraft rumours and accusations? Before delving into this argument, I shall offer some context for the complex ways in which violence is realised and perceived by the *Kinois* in their everyday life. I shall begin by exploring a Lingala term the *Kinois* use to describe the polymorphic nature of violence. That word is *mobulu*.

## ***Mobulu*: Violence as a Catalyst for Social Relationships**

In Kinshasa, *mobulu* denoted not only physical violence, but also disorder and social violence. This form of violence, although less direct or immediately physically harmful, had the power to subvert power relationships and create new ones, and to cast people out from society. The concept of *mobulu* stands opposed to *kimia*, which is translated as peace, calm and tranquillity. In the words of Paul, a political refugee who fled Kinshasa in the 1990s, *mobulu*, “has got many words hidden within it: troubles, unconsciousness, immorality, violence... In some occasions it can mean also disorder”. Paul, who now lives in London with his wife and two children, offered several examples to explain how *mobulu* was used in everyday contexts. *Mobulu* could be referred to as the violence of the street gangs, who robbed and killed pedestrians in the market, or to the actions of soldiers who harassed people for money, both at night and during the day (“they are people of violence”, “*baza batu ya mobulu*”). *Mobulu* also incorporated the violence of witches who killed people through witchcraft (“the violence of witchcraft”, “*mobulu ya kindoki*”). At the same time, a State that did not provide for its citizens, but enriched only those few within its government, was considered a source of *mobulu* (“violence is in the country”, “*mobulu aza na mboka*”).

*Mobulu* could also refer to people who misbehaved in the face of moral rules of conduct. For example, women who engaged in multiple relationships, or who lied to their husbands, were considered *mobulu*, or troublesome. So for example when Martin Azekwa<sup>3</sup>, a friend of the couple I lived with, came to our house in Kinshasa and started to ask about Clarisse, our young and beautiful neighbour, my friend Joseph replied: “Forget that woman, she’s trouble” (“*Tikka mwasi wana, aza mobulu*”), recalling the time when she forcibly entered our house because she wanted to beat one of youngest relatives of the family who I lived with. Also, children who were adjudged to be stubborn and impolite were *mobulu* (“the child is troublesome”, “*mwana aza mobulu*”), while young men who fought under the effect of marijuana and alcohol on the streets without apparent reasons, were often described as *mobulu* because they displayed behaviours considered to be amoral, and were potential sources of violence against other people.

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<sup>3</sup> All names in this thesis, with the exception of those of public figures, are pseudonyms.

Through the lens of *mobulu*, the *Kinois* exhibited a broader understanding of violence. It is only through a systematic and in-depth description of the local meaning of *mobulu* that we can understand how violence presides also in apparent non-violent contexts. For example, a child adjudged to be stubborn and impolite was considered a manifestation of violence because that child embodied the possibilities of becoming a witch and perpetuated fears of death through witchcraft<sup>4</sup>. A woman who had sexual relations with multiple men was considered to be *mobulu* because she might potentially create tensions between her lovers, which could result in witchcraft accusations. A thief or someone who cheated people financially was considered to be *mobulu* because he contributed towards poverty and interpersonal tensions within the community.

*Mobulu* in Kinshasa occurred throughout daily life. People of the same family, as well as strangers, were not afraid to show their disappointment and their rage against each other. For Paul, this was a clear sign of the coolness of the *Kinois*:

In Kinshasa, it heats up [*ça chauffe* in French] very easily! But the good thing about Kinshasa is that it is from there that true relationships are born. You fight, and then you hold no rancour! The day after you run into each other and you say: ‘Ah! Mate, how are you [*masta ndenge nini?*]’, ‘Bien!’ Brother, if you are stronger than me, go on and beat me. I will go and take a shower, and it is over [*Ah mon frère, soki oleki ngai makasi, obeti ngai, nakei nasokoli c’est fini eh*]... It’s normal!

Not only did *mobulu* in Kinshasa become normalised and routinised, but it was also perceived by Paul, and by many others whom I interviewed, as a catalyst for social relationships. Stories of enemies who used to fight each other and then aligned with one another to fight a common enemy were recurrent in Kinshasa. This was also the case for those members of the government and its security forces, like politicians or police men, who at first seemed to fight street gangs and thieves, but would later cooperate with them, as explained in chapter 4. These people, who behaved against their mandate to protect the citizens from criminals, only to later become those criminals, were considered to be as much *mobulu* as thieves and street gangs’ members.

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<sup>4</sup> In Kinshasa, children who did not respect their parents and misbehaved were considered more likely to be bewitched and become witches themselves. Once they became witches, they were believed to kill members of their families in order to sacrifice them in the world of witchcraft (see chapter 7).

In the economic sector, *mobulu* was perceived by many *Kinois* I interviewed as a form of emancipation from the hardship they were subjected to through the economic crisis. In the face of adversity people managed to build their lives through illicit economic practices outside the law. It was through *mobulu* that some people were perceived to be able to accumulate enough wealth to marry and sustain entire households. In this sense, *mobulu* resulted in social bonding.

While some were believed to cheat in the informal economy in order to get rich, others were believed to enter occult Masonic sects for the same reason. Rich people were believed to have sacrificed a relative in the world of witchcraft in order to be able to amass a fortune. The mystical violence of the sacrifice was balanced by immense wealth, which could help sustaining a whole extended family thanks to the familial solidarity networks. This is why people who were rumoured to enter these Masonic lodges were generally not ostracised or punished by the community: the *mobulu* of the sacrifice was able to create wealth and wellness in everyday life.

*Mobulu* was also a powerful element of cohesion in the familial context. Often, tensions among family members over debts and quarrels resulted in witchcraft accusations among family members. Such accusations functioned also as an element of cohesion and reinforcement of familial ties. As witchcraft was deeply linked to kinship and was effective only against family members, witchcraft accusations stressed the boundaries of the family, distinguishing outsiders from insiders in the chaotic social context of Kinshasa, where boundaries and ties were made extremely loose (see chapter 6). Witchcraft accusations had the merit to reassert kin obligations and power relationships within the household.

The different forms of violence described above occurred in the same social context and took place simultaneously. Yet if we look at the existing anthropological literature on Kinshasa, it is unclear how each of these forms of violence are connected and inform each other – of particular interest for this thesis are the violence of the state and the violence of everyday life, as well as the relations between both material and spiritual violence. As such, my thesis will contribute to the literature on Kinshasa by analysing how all these aspects of violence cohabit, and influence the choices of the inhabitants of Kinshasa, choices often dictated by emergency and insecurity.

A few scholars in recent years have focused on the mutual relationship between state violence (or structural violence) and everyday violence in a number of social contexts. Thus, in the next section I shall proceed to outline a theoretical history of the

interplay between structural violence and everyday violence by analysing some of the most influential works in this particular field. This exploration will provide a means of exploring the academic niche within which this thesis resides.

### **Anthropologists, Structural Violence and Everyday Violence**

My research has been influenced by discussions on “structural violence” (Galtung 1969, 1990; Farmer 1996, 2004, 2005, et. al. 2006; Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004; Bourgois & Shonberg 2007; Bourgois 2009), which in its broadest sense is defined as the inability of the state and its institutions to provide its citizens with basic needs. Such structural violence affects the poorest segments of the population in different social contexts, resulting in hardship, insecurity and manifestations of “everyday violence” (Scheper-Hughes 1992) or “violence of everyday life” (Kleinman 2001).

The concept of structural violence was first introduced by Johan Galtung (1969, 1990), professor of the discipline of Peace Studies, and founder of the International Peace Institute in Oslo in 1959. Galtung (1969) describes different types of violence, which he distinguishes between by means of different dichotomies: physical – psychological, manifest – latent, and personal – structural. Structural violence is defined as that violence which is built into a structure, which manifests itself as unequal power, and subsequently as unequal life chances. In particular, Galtung (*Ibid*: 171) explains that structural violence manifests itself when:

“Resources are unevenly distributed, as when income distributions are heavily skewed, literacy/education unevenly distributed, medical services existent in some districts and for some groups only, and so on. Above all the *power to decide over the distribution of resources* is unevenly distributed” (Emphasis in original).

Thus, he explains, if a person died from tuberculosis in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it would be hard to describe that as violence. However, if a person were to die from tuberculosis at present, in spite of all the medical progress and resources potentially available to those who can afford them, then violence is taking place. Similarly, if people are starving where this is objectively avoidable, despite flourishing economic relationships worldwide, then violence is being committed (as a direct result of the unequal way in which these very economic relationships are organized). Structural

violence often does not present itself as evidently as it does in episodes of physical violence: it is static, and produces situations in which inequalities are taken for granted and justified as the normal working principle of a society. From this point of view, structural violence is the “tranquil waters” (*Ibid*: 173) which may seem as natural as the air we breathe, whilst actually containing more violence than it manifests.

Bourdieu (1977, 1989, 2000) argues that the naturalization or “normalization” of violence is the outcome of the symbolic dominance of the state, which maintains the population in a situation of control, impasse and “*inertia*” from which it is difficult to escape. Symbolic violence, he argues, is “a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more precisely, misrecognition), recognition, or even feeling” (Bourdieu 2001: 2). Symbolic violence creates boundaries and inequalities, dos and don’ts which are given as biologically determined, whereas in fact, they are “the product of an incessant [...] labour of reproduction to which singular agents [...] and institutions – families, the church, the educational system, the state – contribute” (Bourdieu 2001: 34).

Galtung (1990), some years after his first article on violence, seems to draw from Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic violence in order to shape his concept of “cultural violence”. He describes “cultural violence” as “those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence – exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science (logic, mathematics) – that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence”. From this point of view, structural violence may not only be exerted by the state: institutional violence is only one shape of structural violence. Galtung (*Ibid*) makes an example of how religion can be considered as a tool for cultural violence by looking at the Palestinian-Israeli example: the Chosen People of Israel translate their claim of the Promised Land by engaging in direct and structural violence against Palestine. Cultural violence, thus, becomes a steady flow at the bottom of structural violence, a substratum from which structural violence draws its power and legitimacy.

The concept of structural violence has been revived in anthropology by Paul Farmer (1996, 2004, 2005), a physician-anthropologist engaged specifically in humanitarian work. In his words, structural violence can be defined as a:

[B]road rubric that includes a host of offensives against human dignity: extreme and relative poverty, social inequalities ranging from racism to gender inequalities, and the more spectacular forms of violence that are incontestably human rights abuses, some of them punishment for efforts to escape structural violence. [...] In each of these situations, acts of violence are perpetrated, usually by the strong against the weak, in complex social fields (2005: 8-9).

Farmer developed this concept following his humanitarian experience and scholarly research among the poor of Latin America, United States, Russia and more recently, Rwanda. Struck by the inequalities of power and the impossibility for most Haitian and Rwandan people to access resources such as basic medical assistance and decent living conditions, he denounces the indifference – or rather, the calculated act of exclusion – of disadvantaged citizens by “neoliberal economics” (2004: 312). Indeed although neoliberalism poses an accent to the autonomy of each individual as rational producers and consumers driven by economic or material concern, little is said about the socio-economic inequalities that distort real economies and affect the powerless and disadvantaged people on the ground. From Farmer’s point of view, the state and those who profit most from such economic policies actively maintain inequalities of power. In those countries in which these inequalities are most visible, the power is concentrated in the hands of the government and those involved in it, to the detriment of the poorest segment of the population. As Sen (in Farmer 2005: xvi) describes in the foreword to Farmer’s book “Pathologies of power”: “The asymmetry of power can indeed generate a kind of quiet brutality”. This recalls Galtung’s notion of structural violence, silent and static like ‘calm waters’.

Farmer’s analysis of the concept of structural violence is appealing because it “allows us to place in broader contexts both human rights abuses and the discourses (and other responses) they generate” (Farmer 2005: 219), while grounding our understanding of injustices against the poor on broader analyses of power and social inequality. The case studies which Farmer demonstrates allow the reader to glimpse into the hardship of people in different contexts around the globe, which are dictated by broader politico-economic agendas from which the poor find it difficult to escape. Farmer’s aim is to gather together and comparatively analyse social hardship in different contexts, in order to devise an analytic model for understanding suffering on a global level and promote a broader human rights agenda. Despite Farmer’s undeniable contribution to studies on violence, his analyses overlook people’s embodiment,



appropriation and re-distribution of violence in their everyday life. Between the macro level of structural violence and the micro level of everyday life there is a whole range of micro-transformations, or rather “micrologics of power” (Green in Farmer 2004: 320) which position the individuals as active protagonists.

Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004), highlight in their book “Violence in War and Peace” that when violence is addressed in the university curriculum, it is often cordoned off in Peace and Conflict Studies, or it tends to be subsumed under biologised notions of ‘human aggression’. In the words of the authors:

These ideological approaches misrecognise the extent to which structural inequalities and power relations are naturalised by our categories and conceptions of what violence really is. They also fail to address the totality and range of violent acts, including those which are part of the normative fabric of social and political life. Structural violence is generally invisible because it is part of the routine grounds of everyday life and transformed into expressions of moral worth (*Ibid*: 4).

Taking Farmer’s definition of structural violence as a starting point, Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004) highlight how it is the everydayness of the production and replication of inequalities, or in other words, “the social and cultural dimensions of violence” (p. 1) that gives violence its meaning. The interplay of such ‘micrologics of violence’ creates specific phenomena within given social contexts. This is why they stress the need to relate structural violence to the “little violences produced in the structures, habituses, and mentalités of everyday life” (p. 19). People become the bearers of the violence imposed by the state, through their attitude towards class, gender, race and so on. A failure to focus on the everyday level of appropriations of violence leaves the many nuances of violence omitted. Indeed, while genocides, massacres and revolutionary violence are often visible, “the everyday violence of infant mortality, slow starvation, disease, despair, and humiliation that destroys socially marginalised humans with even greater frequency is usually invisible or misrecognised” (p. 2).

Scheper-Hughes’ account of maternal love and child death in North-eastern Brazil (1992) is exemplary in showing how the poor incorporated and embodied structural violence in their everyday lives. In order to make sense of the huge number of infant deaths for malnutrition and lack of health care, mothers came to categorise their malnourished babies as “angel-babies”, babies that were already considered as

angels. These babies were described as “having no ‘taste’, no ‘knack’, and no ‘talent’ for life” (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004: 371). As such, their deaths were envisaged by their mothers to such extent that women reduced their babies’ intake of food and liquids “so to help them, their mothers said, to die quickly and well” (*Ibid*). So, alongside killings and abductions, violence in Brazil was also exercised by the doctors who prescribed tranquillisers to hungry babies, the Catholic priests who celebrated the death of “angel-babies”, and the municipal bureaucrats who dispensed free baby coffins but no food to poor families.

In the same fashion, Bourgois and Schonberg (2007) explain the hidden reasons why black drug addicts in the neighbourhood of Harlem, New York, are called thieves. The authors show how the legacy of slavery and the active experience of racism in the United States help explain why black drug-addicts in Harlem refused humiliating jobs and submissive attitudes with their patrons, and preferred to resort to illegal income-generating activities. This earned them a reputation as thieves not only among the population, but also among white drug addicts. Assertions such as “Niggers are thieves” (*Ibid*: 15), demonstrate how the power of the violence of the state had been naturalised in everyday practice. To put it in the words of Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004: 21), violence “is everywhere in social practice. It is misrecognised because its very everydayness and its familiarity render it invisible”.

The concept of structural, symbolic and everyday violence is useful in understanding how *mobulu* has reproduced itself in every sphere of society in Kinshasa. Whether in church or at home, or while fending for themselves in the street, the *Kinois* have been affected by different forms of violence inflicted by different actors. However, the *Kinois* have always been able to make the most out of the hardship afflicting them, turning adverse situations to their favour.

As Galtung (1969, 1990), Farmer (1996, 2004, 2005) and the abovementioned scholars have explained, violence does not always take spectacular and apparent physical forms. Violence is often hidden, covert, and interweaved within everyday life. It is so taken for granted that it is sometimes also mistaken by its victims, who accept episodes of violence as the norm. *La débrouille*, the ‘making do’ economy of Kinshasa, is a clear example of that. In chapter 2, I will analyse how the state legitimised cheating and scamming among the population in the 1970s, when President Joseph Mobutu exhorted the inhabitants of the capital during a public speech to steal without being caught. ‘Making do’ through illegal and illicit means, often at the expenses of others,

became legitimised. As allowed and incited by President Mobutu, *mobulu* became permitted, transforming into a normal presence in everyday life. Violence thereafter became the domain of ordinary people. The *Kinois* were then subjected to different types of violence: the structural violence of the state, the everyday violence of *la débrouille* and street gangs, and so on. Many *Kinois* were both victims and perpetrators of violence, and did not hesitate to reproduce the same mechanisms of violence that they themselves were subjected to. *La débrouille*, as ‘making do’ is referred to in Kinshasa, is the result of the emancipation of legitimized *mobulu* upon society.

Violence, as Galtung (1990) affirms, is not only carried out by the state – meaning institutional violence. Structural violence in Kinshasa was also exercised by the military, the thousands of Pentecostal churches which have mushroomed around Kinshasa, and Western actors like the missionaries. All these actors have influenced the choices and the coping mechanisms of many *Kinois* in different aspects of their everyday lives. In chapter 4, I will explain how the military has played an important role in shaping notions of power and success among the unemployed young men of Kinshasa. Pillaging and the abuse of force became the ‘normal’ means through which these young men could obtain social recognition in their neighbourhood, and carve out a meaningful space for themselves in society.

Structural violence may also be employed involuntarily by some social actors who are not readily and/or easily associated with violence. In chapter 6 and chapter 7 I will explain how some contemporary Western institutions which are present in Kinshasa, such as the missionaries and Non-Governmental Organisations, have had an important role in shaping the notion of the nuclear family through their policies and their programmes. However, the cluster of mother-father-child has presented some challenges to many Congolese families, who still abide by the customary mechanisms of the enlarged family. This model of the nuclear family contributed to increased tensions within the household, particularly between the younger and the older generations, as young people tried to free themselves from the grip of their elders.

Often, the tensions which resided within the family resulted in children being accused of witchcraft by some family members. Children were described by the *Kinois* I interviewed as innocent and in need of protection, a statement which resonates with the Western notion of the child as proclaimed by missionaries and Non-Governmental Organisations. This is explained in chapter 7. Due to their naivety, children were believed to be more easily lured into witchcraft deeds, and were the first to be cast out

by family members as witches. In this regard, Pentecostal churches can also be considered agents of violence in Kinshasa. Indeed it is the Pentecostal pastors who are able to confirm if a suspected child is a witch, during a public confession session in church. As I witnessed during my fieldwork, once the child was declared a witch, he had to undergo a violent exorcism procedure, which sometimes put the life of the child at risk. At the same time, the children's confessions of witchcraft also involved accusations against other family members, who were believed to be the instigator of the child's witchcraft in order to kill other family members. Therefore, on the one hand, Pentecostal pastors provided their followers with a space to reaffirm themselves and retake control of their lives through cathartic healing sessions and exorcisms; however on the other hand they did not hesitate to cast out small children and other relatives as evil individuals, thus threatening the unity of the family and causing further tensions among its members. By ostracizing children as witches, Pentecostal pastors offered the parents a reason to mistreat and abuse their children at home, both physically and psychologically, in order to convince the children to leave the world of witchcraft by any means necessary.

The *Kinois* depicted in this thesis were therefore both victims and perpetrators of violence. This makes it difficult to draw a line between structural and everyday violence, whilst at the same time demonstrating the need for a detailed analysis regarding *mobulu* in Kinshasa's everyday life. *Mobulu* is not a straightforward notion, nor necessarily a negative one. This term represented a whole universe of possibilities for many *Kinois*, of escaping mechanisms and coping strategies. *La débrouille* is a predatory context which people needed to learn how to navigate, if they wanted to make the most out of it. Witchcraft accusations could potentially reunite a whole family against a common enemy, and strengthen solidarity mechanisms. Violent fights have become, for some young people, a way to find their niche in society, in the face of the ineptitude of the state. The purpose of this thesis is to understand how the *Kinois* were able to make the most out of everyday hardship, and to empower themselves through *mobulu*.

## Gap in the Theory: Witchcraft in Everyday Life

In this thesis I aim to contribute to the existing literature on structural and everyday violence by addressing some notable exclusions from the present scholarship. Anthropological studies on violence so far have focused on how this influences the everyday practices of given social groups, regardless of the will of the individuals subjected to it. The mothers described by Scheper-Hughes seem powerless in front of the death of their children, incapable to react to their conditions of passivity in front of the symbolic violence of the state. And Bourgois (2003; Bourgois & Schonberg 2007) description of the social context of drug users leaves the reader with a sense of hopelessness in front of the racial and class discrimination to which black drug addicts are subjected to. In my thesis I wish to shift the focus from the impasse of the marginalised, to analyse the different ways in which they appropriate, transform and take advantage of processes of domination and control. In doing so, I wish to analyse how the abuses of the state in Kinshasa have given rise to new social phenomena. In particular I will emphasize the rise of the street gangs in response to the lack of jobs, the development of informal economy, and the creation of an imaginary rationale according to which the *Kinois* could enrich themselves through witchcraft. This is not mere resistance to a lack of opportunities, but rather the formation of a distinctly new opportunity for the creation of personal livelihoods.

Often, as I have introduced earlier, the appropriation of the structural and symbolic violence of the state takes a violent form in Kinshasa: people cheat each other in the informal market, street gangs and thieves create insecurity within the community, and people accuse each other of witchcraft ordeals in front of misfortunes. However, I will show that many *Kinois* are not reluctant to engage in violent activities, as they consider *mobulu* as an intrinsic regenerative and transformative tool, able to turn their lives in a different – and intrinsically better – direction.

As violence is a social and cultural construct, I argue that social research should pay more attention to the notion of violence as it is understood and experienced by the people of a given society. In this thesis I argue against the prevalent anthropological approaches to comprehend ‘violence’ as something inherently destructive and instead I wish to emphasize how everyday violence is envisioned and experienced as something transformative and potentially creative. In order to analyse the full range of potential of *mobulu*, I will focus each chapter on manifestations of *mobulu* in different fields of the

society in Kinshasa. In doing so, I will deconstruct the notion of violence, in order to explore its nuances in terms of economic hardship, domestic instability, street violence, and witchcraft.

The scholarship on structural and everyday violence focuses on the material side of everyday life: they focus on the institutions of the state and its subjugating power, and on the multiple actions and reactions that people engage with at a quotidian level in order to make front to this. However, everyday violence is not only physical, but also invisible. These studies miss the role of witchcraft in shaping daily choices and relationships. *Mobulu* in Kinshasa was also carried out through the power of isolation and punishment of witchcraft (*sorcellerie* in French, *kindoki* in Lingala), through its rumours and whisperings. Despite its invisibility, the consequences of witchcraft were very visible and affected the *Kinois*' everyday lives in a very dramatic way. This is why an analysis of witchcraft in the context of everyday violence is absolutely necessary. The anthropological literature on witchcraft is so vast that it is impossible to give an extensive picture of it here. Over the following paragraphs I will focus on the trends in witchcraft studies that are most relevant for this thesis, in particular the relationship between witchcraft, modernity and globalisation.

Existing discussions on witchcraft in Kinshasa draw on the wider literature on witchcraft across Africa, which stems from Evans-Pritchard's seminal study "Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande" (1937). During the 1950s and 1960s, the social aspect, more than the invisible or mystical aspects of actual witchcraft belief, became one of the major concerns of the Manchester School. Nadel (1952), Mitchell (1956), Turner (1957) and Marwick (1965) analysed witchcraft as part of the history and social structure of specific societies, and highlighted how, particularly in rural villages, witchcraft accusations reinforced the local balance of power and were essential for the maintenance of the social order.

Studies of witchcraft underwent a major renewal during the late 1980s, when scholars realised that, despite colonial theories that witchcraft would disappear under the influence of missionary education and their particular Westernised notions of progress, witchcraft was not only still present, but gained a renewed strength and novel dimensions. This is why, starting from the late 1980s, witchcraft studies have been integrated into wider debates about modernity and the state in Africa (see Geschiere 1988; Rowlands & Warnier 1988). In many African contexts, witchcraft was able to reinvent itself, mingling elements from the past and the new modern eras. Starting from

the 1990s, scholars started to speak about a ‘modernity’ of witchcraft (Auslander 1993; Bastian 1993; Comaroff & Comaroff 1993; Geschiere 1997; Shaw 1997; Moore & Sanders 2001). In fact, as Moore and Sanders (2001: 11-12) put it, “witchcraft operates as part and parcel of modernity itself. In other words, contemporary scholars of witchcraft cast occult beliefs and practices as not only contiguous with, but constitutive of modernity”.

In Africa, witchcraft showed its power to reinvent itself following colonialism and its new forms of production and distribution of wealth, new accumulation mechanisms, and the imposition of foreign sources of power. Scholars such as Ardener (1970), Brain (1982), de Rosny (1985) and Rowlands and Warnier (1988) interpreted the renewed boom in witchcraft rumours as the attempt by certain African societies to understand new, modern opportunities for economic and political advancement and the increasing economic polarisation and social differentiation that came with them.

Studies on the relationship between witchcraft and illicit accumulation continued later on in the following decades, revealing to be a very fruitful field of analysis. In particular, anthropologists became interested in the way in which witchcraft could impact upon power relations, both political and economic, and how it could be utilised and adapted as African communities struggled to cope with the postcolonial demands and stresses of modernity (see for example Apter 1993; Comaroff & Comaroff 1993; Pool 1994; Weiss 1996; Geschiere 1997; Sanders 1999; De Boeck 1999, 2000a, 2001; Bond & Ciekawy 2001; Niehaus 2001). Stories of zombies, cannibalism and human sacrifices became tools to understand the new mechanisms of market economy such as wage labour, consumption practices, migration and development policies (Niehaus 2005; Shaw 1997, 2001; Masquelier 2000; White 2000). Moreover, some authors have highlighted how witchcraft became a tool to criticise development, modernity, capitalism and globalisation and their relations of production (Brain 1982; Parish 2000; Smith 2008).

Witchcraft discourses have entered not only the economic, but also the political sphere, and many authors have explored the way in which political action and witchcraft interrelated in African states (see Geschiere 1988; Rowlands & Warnier 1988; Geschiere & Fisiy 1994; Ciekawy 1997, 1998; Ashforth 1998b; Niehaus 1998, 2001; West 2005). For example, Rowland and Warnier (1988: 121) state that in Cameroon: “[S]orcery is not only a mode of popular political action but lies at the centre of the state-building process both in the present and in the past”.

Witchcraft discourses have been described as extremely malleable. They are discourses about power, inequalities, desires and privations. This is why in recent decades witchcraft studies have witnessed a renewed proliferation. A first interesting element is that witchcraft studies have increasingly focused on the urban milieu or on the interstices between rural and urban (Bastian 1993; Geschiere & Nyamnjoh 1998; Geschiere & Gugler 1998; Ashforth 2001; Van Dijk 2001; Bähre 2002; De Boeck & Plissart 2004). It is in the city that witchcraft manifestations in relation to modernity are most visible. In the city, witchcraft has found a way through new technologies and the media, as highlighted for example by Bastian (1993, 2001), Meyer (1999a, 2001, 2003), and Pype (2006, 2012). The city has also been the privileged space for Pentecostal churches to make their appearance and to become the official expurgators of witchcraft in society (see Meyer 1992, 1998, 1999b; Maxwell D. 1995, 2006; Van Dijk 1995, 2001; Pype 2012).

In recent years, scholars have written about how witchcraft relates to everyday life in postcolonial situations. Kapferer (2003) argues that we can see witchcraft as an amoral “phantasmagoric space”, defined as an imagined, virtual field in which people seek ‘spiritual’ shelter that is not necessarily connected to the real world. Lambek (2003) and Kluchhohn (1967) examine witchcraft in terms of psychological processes of projection, as a channel through which emotions such as anxiety and aggression can be displaced into others. Niehaus (2001) and Lattas (1993) describe witchcraft as a symbolic vehicle for appropriating the power of white persons.

While the authors above refer to witchcraft as a space ‘other’ than reality, and not necessarily interrelated to everyday life on a daily basis, Ashforth (1996, 1998a, 1998b, 2001) and De Boeck (2005a; De Boeck & Plissart 2004) have analysed the way in which witchcraft and everyday life combine in the construction of a given social and imaginary context. During his research in the city of Soweto, in South Africa, Ashforth (1998b: 62) was struck by the “pervasive sense of insecurity in the face of unseen powers and invisible forces capable of causing real, palpable, material, physical (call them what you will) effects in the here and now” – a phenomenon which he called “spiritual insecurity” (*Ibid*). Witchcraft, he continues shortly after, “is a form of action akin to violence and crime in that it is understood to be the real cause behind palpable, physical, harmful results” (*Ibid*: 63). Witchcraft was an everyday occurrence, a power which lay “at the very heart of the relationships constituting politics in that place, from the household to the state” (Ashforth 1996: 1184). As such, it had the power to put



people in a state of constant fear not only of misfortunes in general, but also of any other person – being him a neighbour, a son, a friend – who might be harbouring evil intentions through witchcraft. Witchcraft thus contributed on a daily basis to the climate of paranoia and insecurity within the community and within the family – a fact which has a striking resemblance with the social context of Kinshasa.

De Boeck (2005a) and De Boeck and Plissart (2004) propose yet another way of thinking about witchcraft and everyday life, describing witchcraft metaphorically as a mirror. In their work on Kinshasa, witchcraft is described as a “second world” (*deuxieme monde*), a “second city” (*deuxieme cité*), a “pandemonium world” (*monde pandemonium*), or “fourth dimension” (*quatrième dimension*) (De Boeck & Plissart 2004:57) in which the marvellous and the dimension of terror are reflected through a mirroring mechanism into daily life. This mirroring process has been so powerful that, according to the authors, witchcraft has lately superseded reality, leading to an “*indiscernibleness* between ‘*réel*’ [real] and ‘*irréel*’ [unreal]” (Deleuze 1990 in De Boeck 2005:189). De Boeck and Plissart (2004: 57) assert this idea of interconnectedness when they say “the activities of the day constantly include the world of the night, of the dream and of the shadow” (De Boeck & Plissart 2004: 57). Witchcraft was like a shadow to reality, which followed people everywhere interpenetrating in their daily life, while dreams were “beacons” (*Ibid*) that allowed the *Kinois* to spot who conspired against them in the second world. Reality and the imaginary interpenetrated, creating multiple dimensions of perception.

My thesis will contribute to the scholarship on witchcraft in two ways. First, I will contribute to those studies which highlighted the interdependence between witchcraft and everyday life (Ashforth 1996, 1998a, 1998b, 2001; De Boeck 2004, 2005a, 2009; De Boeck & Plissart 2004) by focusing on how the *Kinois* perceived *mobulu* at the intersection between material and invisible violence. Second, I will explain in detail some mechanisms of witchcraft in Kinshasa, which have developed in the last few years in parallel with the inequalities brought by market economy, as I shall now explain.

During the last decade, studies on the cosmology of Kinshasa have focused mainly on two phenomena. The first is the use of witchcraft (*kindoki*) in order to kill or harm other people (see De Boeck 2004, 2005a, 2009; De Boeck & Plissart 2004). In this case, *kindoki* accusations often took place between the youngest and the elderly, as the result of intergenerational tensions caused by shifts of power within the social

hierarchy in Kinshasa. Young and old people accused themselves of trying to kill each other through *kindoki* – a phenomenon which I analyse extensively in chapter 7. The second field of study has been divination (see Devisch 1991, 1993, 2013; Devisch & Brodeur 1999; De Boeck & Devisch 1994). The diviner (*nganga*), through bodily practices, his ‘diviner basket’ and clairvoyance, was able to envision the sources of afflictions or death through sorcery of the client, and suggested a therapeutic solution.

However, another manifestation of witchcraft also demands detailed analysis. The neighbourhoods of Kinshasa were also filled with rumours of *la magie*<sup>5</sup>, which constituted a specific way of turning to the occult powers of *kindoki* for personal endorsement, rather than to kill. People involved in the phenomenon of *la magie* were believed to enter occult Masonic sects, where they were required to sacrifice a family member through *kindoki* in order to get rich. Modern commodities, aspirations and lifestyles have enriched and differentiated the spectrum of *kindoki* – and thus reality. Due to the relative novelty of this modality of witchcraft, no extensive studies have been conducted on this subject.

*Mobulu* in Kinshasa was experienced both materially and imaginarily. People whispered that witches killed their relatives in the world of witchcraft in order to enrich themselves, and that occult covenants were taking place in the Masonic lodges around the cities. Much of the *mobulu* that took place in Kinshasa circulated within the community in the form of rumours and gossip. As such, the next section is devoted to the power of word of mouth in creating witchcraft accusations and tensions within the community.

### **Rumours and Gossip in *la Cité***

‘Pavement radio’ (*radio trottoir*, which is the definition the *Kinois* use for ‘word of mouth’ and ‘chit-chat’), was probably the most powerful instrument of ‘news distribution’ in *la cité*, the ensemble of the residential suburbs of Kinshasa as opposed to the bureaucratic centre of *la ville* (also called *Gombe*). Every type of event was discussed through ‘pavement radio’ in the form of rumours and gossip: recent political events, football matches, pastor’s successful exorcisms, fraud scandals, and witchcraft

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<sup>5</sup> Although the term *la magie* can be translated with ‘magic’, I have preferred to keep the original term the *Kinois* use. Translating *la magie* into ‘magic’ risks overshadowing some original mechanisms and missing out on the nuances which are specific to the modern context of Kinshasa.

suspicions and accusations. In a city where electricity supply was erratic, newspapers rarely made their way to the inhabitants of *la cité's* homes, and people spent most of their time on the street making do, gossip and rumours were for many the only way to have a grasp of large-scale events, as well as the more intimate events taking place within the community.

The distinction between gossip, rumour and scandal is delineated by Stewart and Strathern (2004) who explain:

Gossip takes place mutually among people in network groups. Rumour is unsubstantiated information, true or untrue, that passes by word of mouth, often in wider networks than gossip. Scandal is news that is unambiguously deleterious to those it is directed against, whereas gossip and rumour need not be so (although they often are) (p. 38-39).

Since the 1960s, rumour, gossip and scandal became the focus of an ongoing debate over their purpose and implications. Gluckman (1963) highlighted the positive role of gossip in maintaining the unity and morality of a group, and to create bonds of intimacy among its members. Moreover, gossip enabled groups to “control the competing cliques and aspiring individuals of which all groups are composed” (*Ibid*: 308). By analysing Colson’s (1953) study of the Makah Indians, Gluckman (1963) explained how they constantly use the tongue of scandal in order to keep each other in proper place. The Makah, a small group of people who were made American citizens, found in gossip and scandal a tool to assert their identity and uniqueness as a group set outside American society:

The constant criticism, gossip and backbiting is a reassertion of these values, which today can be expressed in no other way. If they repressed the gossip and back-biting, the values themselves would disappear, and with them much of the feeling that the Makah are a distinct people (Gluckman 1963: 311).

This particular approach was later criticised by Paine (1967) who denied the positive moral function of gossiping, shifting the attention from the community where the gossip took place to the *individuals* who gossiped. Paine believed that people involved in gossiping were driven by self-interest and they gossiped in order to “forward and protect their individual interests” (Paine 1967: 280). Gossip was described as an informal and indirect sanction where one cannot risk an open accusation or attack. In this sense, Paine attributed the role of gossip as similar to that

of witchcraft (p.278), as were the effects of such gossiping: projecting guilt on others might cause them harm – for example they could lose their job, be physically assaulted or socially marginalised.

The negative impact of rumours and gossip on the accused was later analysed by Stewart and Strathern (2004), who highlighted how gossip was often destructive and invasive, and could function exactly like witchcraft accusations. The authors acutely added that the power of gossiping rests on the fact that it cannot be easily checked or verified by explicit means and is effective regardless of verification. This means that gossip, in order to be effective and to be considered true, must be spoken in contexts of ideology that are congenial to them.

In recent decades, some authors have highlighted how rumours and gossip can instil suspicion and fear within the community *vis à vis* new forms of enrichment, consumption and class structure (see Geschiere 1997, White 2000). White's (2000) analysis of vampire narratives in colonial East and Central Africa shows how vampire stories "reveal the world of power and uncertainty" (p.43) in which the Africans have been living in the past few decades. However, she asserts that attention on gossip and rumours should shift from looking at the reason behind make-believe to what such beliefs articulate in a given time and place. As such, gossip is useful because it allows people in a certain context to speak for themselves through stories that for them are meaningful and, consequently, true. As she puts it (2000: 64), "[g]ossip is a reliable historical source because it traces the boundaries created by talking about someone. In that talking, a world of value and behaviour is constituted". Gossiping reveals motivations and interests of a person in a given time and depicts the web of power relations that people of a certain social context are trying to make sense of. Gossip as such becomes a way to catch a glimpse of the world as the speakers inhabited and imagined it to be.

White (2000) distances herself from those scholars who refused to consider hearsay and gossip as worth considering because of the changing character of the stories conveyed through word of mouth. She highlighted how people construct experience through hearsay, and this is what makes stories true regardless of verification. In her words: "The labelling of one thing as 'true' and the other as 'fictive' or 'metaphorical' – all the usual polite academic terms for false – may eclipse all the intricate ways in which people use social truths to talk about the past" (*Ibid*: 68) – or indeed the present or future, one might add. People do not speak from experience but

rather carry and rework stories that are meaningful according to the situation. As such, elements within stories can vary radically from one version of a story to another. It is not the accuracy of information that matters to them, but rather the message and the values such stories convey.

In Kinshasa, gossip had a central role in everyday life. *Basongi-songi*, as people called gossip in Lingala, was a central means of communication and value-conveyor within the community. Many of the situations I depict are based on data which was not only secondary, but also tertiary and beyond: the more it circulates, the more gossip increases its power and reliability. At the time of my fieldwork, I did not personally witness any violent clashes between street gangs, nor was I directly implicated in robberies by the thieves that I describe in chapter 4. I did not witness any witchcraft dealing by children nor by adults, nor violent exorcisms by fiery pastors. What I witnessed was the result of street gang terror, people telling me how they avoided passing through certain areas of the city; the fears of those *Kinois* who rushed home at sunset not to be caught on the street by bandits; the painful memories of the street-children accused of witchcraft, and the angry accounts of their families on how their children destroyed businesses and killed relatives. I collected whisperings, gossip, rumours, life histories and accounts on disparate subjects. I believe that all this data is extremely useful to understand the social world which the *Kinois* were trying to tame and turn to their own benefit. Moreover, although the stories the *Kinois* circulated about witches and street gangs fights often varied from informant to informant, they were all considered as truth and all had very serious physical implications on the people they gossiped about.

The social context in which I carried out my fieldwork was one of profound insecurity and mistrust: hardship and poverty have made people more cautious not to run across risks and accidents they might not be able to manage. In the next section, I shall introduce the reader briefly to the climate of insecurity which reigned in the neighbourhood of Maman Yemo where I lived. I shall describe the complexities of how I conducted my research, and how I found myself positioned in the field in relation to rumours of witchcraft and questions of my true intentions. I will illustrate how *mobulu* in all its forms – hence comprised witchcraft – touched me and the family I lived with personally, and required us to adjust our lives according to it.

## Setting and Methodology: Dealing with *Mobulu* in Maman Yemo

This research is the outcome of a total of fifteen months of fieldwork in Kinshasa, two months of which were conducted during 2007 for my Master's dissertation, followed by thirteen months between 2010 and 2011 for my doctoral thesis. In 2007 I stayed with a congregation of missionaries based in the west side of town. This is where I met Joseph Mutambu, a young man from the Oriental Province (see Map 1) who was pursuing a ministerial career. When we first met, Joseph was going through a hard time because of an accident during a football match. He was struck in the face by a football and as a consequence developed an eye infection. Health care is so poor in Kinshasa that this infection developed to the degree that Joseph lost the sight of his eye<sup>6</sup>. Joseph soon became one of my closest friends, and helped me throughout the course of my research. In 2010, however, I decided to focus more on domestic life by living with a Congolese family. In order to do so, I contacted Joseph, asking him to help me finding a host family.

Between my two periods of fieldwork, Joseph had gone through great changes in his life. He had decided to leave the seminary after twelve years because of repeated discrepancies with some members of the mission, and he had built a life on his own. After living for a short period in the house plot (*parcelle*<sup>7</sup>) of some distant relative who had come to Kinshasa some years before, he had finally found a room to rent in a *parcelle* in Kinsuka, a neighbourhood in the commune of Ngaliema. During one of our calls in those days, he told me he also had a baby, Yannick, and a girlfriend, Julia, both living in the girl's family-house, not far from Joseph's actual home. At this point Joseph suggested that, as I was not used to living in the suburbs (*la cité*), his girlfriend and their baby could come to live with us, and help me getting adjusted to my new life. My initial plan was to live with a Congolese family, so I had no other option but to

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<sup>6</sup> This is an example of the *mobulu* of everyday life in Kinshasa. The structural violence of the state, in the form of poor health care, resulted in Joseph having to spend the rest of his life with one eye. This reflected not only on his self-esteem but also on his practical life, as he was slowed down in many daily activities and could not carry out others. This limited his possibilities of 'making do' in Kinshasa, a concept I will flesh out in chapter 3.

<sup>7</sup> A *parcelle* (see also La Fontaine 1970a) is a house plot, or a plot in which several houses are organised around a central courtyard. While De Boeck and Plissart (2004) describe the *parcelle* as inhabited by "one's (extended) family and ethnic affiliation" (*Ibid*: 53), today *parcelles*' owners often rent them to people unrelated to each other and coming from different regions of the country.

accept his offer, which I considered to be mutually convenient, given my will to live in *la cité* and his need to sustain his girlfriend and child.

Joseph proposed that we find a *parcelle* in which we would live on our own rather than sharing it with strangers. Out of personal experience, he was afraid that other members of the *parcelle* could steal something from us while we were not there. After some hunting, he found a *parcelle* not far from where he was living in Kinsuka, with high walls topped by broken glasses (a very common method in Kinshasa in order to defend the compound from thieves) in the neighbourhood of Maman Yemo. Because a white person in *la cité* risked attracting attention from bandits<sup>8</sup>, we also decided to hire a sentinel called Alpha Mumbela, a man from a close locality called D.G.C. who would spend the night in our *parcelle*, armed with a machete (which he ended up using to cut the grass) and eventually also a sling shot.



FIGURE 1: A street in our neighbourhood, Maman Yemo

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<sup>8</sup> 'White' in Kinshasa is synonymous with wealth, modern commodities and progress. In Kinshasa there is still a huge gap between the local Congolese population and the expatriate community. While a large number of Lebanese and Chinese have the monopoly of the private sector, such as minerals trade and construction business, many Western expatriates work with non-Governmental and International Organization and embassies. The disparity between Congolese citizens and the White is extreme.

Maman Yemo<sup>9</sup>, the neighbourhood in which I lived during my stay in Kinshasa, is a 2.5 square kilometre area which in 2011 had 28,466 inhabitants. The population of the neighbourhood is quite heterogeneous, with people coming from every corner of the Congo. A 2009 census of Maman Yemo describes the diverse character of the neighbourhood – and of the city in general:

<b>Maman Yemo Population (2009 census)</b>	<b>Province of origin</b>	<b>Inhabitants</b>
Congolese	Bas-Congo	11753
	Bandundu	5573
	Kasai Oriental	3671
	Equateur	3497
	Kasai Occidental	1624
	Oriental province	626
	South Kivu	556
	Maniema	426
	Katanga	308
	North Kivu	170
Foreigners	Kinshasa	66
	Angolans	196
<b>Total population</b>		<b>28466</b>

FIGURE 2: The population of the neighbourhood of Maman Yemo in 2009, divided according to regions of provenance

Among the Congolese, the majority hailed from the Bas-Congo region and quite significantly, the smallest group of population is formed by the autochthones of Kinshasa.

Maman Yemo is part of the Commune of Ngaliema, South West of the centre of Kinshasa, *la ville*. The majority of the inhabitants of Maman Yemo had small businesses (*petit commerce*) often outside of the formal market economy and very few residents in the neighbourhood had any formal employment. As such, most residents were excluded from the circuits of Western commodities and salaried jobs. They were, to use Meyer and Van de Port's words, "in the shadow of modernity" (1999 cited in Lambek 2003: 199).

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<sup>9</sup> The name Maman Yemo, assigned under Mobutu's regime, was in honour of Mobutu's mother, Marie-Madeleine Yemo – informally called Maman Yemo.



Relationships in our neighbourhood and in Kinshasa in general were very precarious: people from different tribes, with different backgrounds and customs were obliged to share overcrowded *parcelles* under precarious living conditions, confronting each other's habits, families and fortunes. The situation was rendered tenser by the frequent robberies and assaults that took place both on the street and in people's homes. I had frequently heard the expression "people don't know each other" (*batu bayebani te*), which illustrated the atmosphere of diffidence that permeated the city, pushing people to doubt their neighbours and even their own family members. In fact not only did people not know each other well, but also, and foremost, they did not *trust* each other (see also Rubbers 2009a). They saw cheating and lies everywhere around them. This mistrust went beyond the limits of material, visible life and was exacerbated by the fear of witchcraft. Everyone could be a witch in Kinshasa, with their true identity concealed under the mask of normality and anonymity of everyday life, which makes every *Kinois* a potential danger. The climate of insecurity and paranoia, endorsed by the state's abusive power against the population, had presented many challenges to my fieldwork within this neighbourhood. No one could figure out what a 'true white' (*vrai mindele*<sup>10</sup>) was doing living among the poor of *la cité*. As such, my presence and my role in the neighbourhood raised many doubts and suspicions. Despite my effort at explaining that I was a student, people did not believe me.

Rumours started to circulate that I was a spy<sup>11</sup> sent by the Government to monitor the malcontent of the population. Some people believed that I was working undercover with Joseph, who was imagined as a general from the east of the country who had lost his eye in combat. Others believed I was a witch from London to learn Congolese witchcraft. In this case, Joseph was simply considered my apprentice, who had lost his eye while holding a pot of potion that spilled onto his face. One day while I was not home, some children threw small stones inside the wall of our *parcelle* yelling "Witch! Witch!" (*Ndoki! Ndoki!*) Such gossip caused me to experience both surprise and distress. I started to note people avoiding me, talking behind my back and I became quite paranoid about other people's judgments. If on the one hand these complications deeply upset me, on the other they had the advantage of throwing me into the

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<sup>10</sup> 'True whites' (*vrai mindele*) refers to Europeans or Americans, considered to be 'proper Westerners' as opposed to the Chinese and Lebanese businessmen present in town, who are considered only as 'fake *mindele*' or 'half-*mindele*'.

<sup>11</sup> On the same argument see Gordon (1990).

atmosphere of suspicion of my neighbours. I too felt “the invisible violence of fear and intimidation” (Green 1995: 105). I observed first-hand how insecurity lay between the macro-dimensions of history and structural violence, and between the micro-dimensions of violence at the level of everyday life.

The rumours surrounding my presence, made carrying out fieldwork with my neighbours very difficult. In front of my neighbours’ suspicions, I tried alternative methods to win their trust, such as selling frozen juice (*jus*) in front of schools and selling bread in one of the small open-air boutiques of the square. While my “economic adventures” earned me the sympathy of the neighbours, some topics remained taboo. I could not ask them about political events and their opinions in detail, or ask about witchcraft at all.

As a consequence, I had to adjust my research strategies. I started collecting data outside the neighbourhood. A person’s community and solidarity networks, rather than being merely spatial, were conceptual. As such, my networks were not organised around my neighbourhood, but rather around a group of acquaintances and friends with whom I managed to create connections. A few key interlocutors – Julia and Joseph, a Congolese Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) and a few Pentecostal churches – played a central role in constructing these.

I organised my fieldwork in a meticulous way. During the early months of my research, I reconnected with a Congolese Non-Governmental Organization working with street-children that I first came to know during my fieldwork in 2007. I interviewed many of these children, who I subsequently visited on the street independently with Joseph on a number of occasions. A couple of days a week I joined a member of the NGO visiting families scattered across all the neighbourhoods of Kinshasa. Whereas some families perceived me as a social worker and tended not to talk to me, others opened up and gave me very detailed accounts on witchcraft and many other topics. On many occasions, these people were adopting a strategy that Robben (1995: 83) calls “ethnographic seduction”, defined as a set of “strategies of persuasion and concealment” (Nordstrom & Robben 1995: 16) in order to disable the “ethnographic gaze” of the anthropologist and project him or her into an atmosphere of empathy, an universe of reason and emotion. Although I was very aware of these seductive strategies and of their partial truths in respect to witchcraft, I focused less on analysing the veracity of their statements than on the values and meanings people were conveying through their stories: when the witchcraft started, whom it involved, and

how the family reacted to it, all added very useful elements to understand the social context of people's everyday lives, their relationships within the family and the community, their aspirations and their fears. Although some of my informants preferred avoiding the topic of witchcraft, they had no reservations in talking to me about their occupations and other family mechanisms such as marriages and child rearing in Kinshasa. We discussed a diverse range of issues, and these formed the bulk of my ethnographic data.

I devoted a further two days of the week to 'awakening churches' (*églises du réveil*), which were religious sects in which pastors preached the Bible and held liberation sessions to free the devotees from the attacks of evil spirits and witches. I visited many Pentecostal churches, some of them more frequently than others. I was a regular of a Centre for Spiritual Healing (*Centre de Guérison Spirituel*) in Ma Campagne: I interviewed the pastor and his assistants, as well as several adults and children who had been identified as possessing mystical problems. I also interviewed the pastors and attendants of other churches, and some of these families even invited me to their homes, which signalled the beginning of a long series of visits.

When I was not in churches or with the NGO members, I spent the days visiting the people I had met through established research participants. I went to visit schools and spoke with the children about their daily lives; I went to the market to buy food and to help sell cakes; I went to pastors' home to discuss witchcraft; I interviewed many of the moto-taxi drivers that worked between Pompage and DGC. At the same time, I found multiple sources of friendship and data among Joseph's and Julia's kin and friends. With them I was free to speak about various issues and some of them shared with me very personal stories and points of view. Thanks to Joseph and Julia I managed to meet some former child-soldiers (the so-called '*kadogos*'), who were all distant acquaintances of Julia's family from the east of the country, and also I came to meet some high ranking military officials who lived around our neighbourhood. I was also invited to weddings and funerals, sharing food and shelter with those whom I called my Congolese family. This thesis is the result of the contribution of all these networks of persons and families.

## Thesis Outline

This thesis is divided into three parts. The first, formed by chapters 1 and 2, is a general introduction to my research and to the interplay between structural and everyday violence. In particular, chapter 2 explores how disenchanted young people in different epochs – from pre-Independence until the time of my fieldwork – were able to turn structural violence to their favour, creating original and empowering social phenomena, such as street gangs and fashion movements. Despite the *mobulu* perpetrated by the government and the military upon the population, the inhabitants of Kinshasa were able to empower themselves through subversive mechanisms, social phenomena and religious movements. The history of Kinshasa is a history of *mobulu*, and how the *Kinois* actively engaged with this *mobulu* throughout the years.

The second part of the thesis opens with chapter 3, in which I focus on the economic strategies of survival within the poor of Kinshasa. I describe how the market economy and its mechanisms of wealth and inequality deeply affected the lives of the *Kinois*, creating resentment and insecurity among the population. As the market economy was inaccessible to most of Kinshasa's population, there was a drastic increase in informal activities and circuits of self-help, but also of 'cheating' and illegal activities. However, the *Kinois* were able to reproduce such informal mechanisms in the public sphere, making crisis and corruption that affected the market economy, work for their own benefit.

In chapter 4, I analyse how the *mobulu* at the economic level resulted in the formation of street gangs. The chapter explores the phenomenon of the *kulunas*, street gangs of young men who found a source of masculinity through violence and through the image of the military. The *kulunas* were a result of the economic crisis and the inabilities of many unemployed young people to find a place in society. As they could not attain adulthood through economic independence, they searched for respect by entering street gangs. In appropriating the symbolic power of the military, structural and symbolic violence were thus used to generate social organisation amongst the youth leading to street gangs.

At the same time, the insecurity and volatility of wealth resulted in gossip about people enriching themselves by entering occult Masonic lodges, in which they were asked to sacrifice relatives in exchange for wealth. In chapter 5, I analyse this way of accessing and using witchcraft (*kindoki*), which the *Kinois* I interviewed generally

referred to as *la magie* or ‘freemasonry’ (*franc-maçonnerie*). This nuance of *kindoki* was believed to be linked to the Whites and to notions of development and progress. After an introduction to the concept of *kindoki* and its sub-category, *la magie*, I will focus on how adults were believed to use *la magie* to acquire wealth. Rumours on *la magie* and the *mobulu* they generated at the everyday level were strongly interrelated to economic hardship: through *la magie*, the poor of Kinshasa tried to explain the intrinsic tension between their struggle to ‘make do’ and the disproportionate enrichment of others. By describing wealth as bewitched, people actively engaged in a critique of social inequality and of the power of the state elite in Kinshasa.

Chapter 6 opens the third part of the thesis, which focuses on the family and intergenerational tensions among its members. Indeed, economic insecurity resulted in a transformation of household patterns and familial solidarity. The impossibilities of some young people to build financial capital and pay bridewealth made it increasingly difficult for them to settle down and create a family. This resulted in young people moving from one household to another, and entering in short-lived relationships with different partners. These short unions often ignored the will of the elders of the family, who were left as spectators while the youngsters got married without official permission and without bridewealth. In this precarious context, unresolved debts and tensions between the younger and the elder generations generated both physical and mystical violence.

In chapter 7, I explain how the ‘violence of the house’ (*mobulu ya ndako*) often resulted in accusations of witchcraft (*kindoki*) between kin members and how such accusations were double-sided, with young people and the elders accusing each other. I explain that children born out of customary wedlock, who found themselves at the intersection of households and familial tensions, were believed to be the emissaries of *kindoki* between the younger and the elder generations. Thus, in the second part of the chapter I focus on the phenomenon of the so called ‘witch-children’ (*bana bandoki*), who were children accused to be bewitched by some family members in order to deliver death through witchcraft to other members. I argue that the idea that children could be easily lured into witchcraft plots comes from a Western notion of the child promulgated by the colonial state-actors, missionaries and later Western non-governmental organisations, which describe children as innocent and in danger. Although this vision of the child has revealed to be a catalyst for witchcraft accusations against children, I show how children, once they escaped from mistreatment at home

and lived on the street, were able to turn to their advantage the mechanisms of those same non-governmental organisations which involuntarily contributed to their becoming witch-children. Once again, the *Kinois* were able to turn structural violence and everyday *mobulu* to create fruitful coping mechanisms in their daily lives.

In chapter 8, I return to the relationship between everyday violence and spiritual violence, and between material and mystical violence. I highlight the need to include witchcraft within scholarship of the anthropology of violence, and on the necessity of studying local situations from the privileged point of view of everyday life. I conclude the discussion with an overview of the concept of *mobulu*, and how the *Kinois* have transformed violence into a constructive force, able to create original social phenomena, coping strategies and strong relationships at the everyday level.

## - CHAPTER TWO -

### CITY OF YOUTH: KINSHASA, *MOBULU* AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S MOVEMENTS

This chapter analyses how the *Kinois* have been able to transform and appropriate the everyday violence to which they are subjected in order to create meaningful everyday practices and coping strategies. In particular, this chapter will focus on some specific social phenomena which have placed young people as protagonists across various stages of Kinshasa's history. First, I shall highlight the emergence of street gangs called *bills* and the development of the fashion movement of *la Sape*<sup>12</sup> during the decades around Independence in 1960. These two movements allowed many young *Kinois* to turn the *mobulu* of state impositions on their heads, using it to build original social movements through which they could shape their identity in the new social context of the city. Second, I shall expand on the rise of informal economy and explore the development of Pentecostal churches and witchcraft accusations during the tenure of President Mobutu from 1964 to 1997. Although Mobutu's reign was characterised by corruption, intimidation and economic impasse, people managed to create new phenomena in the leaks of state control. These phenomena shifted between formal and informal, legal and illegal, but also Western and local, demonstrating the ability of young people to navigate in between different registers. Third, I shall illuminate more recent social phenomena such as the street gangs known as *kulunas*, who have appropriated the figure of the soldier in order to create a new idea of manhood, and the emancipation of the children accused of witchcraft in the streets of Kinshasa.

Although some of these phenomena, like the *kuluna* gangs and the phenomenon of the so-called 'witch-children', will be dealt with carefully in the following chapters, this chapter gives us the opportunity to situate such phenomena within a historical continuum, in order to understand how they interrelate and how they developed according to politico-economic changes. A rigorous exploration of the development of these social phenomena through time will help us understand the creative responses of young people to different forms of oppression – political, economic, and social. Indeed, these phenomena were born out of the will of unemployed and also uneducated young people to prove their worth and find their own space within a state which had forgotten

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<sup>12</sup> An acronym for '*Société des Ambianceurs et Personnes Élégantes*' (Society of Fun Lovers and Elegant People).

about them. Despite suffering *mobulu* on a daily basis through state neglect and economic hardship, some young *Kinois* have also been able to utilise *mobulu* as a springboard for the creation of original strategies and coping mechanisms in the ever changing social context of Kinshasa.

The *mobulu* of everyday life, which has been at the basis of the creation of young people's movements, is very much interrelated to the violence, corruption and impasse at the state level. Indeed throughout the history of Congo, violence has been a central instrument of coercion and control. Mobutu usurped power by means of a *coup* in 1964, and significantly aided by the might of the military in holding together a country as large as Western Europe for nearly thirty years. Laurent Désiré Kabila also became President of the country through a *coup* in 1997, marching to Kinshasa with his army of 'little ones' (*kadogos* in Swahili, the so-called child-soldiers). After his violent assassination, his son Joseph Kabila, who was chief of the army at the time, took his place as the leader of the country. Under Joseph Kabila's governance, the Congo today is not officially at war, yet armed conflicts still regularly occur on the borders with Angola to the west and Rwanda to the east. In those areas, soldiers frequently harass local populations, pillaging, raping and killing both civilians and men in uniform.

Kinshasa, like Congo itself, has witnessed profound political, economic and social changes over its history. Immediately after Independence in 1960, the city was shaken by revolts against the colonists in the capital, and abusive occupations and squatting. Between 1991 and 1993 two huge waves of pillaging struck the city, with malcontent soldiers and civilians attacking shops and boutiques of the city in order to combat poor wages and unemployment. Throughout different epochs, violent attacks and harassment by soldiers against civilians have been a common phenomenon. Military turmoil and the corruption and ineptitude of the state have had a profound effect at the community level, as explained in chapter 1. Poor services, inefficient social policies and social insecurity have touched the lives of the majority of the *Kinois*. Healthcare is dangerously ineffective, the market economy is unstable and often regulated through scam and cheating, and public services like running water and electricity are non-existent in several areas of the city.



The majority of the population of Kinshasa is less than 25 (De Boeck & Plissart 2004<sup>13</sup>). As such, most of the *mobulu* which affected everyday life – extreme poverty, premature deaths, unemployment, and so on – had a strong impact on this segment of the population. Rather than getting overwhelmed by *mobulu* and abandoning themselves to hopelessness and despair, young people have been able to transform and re-channel the *mobulu* they were subjected to into creative social phenomena. For example street gangs became a way for some young men to plot a pathway to manhood and to gain social recognition in a society which denied any agency to unemployed and uneducated people. In the same fashion, other young people found a new means to express their malcontent for the structural violence and the indifference of the government elites through the wearing of designer clothes. Each of these manifestations of *mobulu* refers to the youth of the population and shows how many young people constructed their lives in relation to an ever shifting social terrain. Their lives are entry points to understand the evolving and malleable concept of ‘*mobulu*’ which surrounded their lives – concept which restricted them but also freed them.

The chapter starts with a digression over the anthropology of youth, and the latest developments in this field. In order to place this chapter within the wider anthropological literature on youth, I will indicate how young people in different social contexts have been able to turn negative situations to their own advantage. I will offer further context to the young lives I am presenting here with an exploration of the anthropology of the urban milieu in Africa, which informs much of what I will later discuss. This will allow us to situate Kinshasa within the recent scholarship on ‘cosmopolitan cities’, which acknowledges the vital role of people in shaping the urban space through practices which draw from both local and global influences.

The following section introduces the reader to the urban context of Kinshasa, and to some social phenomena which took place before Independence, such as the formation of the first street gangs called *bills*. Following a chronological continuum, the next section will be devoted to the creation of new Congolese elites called the *évolués*, and the rise of the first *sapeurs*, who dressed to imitate to the Belgian elite.

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<sup>13</sup> The analysis of the population of Kinshasa according to age groups suffers from both a paucity of quality and reliability, in a country where public offices are characterised by operating failures (see chapter 3) and where the general census of the population is not regularly organised. No more recent data are available.

The next section analyses how the *Kinois* were able to develop an informal system of ‘making do’ strategies in order to fight the economic recession which hit the city under Mobutu’s tyranny. Despite economic impasse and political corruption, that epoch (which lasted thirty-two years) was characterised also by intense social activity. Street gangs now called *kibills* still roamed the streets of Kinshasa, and the phenomenon *la Sape* – now a contesting movement against corrupt state elite – reached its zenith in the 1980s. The religious scene also enriched itself under Mobutu, when hundreds of independent Pentecostal churches started to appear around the city; a phenomenon which went hand in hand with the rise of accusations of witchcraft against children. An in-depth description of the political, economic and social context of Congo under Mobutu’s rule will help us understand how these phenomena were born, and how they developed in the following years.

The last section depicts the social context of Kinshasa in the decades following Mobutu’s decline, analysing how social phenomena previously described have developed according to more recent forms of *mobulu*. By appropriating and reinterpreting the *mobulu* of the state, young people have been able to shape countercultures and movements which empowered them in the challenging social context of Congo’s capital city.

### **Contextualising Young People in Africa**

Up until recent decades, ‘youth’ has always been seen as a taken-for-granted notion, analysed in terms of its supporting and secondary role in all social relationships (Argenti 2002; Durham 2004). Youth was seen only as an intermediary step to reach the more complete status of adulthood. However, in the late twentieth century, young people have started to gain more autonomy as a social category “in spite, or perhaps because, of their relative marginalisation from the normative world of work and wages” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2005: 21). They began to be described as a “lost generation” (O’ Brien 1996; Durham 2004), an “alien nation” (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999), or the generation of the “without-importance” (*les sans importance* – Bayart 1985, 1992) at the mercy of global, political, and economic changes.

However, in the modern globalised era, characterised by technologies of mass production, communication and coercion, young people have gained an increasingly prominent role across various societies. They have been able to evade the control of the

adults and organise themselves in independent, often subversive groupings. Moreover, they have managed to turn their position of subordination into a powerful weapon to shape reality to their own will. Not only have young people been able to contest the social system, but also to borrow elements from the social category of those in charge, recontextualise them to shape their own identity, and adapt them to their needs. Rather than a lost generation, youth today is seen as a liminal or interstitial category (O' Brien 1996; Argenti 2002; Comaroff & Comaroff 2005; Honwana 2005), powerful and feared for its unpredictability. Deborah Durham (2004: 593) speaks about young people as social shifters, who “create the social configurations of their utterance but rely on meanings external to the utterance itself”.

The creativity of young people in creating and recreating their roles in conditions of social and economic adversity have often clashed with the social impositions of the gerontocratic structure of power in society. Thus, in many fields disillusioned young people have found ways of empowering themselves by contesting and appropriating the power of the elders. For example Meyer (1998: 320) explains how in the religious arena in Ghana, young people have been exhorted by pastors to make a break with the past, and “liberate themselves socially and economically from their extended families and to be successful in life independently” (Meyer 1998: 320). In Pentecostal churches, young people have found a space to break free from the grasp of their elders, who are often ridiculed and despised (Van Dijk 1998). Authors such as Jourdan (2004), Richards (1996), Honwana (2005), Utas (2005), and West (2000) explain how young men and women empower themselves and cultivate independence by joining armed groups. Far from a stereotyped idea of innocent victims of violence, these young boys and girls utilise guns to act as producers of violence rather than targets.

Young people have also expressed their desire for independence and emancipation through sport and the arts. For example in Dakar, Senegal, during the 1980s youngsters engaged in a city-cleansing movement called *set/setal* (Diouf 1992). Through cleaning sessions and the creations of graffiti on walls around the city, young people expressed their disdain towards the public infrastructures and the government which stayed indifferent in front of their needs and rights. At the same time new figures of power started to emerge within the young Senegalese community. Rappers and boxers started to become the embodiment of social prestige among youngsters (Harvard 2001). The movement ‘Be Indifferent’ (*bul faale*), to which rappers and boxers referred

to, was named after the attitude of the citizens in the face of the economic crisis (Biaya 1997) and became the favourite means for young Senegalese to express their “desire for rupture and a remarkable capacity for innovation, which is based on processes of reformulation of identities” (Havard 2001: 75, my translation from French). Likewise, Pype (2007) illustrates how in Kinshasa, in the last decade, many young *Kinois* have been influenced by models of masculinity of fighters and boxers.

In some examples, music has provided a fruitful field of expression for youths exploring their lives positioned between tradition and globalisation. In Niger, Rasmussen (2000, 2003) has demonstrated how Tuareg women employed musical performances in order to express changing intergenerational relationships. Through the means of new technologies such as the radio, feminist organisations advanced their own agenda for gender and socioeconomic change. In Tanzania, Weiss (2002, 2009) explored how young barbers envisioned and imagined global fantasies in their barbershops. In there, young men listened to gangsta rap, read pornographic tabloids, watched Jackie Chan movies and aspired also to a return to Islam (*Ibid*). These shops, described as “things of today” and “unknown to ‘elders from the past’” (Weiss 2002: 101) embodied links to an imaginative elsewhere, allowing young people to navigate between those ‘outside’ and ‘within’ their lived local context.

Nunley in Sierra Leone (1987) and Argenti in Cameroon (1998) each explored how masquerades and dance performances have also become one of the spaces where young men could subvert the authority of the elders. Through their synthetic-fabric uniforms and modern-styled dances, the modern masquerade Air Youth described by Argenti (*Ibid*) drew their power from a world of modernity and globalisation which was a sharp contrast with the long-established masquerades of the palace, which drew from elements of the forest to symbolise state power.

Last but not least, in several urban contexts, young people have demonstrated their capacity to shift from passive subjects of violence, discrimination and marginalisation, to active creators of counter-cultures and movements in the realm of the street (Biaya 1997, 2000; Abdullah 2005; Gondola 2009; De Boeck 2005a). The street has become the space for these young people to construct a new identity and forms of socialisation different from the familial sphere.

In this respect, my thesis contributes to the anthropology of youth in Africa, by analysing how many young people in Kinshasa have been able to navigate adversities and create original phenomena across different fields of society such as economy,

family, and urban street culture. Through their ability to shift between global notions of wealth and commodities and local contexts, through customary laws and modern lifestyle, young people, often in adverse socio-economic contexts, have demonstrated an incredible capacity to break conventions and make a new society possible.

In Kinshasa, young people have demonstrated their ability to cope with hardship by appropriating *mobulu* and using it as catalyst for creation of social phenomena which challenge the gerontocratic power of society. Those young men and women who find themselves in liminal positions within society – either due to being uneducated, or unemployed, or both – have been able to create alternative avenues for social prestige and empowerment, not approved of by the elders, and to defy their elders' monopoly of power.

Growing metropolises like Kinshasa are privileged spaces for young people's creativity, providing a perfect ground to develop in the intersection between local and global, 'modern' and 'traditional'. As such, a brief excursus over the anthropology of urban spaces in Africa is needed. Furthermore, the ethnography I will present over the course of this thesis will seek to contribute to this academic exploration of African cityscapes and the ways in which such urban spaces emerge through, but are also constructed by, the complexities of urban life.

### **Theorizing the City in Africa**

The interest in urbanism in Africa arose as cities across began developing exponentially and in often surprisingly ways. As such, in the last few decades, studies have drastically shifted from rural realities to urban centres. Scholars have focused their interests on specific cities in Africa (Ferguson 1999; De Boeck & Plissart 2004; Trefon 2004; Mbembe & Nuttal 2004; Simone 2004a), on their development, and how African cities positioned themselves in relation to the wider literature on urbanisation.

Urbanisation has often been measured in relation to concepts of modernisation and progress, as Ferguson summarises: "The established approaches to 'urbanization' have all depended, in different ways, on an underlying metanarrative of modernization" (1999: 20), which demonstrates how "some people are 'adapting' to the modern society while others lag behind in the old, traditional one" (*Ibid*).

In this fashion, a cutting-edge paradigm for the analysis of African cities in recent decades has been the 'failed states' approach. One of the scholars of this trend,

Mike Davis in his book “Planet of Slums” (2006), describes African metropolises as ungovernable, incapable of implementing public policies and intrinsically on the edge. This approach to ‘crisis states’ and cities in crisis is often shared by humanitarian agencies, which treat African urban contexts as in need of help and support, as not as successful in comparison to their Western equivalents (see also Putzel & Di John 2012, and UN Habitat report 2004). Although the ‘failed states’ approach has the merit of shifting the focus on the struggles of ordinary people in the urban context, it also has a few obvious limitations, in that it seems to deny any agency to local actors, and analyses the development of cities according to Western standards of urbanisation. This approach perpetuates the idea that cities in Africa are “not-quite cities” (Myers 2011: 4), as they are perceived to have failed to uphold the standards of modernisation and progress as dictated by the West.

Ferguson in “Expectations of Modernity” (1999) urges to look beyond the dualism between West and Africa; modern and traditional. In Ferguson’s approach, the global North and South, their models and specificities are finally perceived as moving towards each other, to create a trans-territorial city; a cosmopolitan city which has stretched out and crossed oceans through transnational migration and technological innovation, a centre of generative and imaginative synergies which are original and unique.

Anthropologists who have worked on cities in Africa have lately focused on the “worlding” (Simone 2001) of cities and their cosmopolitan formations (Ferguson 1999; Simone 2001, 2004b, 2009; Simone & Abouhani 2005; Mbembe & Nuttall 2004; Nuttall & Mbembe 2008; Malaquais 2005). Simone (2001: 18) explains the worlding of the city as the process by which “the salient features of urban life and its accomplishments were always also taking place somewhere else besides the particular city occupied”. On the same note, Mbembe and Nuttall (2004: 360) write that: “[T]he city is increasingly a key articulator in a new, regional geography of centrality, dispersal, mobility, and connectivity that expands not only to the rest of the continent but around the globe. It is the site of a high concentration of strategic resources”. African urban residents are today able to operate in a broader world through the mobilisation of religious practices, modes of dress, food and musical taste which draw from multiple sources and create original phenomena. Cosmopolitan cities are formed of those who create their own specific world in between the foreign and the local, the

global and the local, the interior and the exterior, the rural and the urban, the periphery and the centre.

Finally, the understanding of the creative agency of people is at its apex. As Mbembe and Nuttall (2004: 360) put it, “a city is not only a string of infrastructures, technologies, and legal entities, however networked these are. It also comprises actual people, images and architectural forms, footprints and memories”. Similarly, Simone (2004a) argues that the city – in this case, Johannesburg – is formed by “complex combinations of objects, spaces, persons, and practices” (*Ibid*: 410). Thus in recent years, scholars have focused on the everyday practices of ordinary people, on the new coping strategies and social mechanisms at stake in the urban scene, and on the cosmopolitan imagination at work in the urban context (Simone 2004a, 2004b, De Boeck & Plissart 2004; Trefon 2004).

Like the cities described by Ferguson (1999), Simone (2001, 2004a), Malaquais (2005), and Mbembe and Nuttall (2004; Nuttall & Mbembe 2008), Kinshasa is a cosmopolitan city. Colonialism, the trade economy, the channels of modern technology and globalisation have contributed to enrich the material and imaginary layout of the city. It is between modern commodities and customary practices, and between Western religions and local cosmologies that young people have built their daily lives. Moreover, we can say that it is thanks to their in-between existence that they have been able to respond to the *mobulu* of the state, creating original phenomena which are the result of the interplay of different worlds. In the next section, I shall illustrate some of the social phenomena which arose in Kinshasa, and which went hand in hand with the development of the city. These phenomena were directly linked to the *mobulu* which has become integrated within the fabric of the country, and transformed following the politico-economic development of the city.

### **Leopoldville’s Development and Unexpected Turmoil: the *Bills***

The city of Kinshasa, called Leopoldville until 1971, was born during colonisation, under the rule of the King of Belgium Leopold II. Henry Morton Stanley, an explorer who was appointed as King Leopold’s delegate in Congo, established Leopoldville in 1881. The city’s ideal position on the Congo River enabled swift development and it soon became a pivotal trading post for the rubber and ivory collected in the interior. Workers were drawn from every region of the country, which served to create the basis

for the cosmopolitan character of the city. Barracks for the workers of the trade companies and for King Leopold's soldiers started to appear, together with the houses for the Belgian officials. Barracks were built for single men, as the city had been conceived as a working site, and neither family members nor women were allowed in.

When King Leopold II, following international pressure over his turbulent rule<sup>14</sup>, handed control of the colony to the Belgian Government in 1908, the break-up of Leopold's trade monopoly gave a boost to the development of Leopoldville. From the 1920s, the city witnessed an incredible economic boom, whereby Western factories and companies increased ten-fold (Gondola 2009). During this time the colonial government started to invest more on Congolese subjects in order to create a society ordered according to the Belgian vision, with healthy, fit-to-work men, obedient women and educated children (Hunt 1990).

The state embarked on a 'civilising mission' and the colonial Government started to develop new juridical, legislative and public systems. Cooper (2002) points out that "Belgium was the most socially interventionist of colonisers: it established childbirth centres, midwife training, and orphanages, and tried to shape how Congolese women care for their children" (*Ibid*: 63). Colonial rule exerted control not only by reorganising the administration and public infrastructure, but also by imposing a number of other social and personal conditions such as education, leisure, a certain dress code and working timetables on the population (Gondola 1999b). Dressing in Western clothes soon became symbol of social status and of achievement, and by the 1920s Congolese houseboys of Europeans and civil servants were engaged in a "clothing frenzy" (Gondola 1999a, see also Martin 1995) which further intensified following the rise of the second-hand clothes market (see also Hansen 2000).

Despite its economic potential, Leopoldville could not accommodate the rapidly escalating population. From as early as the 1920s, the city became inhabited by thousands of young men, many of whom were uneducated and unemployed. Young people started to pass their days on the street. The missionaries, charged with overseeing the physical and psychological welfare of the population, instituted the first youth groups, to channel young Congolese into spaces that were easier to control. The activities of these groups included watching Western movies such as cowboys and

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<sup>14</sup> The atrocities of King Leopold II and his brutal exploitation during the ivory and rubber trade have already been analysed by several authors, including Hochschild (1998), Wrong (2000) and Marchal (1996).



spaghetti westerns, regional musical performances, theatre and sport. At the same time, however, numerous unorganised and spontaneous gatherings occurred on the streets and in squares, where young people played tam-tam and performed traditional dances (Gondola 1999b).

During the Second World War, the fall of Belgium to the Germans and the readiness of the Congo to support United States and their allies led to a second economic boom (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2002; see also Buelens & Cassimon 2013). Several light industries were set up in Leopoldville, and thousands of Congolese moved from the countryside in order to look for a job in the city. The number of city-dwellers was also swollen by women, who were finally allowed in town in 1930 as a result of the government 'civilisation mission'. In the light of the restless population's growth, the state provided thousands immigrants with cheap and modest housing. The initial layout of the colonial city was defined according to race and class (De Boeck & Plissart 2004; Gondola 1996; La Fontaine 1970a; Pain 1979): White settlements were separated from the African Towns (*les cités Africaines*) by a *cordon sanitaire* which consisted of the zoo, the botanical garden, the market area, and a golf course. This cordon was designed to protect the White area from the spread of African disease (La Fontaine 1970a: 19). However, since the end of the 1940s, Leopoldville population grew at a very fast pace and the state was not able to keep the pace with the overpopulation of the city. Private housing without official permission (squatting), 'satellite neighbourhoods' (*quartiers satellites*) and 'annexed areas' (*zones annexes*) sprung up on the outskirts of the previously created African Towns.

The increasing flows of migrants from the countryside contributed to differentiate the ethnic spectrum of Leopoldville, which was already an ethnically diverse city. Bakongo people, coming from the Bas-Congo region, were the most numerous<sup>15</sup>, followed by people coming from the regions of Bandundu and Western Kasai (from the ethnic groups Yaka, Mbala and Suku<sup>16</sup>), lower Kasai (mainly from the groups Yanzi and Sakata), the Equateur Province and the eastern Katanga-Kasai region (mainly Mongo and Luba). Together with these young men coming from rural areas,

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<sup>15</sup> Pain (1979) for example speaks of the Bakongo as being 40% of the population at the end of the 1960s.

<sup>16</sup> Ethnic groups' spelling can vary from author to author. In here I attained myself to Vansina's (1966) spelling.

during the years Leopoldville started to be inhabited by “neocitizens” (Nzuzi 2008: 20, my translation), young people who were born in the city.

As the city found itself at the border with the Bas-Congo region, home to the Bakongo populations, the Bakongo belief system had a large influence on the social as well as religious context of Leopoldville. Central to the whole system was the notion of witchcraft (*kindoki*) and the witch (*ndoki*) who kills for private purposes such as the accumulation of wealth (MacGaffey W. 1970b, 1986). Influenced by missionaries, the Belgian colonial government banned the practice of *kindoki* and also the accusations of others as witches, considering these to be pagan superstition. Despite these efforts, witchcraft did not disappear from the city, and continued existing away from the official discourses of the state, in the African Towns (*cités*) of Leopoldville, before re-emerging with vehemence after Independence, during Mobutu’s reign.

Although the inhabitants of Leopoldville had different customary rules and descent systems (matrilineal and patrilineal), a new urban custom which cut across ethnic affiliation started to emerge. La Fontaine (1970a), in her study of Leopoldville in the years around Congolese Independence, called this process a “Leopoldville way of life”:

Although intertribal marriage is not very common, there has been enough contact between people practising different types of marriage, with the concomitant rules about filiation of children, rights and duties of spouses, and inheritance to cause a new town pattern to emerge. [...] It is sufficient here simply to note the heterogeneity of the traditional cultures represented in Leopoldville and the emergence of a ‘Leopoldville way of life’ (*Ibid*: 44-45).

The emergence of these common rules was influenced not only by the need to find a common ground between people from different regions, but also by the need to enlarge solidarity networks following the economic depression which followed the end of the Second World War. Congolese people in Leopoldville crossed ethnic divisions and started to gather in groups such as rotating credit associations, called *moziki* and *likelemba* (see chapter 3), and street gangs.

The street gangs which emerged in Leopoldville since the end of the 1940s adopted the imagery of the Western movies that young men watched in the educational and leisure film-showings set up by the colonial authorities and the missionaries. Although the film showings were intent on pacifying the indigenous and “stymie the ir

resolve to emerge from the political torpor imposed by colonial rule” (Gondola 2009: 78), instead, they stirred the disenfranchised and jobless youth of the city into action.

Street gangs called themselves *les bills* (from Buffalo Bill) and gang members chose nicknames from the most renowned Wild West actors: Buffalo, Sinatra, John Wayne, and Pecos to mention a few (Gondola 2009: 83). The *bills* were organised into bands called ‘stables’ (*écuries* in French), a term which will continue to be used to denote groups of young people in the following decades<sup>17</sup>. In the streets, these gangs played out historical fights between Cowboys and Indians and adopted the aesthetic notions of violence shown in movies. The activities of the *bills* centred on fighting over territories against other groups of *bills*, wearing red scarves knotted around their neck and waistcoats which recalled the cowboy’s style. Other activities included stealing for living, applying their own system of taxation, smoking marijuana and gang-banging neighbourhood girls (De Boeck 2000a). They also created their own language, the Hindoubill, from the mix of the words Bill as in Buffalo Bill, and Hindou as Indians (La Fontaine 1970b). The language was a Kinshasa slang comprised of Lingala, French and Kikongo words, which was appropriated amongst the *bills* in order to distinguish them from the world of the adults and from other young men coming to the city from the outside.

Gondola (2009: 82) highlights that when the colonial government started the film-showings, “they were so blinded by colonial racism that they brushed aside any thoughts that such images could impact these young audiences differently than they had anticipated”. Western movies were considered mere entertainment, in order to distract the population from the high unemployment rate and to doze off any malcontent. From this point of view, the colonial government expressed *mobulu* through subjugation, control and forced passivity. However, the inhabitants of Leopoldville, in an unexpected twist, transformed the *mobulu* of the colonial state into vernacular *mobulu*. The actors of Western movies, which embodied notions of moral justice, courage and dignity, soon became models of masculinity for these unemployed, disenfranchised youngsters. Through fights in the streets, the *bills* reinterpreted Western movies to gain a political and social foothold of the colonial city.

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<sup>17</sup> According to the Larousse dictionary, ‘*écurie*’ denotes a stable for horses or other animals, or also a group of horses. This can help in understanding the etymology of the word. I suggest that the use of the term was influenced by the Western movies so dear to the young people of the city, in which Cowboys and Indians would fight against each other on horses. References to ‘*écuries*’, the French translation for ‘stables’, were probably common during the movies.

The *mobulu* enacted by the *bills*, rather than being physical violence *per se*, became a powerful political and social tool to transform the society they inhabited. Through their aesthetics of violence, envisioned through the conceptual prism of *mobulu*, the *bills* acted as a wedge that prised open Leopoldville's *cités* to the possibility of insurrection and accelerated the decolonisation process (Gondola 2009).

### **Towards Independence: the *Évolués* and the First *Sapeurs***

A critical juncture for the development of new social phenomena in Leopoldville came in the years following the end of the Second World War and in the lead up to Congolese Independence in 1960. In 1948, the Belgian government started a programme to educate a Congolese *bourgeoisie*, whom they prepared for self-governance. This marked the emergence of modernizing elites known as the *évolués*<sup>18</sup>. These young Congolese, also called 'the White with black skin' (*mindele ndombe* in Lingala), modelled themselves on the colonial elite, and tried to mimic not only their dress code but also their lifestyle and body language. The Congolese historian Ndaywel E Nziem (1998: 452) writes of the *évolués*: "[S]ome of them also managed to walk like the White, talk like the White and even laugh like the White". The status of *évolués* was cemented following the colonial administration's introduction of official certificates, such as 'social merit cards' in 1948, and 'matriculation certificates' in 1952. Willame (1972: 26) explains that initially, although the *évolués* "knew very well that they could never cross the racial barrier established by their colonial benefactors [...] they did wish to be regarded as members of an elite group distinct from the Congolese masses". They established parallel niches of social power by instituting clubs for *évolués* and associations<sup>19</sup> organised along ethnic membership, in which they were able to voice their concerns as to the "pressing need [...] for new opportunities to demonstrate leadership potential" (Willame 1972: 26).

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<sup>18</sup> The *évolué* is a figure that was born in the first decades after colonisation. However, it is only in the second half of the 1940s that such figure was officialised within the state and that "the group became numerous enough to start caring about their status in relation to the colony" (Ndaywel è Nziem 1998: 453).

<sup>19</sup> Willame (1972: 26) writes that "by 1947, some 110 clubs with a total of 6,509 members had been organised in various Congolese cities", and the number multiplied between 1952 and 1956.

These *évolués*, in the wake of the houseboys who wanted to emulate European officials, developed a true cult of elegance. The phenomenon of *la Sape*<sup>20</sup>, ‘The Society of Fun Lovers and Elegant People’ (*la Société des Ambianceurs et Personnes Élégantes*) was born. Not only *sapeurs* but also other employed and married Congolese men, who longed for the same socio-economic power of the government elite, started to identify themselves with the lifestyle and fashion in post-war Paris. By acquiring a wardrobe of designer clothes and whitening their skin through lotions while simultaneously fattening their stomachs, buttocks and cheeks through a special diet, these young people tried to achieve the title of a ‘big’ (*grand* in French) or Great Man (MacGaffey & Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000). Having a large belly has always been a symbol of power and authority in the Postcolonial African state (Mbembe 1992), while acquiring clothes made in Europe was perceived as a way to get closer to the European colonial elite. As such, the *sapeurs* of the 1940s and 1950s saw in the clothing movement an imaginative dimension through which they could achieve a status which had previously been out of reach.

At the end of the 1950s, Belgian hegemony was rendered increasingly fragile by the demands for Independence. In those years, the *évolués* realised that they would never be considered part of the elite, nor enter the government as the Belgian had promised. This is when the *évolués* allied themselves with the poor in the quest for Independence: the former were tired of seeing their rights to power and leadership denied, with the latter frustrated by precarious living and working conditions. It was the *évolués* who raised the prospect of Independence among the masses, gave voice to malcontent and organised protests. Again, it was the *évolués* who created the first political parties in 1954, when the government finally opened up the political scene to local parties, and who pushed the colonial government to grant Independence to the country on June 30 1960.

The *évolués* are another example of the ability of the inhabitants of Leopoldville to turn the *mobulu* of the state to their own advantage. The social class of the *évolués* was created by the Belgians in order to keep a hold of the future Congolese elite. The *évolués* were meant to eventually supplant the Belgians, and play to their interests when Independence came. However, ironically they were the first challengers to colonial

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<sup>20</sup> On the *Sape* and the *sapeurs* see Gandoulou (1989a, 1989b); Gondola (1999a); Trapido (2011); MacGaffey & Bazenguissa-Ganga (2000).

order. Not only did they organise protests and revolts against the colonial order, but they were also able to awaken the political consciousness of the wider population, and lead them to Independence. Once again, the inhabitants of the city transformed *mobulu* into a positive means of change.

The four years following Independence in Congo were punctuated with a series of political events hard to summarise adequately in this chapter. I refer here to the mutiny of the army only five days after the declaration of Independence, the secession of entire regions of the country from the central government and their violent repressions by the state, the assassination of Prime Minister Patrick Lumumba and another wave of secessions in 1963-64<sup>21</sup>. These events indicate that the newly independent Congo was divided and unstable, and the population was paying the higher price of this instability: the market economy was fluctuating, the job sector collapsed, and insecurity reigned across the country. This is why in 1964, the population in Leopoldville welcomed the *coup* of the chief of the army Joseph Mobutu, who dismissed the then president Joseph Kasavubu and proclaimed himself the president of Congo. After four years of political violence, the inhabitants of Leopoldville were hoping for some stability and wealth. No one could predict, however, the politics of pillage and self-enrichment that sank the country during Mobutu's tyranny. At the same time, no one could predict how people in the city would react to the *mobulu* of the state, and how, once again, they would be able to turn state impositions and limitations in their favour. It was under Mobutu's rule that the informal economy, which still is the main form of survival for the majority of the *Kinois* in contemporary Kinshasa, was born. An in-depth account of Mobutu's rule is necessary if we are to understand the resilience of the inhabitants of Leopoldville, and their ability to take advantage of *mobulu* in surprisingly ways.

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<sup>21</sup> For detailed accounts of the political events between 1960 and 1964, see Young (1966) and dia Mwembu (1999). For detailed historical and political accounts on the Democratic Republic of Congo from colonisation to present days, see also Nzongola-Ntalaja (2002) and Ndaywel è Nziem (2008).

## Mobutu's Institutionalised Theft and 'Making Do' Strategies

During the first years of government, Mobutu's approach received very positive feedback. According to Cooper (2002: 166), "even opponents saw Zaire [...] as a unit to which aspire". Mobutu was able to centralise power once again, bringing some stability after the insecurity. For thirty-two years, thanks to his foreign alliances, the annihilation of political opposition by the army through intimidation and co-optation, and absolute control over the population, Mobutu managed to rule a country as large as Western Europe owing much to his charismatic personality<sup>22</sup> and to his management of the army<sup>23</sup>. He imposed himself as a despotic figure, maintaining power through clever political choices and oppressive methods.

At the beginning of the 1970s, Mobutu started his 'authenticity' programme (Devisch 1998; Nzongola-Ntalaja 2002), which advocated a return to traditional values to fight the imposition of Western ideology. He renamed the country Zaire<sup>24</sup> (and the river Congo became Zaire river), and changed the name of the capital from Leopoldville to Kinshasa in 1971. Part of Mobutu's authenticity programme was the Zairianisation economic project of 1973, which entailed the confiscation of foreign-owned enterprises for the benefit of Congolese<sup>25</sup> politicians and administrators. Zaire became a dictatorship, with Mobutu as undisputed leader and members of his ethnic group as government administrators – all linked to him by marriages or alliances.

The economy, which was still trying to recover from the political turmoil of the 1960s, was rendered insular. Zairianisation allowed the president and his *compères* to have complete control over government funds, which jeopardised national recovery. Loans from Western organizations and governments ended up in the pockets of Congolese politicians, who spent them on lavish luxuries (Kabwit 1979). During his long reign, Mobutu spent millions of dollars from international aid on private mansions,

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<sup>22</sup> Mobutu built a veritable cult of personality around himself. He liked to speak of himself as a "Bantu chief" (Callaghy 1984:183; MacGaffey W. 2000:74) and the "father of the nation" (Schatzberg 1988; Devisch 1998), while at the same time embodying "the bearer of all authority" like King Leopold (Devisch 1998; Nzongola-Ntalaja 2002).

<sup>23</sup> During his reign, Mobutu asserted sovereignty through violence and did not hesitate to use force to suppress revolts and demonstrations by military and civilian dissidents. This was dramatically demonstrated by the killing of hundreds of university students protesting against the government in 1969 and 1971. At the same time, he dispatched para-military death squads, known by the name of Owls (*hiboux* in French), to commit nocturnal executions of political opponents across the capital.

<sup>24</sup> The choice of the name came from the corruption of the word 'river' in Kongo language (*nzadi*).

<sup>25</sup> The adjective Congolese will be used throughout the whole text for convenience, even though the country was called Zaire from 1971 until 1997 and the inhabitants of the country the Zairians.

overseas villas, luxury cars and various other expenditures. His regime was pervaded by patrimonialism and authoritarianism, and christened as a ‘kleptocracy’ by its critics (Wrong 2000, Clark 2002).

Crucially, Mobutu often personally endorsed certain forms of corruption. In 1976, in a major stadium speech before 70,000 Congolese, Mobutu exhorted:

If you want to steal, steal a little in a nice way, but if you steal too much to become rich overnight you will soon be caught. And if you have succeeded in stealing, please reinvest in our country the product of your theft. You become the Republic's enemy if you transfer this product overseas (Kabwit 1979: 397).

Mobutu's regime institutionalized corruption<sup>26</sup>. It was during this period that political actors coined the slogans ‘fend for yourselves’ (*débrouillez-vous*), ‘system D’ (*systeme-D*, from *débrouille*) and ‘cooperation’ (*la coop*). As the state was incapable of providing its citizens with a secure income, Mobutu's associates focused upon sustaining themselves, and encouraging others to do so.

Zairianisation put the country in a state of bankruptcy. Following the reallocation of industries from Western to Congolese ownership, and the subsequent collapse of industrial production, the majority of the population was abruptly left without employment. However, whereas the formal economy failed, a second – or ‘shadow’ (De Boeck & Plissart 2004) – economy flourished<sup>27</sup>. It is in those years that ‘making do’ (*la débrouille*) started. Money no longer circulated in the offices and bureaus of colonial and postcolonial enterprises, but rather on the streets. Now that men were left without jobs in the market economy, women became the main breadwinners of the household. Women carrying baskets and a range of goods started walking the city, selling their merchandise from door to door. In the face of the absence of jobs, people started to invent occupations which could bring them quick money. There was encouragement from Mobutu's words, as outlined above, leading people to fend for themselves (*se débrouiller*) outside of official channels, engaging in small jobs, scamming, cheating and smuggling.

*La débrouille* allowed the *Kinois* a daily income – although in most cases very little. The informal economy of Kinshasa was not a casual sector at the mercy of

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<sup>26</sup> On the moral economy of corruption in Africa see de Sardan (1999).

<sup>27</sup> For a description of the second economy see MacGaffey J. (1987, 1991) and Trefon (2002a, 2004).



improvisation, but rather so organised and institutionalised that the *Kinois* colloquially invented an article for it: ‘Article 15: fend for yourself’ (*Article 15: débrouillez-vous*), which is still popular many decades after the end of Mobutu’s reign. I shall explain this organised and efficient informal system in depth in chapter 3, and how the mechanisms of which recalled very much the mechanisms of formal market economy. For example, people would lend each other money applying a (very high) interest rate, whilst other people would function as banks, safeguarding people’s savings in their homes or boutiques for a small fee. The *mobulu* of political insecurity and economic impasse was transformed in everyday life into a very efficient and fruitful coping system.

Kinshasa under Mobutu witnessed not only the creation of new coping strategies, but also the transformation of social phenomena born in previous epochs. Due to the creativity and constant inventiveness of people, phenomena like the *bills* and the *sapeurs* developed, to keep pace with politico-economic changes and their social implications – and the need of young people to cope with them.

### **On *Sapeurs*, *Kibills* and Witch-Children**

During the economic crisis brought by Zaireanization, children started to appear on the streets of Kinshasa. With women in the streets looking for some income for their household through *la débrouille*, many children were left home alone. Many preferred to leave their households, where food and care were scarce, and tried their luck in the street. Since then, these street-children, generally called *shegue*<sup>28</sup> (plural *bashegue*), have increasingly dominated the urban spaces (see Geenen 2009). Many joined the bands of young men who were already roaming the streets, in search of protection and co-operation. This period of economic hardship and unemployment swelled the ranks of youth groups such as the *bills* and the *sapeurs*.

After Independence and the Congo crisis, *bills* became known as *kibills* and *yankees*. The youth gangs were still influenced by Western movies, but also started to relate to the imagery of the military. De Boeck (2000a) highlighted how the political

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<sup>28</sup> According to De Boeck (2004, 2006) and De Boeck and Plissart (2004), the term '*shegue*' can derive from two different sources. On the one hand, the word was born when Kabila entered Kinshasa in 1997 with his *kadogos* (child soldiers), who were seen as little Che Guevaras. On the second, the word is an abbreviation from Shengen, where the Shengen agreement was signed in 1985. People can freely travel around Europe as well as the *shegues* can 'freely' access all the resources of Kinshasa without restraints (De Boeck & Plissart 2004; De Boeck 2006).

unrest throughout the country in the 1960s had triggered a change in the imaginary of street gangs, who now made use of the vocabulary of Western movies and also incorporated references to the military. For example the name of one of these post-Independence gangs, the United Nations Blue Helmet, reflected the aforementioned context. Across the 1980s and the 1990s street gangs continued to reflect the wider world of movies with characters such the Ninja Turtles, Rambo, Zorro, Superman and Terminator becoming prominent figures in the new imaginary of the street gangs (De Boeck 2000a; Gondola 2009). These movie heroes were readily associated to the military and para-military forces which operated in Kinshasa and through the country at the time. Both figures – the movie hero and the soldier – worked together in the construction of a new figure of power in young people’s imaginary.

Under Mobutu, Kinshasa witnessed the revival of the fashionable dressing phenomenon, *la Sape*, which emerged “among unemployed and young people who had been displaced politically and ideologically” (MacGaffey & Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000) by the total crisis of the country, and who organized themselves into clubs (Gandoulou 1989a). Through the cult of *la Sape*, these uneducated people found a way to appropriate and re-contextualise the power and prestige of the elites. These *sapeurs* were extremely different from their namesakes of pre-Independence, who used European clothes in order to merge with the colonial power. During the 1980s, *la Sape* was used rather as a subversion tool and the *sapeurs* used fashion as “a statement against economic deprivation” (Martin 1995:171).

*Sapeurs* relied upon the informal economy, often engaging through illegal dealings to survive and also to get the fashionable clothes they desired. On one hand, in the words of MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga (2000: 137), they: “[R]efuse[d] to accept passively the constraints imposed on their lives, actively engaging with them in activities outside the law, thus resisting their exclusion from the opportunity to fulfil their ambition or to better their life”. On the other, they inverted the values of the clothes themselves. Social status arose from the monetary value of the clothes rather than the clothes themselves. To put it with MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga (*Ibid*: 140): “This young people’s emphasis on the labels shows that they do not respect the Parisian or international rules which usually govern the wearing of designer clothes”. The *sapeurs* were able to create a counter-culture, “their own world with its own status and value system and its own scale of achievement and satisfaction” (MacGaffey & Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000: 137). As such, *sapeurs* spent their money on luxury clothes

rather than on a society that denigrated them. Through social movements and alternative forms of groupings, the Congolese shaped a whole “parallel society” (Cooper 2002: 167), in which they could express resistance to the state and political consciousness. This cultural dynamism also concerned the spiritual dimension of society, which became evident in the ways in which the Congolese incorporated Christianity within their belief systems, as I shall now explain.

Since the 1970s, Protestantism and Kimbanguism (see chapter 1) started to develop relentlessly. This was due to the resentment that Mobutu felt against Christianity (the religion imposed by colonisation) and his will to challenge the monopoly of Western impositions. However in the 1980s, following the decline of the authenticity programme and the loosening of state control on the religious panorama, hundreds of independent Pentecostal churches started to develop in Kinshasa. Pastors and prophets started to organise cults, characterized by sermons, healing sessions and wakes. In their sermons, they preached the words of the Christian God and Holy Spirit, while combating malevolent spirits and witches. Witches were defeated with exorcisms (or *délivrances*), during which the preachers intimated the evil spirit to leave the body of its victim in the name of the Supreme God. Indeed, witches, evil spirits, demons and bad ancestors were all gathered under the name of ‘Devil’ (see Meyer 1992, 1999b and Anderson 2006). Through exorcisms, in their churches pastors re-enacted the eternal fight between God and the Devil.

People in Kinshasa took possession of the Christian ideology and combined it with local belief systems. In particular, the similarities between the figures of the devil and the witch belied the opposition between these belief systems as vaunted by many young preachers (see Meyer 1992). The spirits and witches had returned to the centre stage of society after being forbidden by the colonial government and the missionaries. The rise of the idiosyncratic religion preached in Pentecostal churches once again represents the demonstration of the creativity of the *Kinois* in front of the *mobulu* of the state.

The multiplication of Pentecostal churches in Kinshasa coincided with the development of a new kind of witchcraft. Since the 1990s in Kinshasa hundreds of children have been accused of spiritually killing members of their families or creating misfortunes through witchcraft. Accused children were taken to a Pentecostal church, where the pastor usually confirmed the suspicion. Children were then lead into church in order to be exorcised through the use of medicines such as laxatives and periods of

quarantine, in order to make sure witchcraft left the body of the child. The phenomenon of the witch-children<sup>29</sup> (*bana bandoki* in Lingala) contributed to increase the number of street-children (*bashegue*), as many children took to the street to escape the abuses of family and pastors or were forcibly chased away by their families. There, they often organised themselves in street bands who competed among themselves for the control of territory. Their activities shifted between legality and illegality, and they lived in spots that they created and domesticated between buildings (Geenen 2009). Furthermore, these children demonstrated intimate knowledge of the growing concern of non-governmental organisations for the street-children of Kinshasa, and they have taken advantage of these Western sources of wealth (*Ibid*). From this point of view, we can say that through their interactions with western charities and NGOs, the *bashegue* also navigate social lives beyond the borders of the city, between the local and the West.

The explosion of the phenomenon of Pentecostal churches and accusations of witchcraft against children are directly linked to politico-economic events during Mobutu's epoch. Although many Pentecostal churches contributed to the *mobulu* of society through violent exorcism sessions, they had the merit to offer the *Kinois* an original space for solidarity and aggregation in the insecure socio-economic context of Kinshasa. At the same time, children were able to turn the *mobulu* of their families and pastors who accused them of witchcraft into a tool of empowerment in the streets, where they had more chances to appropriate wealth through the circuits of 'making do' (*la débrouille*), cheating and robbing.

Although Mobutu sank the economy and left the population in abject poverty, he had kept the country united and without war for almost thirty years. Things were about to change during the last years of his of regime, as I shall explain in the next section.

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<sup>29</sup> See De Boeck and Plissart (2004) and De Boeck (2004, 2005a, 2009).

## **From Mobutu to Joseph Kabila: the *Kinois* amidst *Mobulu* and Witchcraft**

The 1990s signalled the beginning of a period of political changes and war in Kinshasa and throughout Congo. In Kinshasa, Mobutu's failed attempt to pass from a regime to a multi-party democracy and the economic impasse were the main causes of two huge waves of pillaging in 1991 and 1993 (Devisch 1995; Nzongola-Ntalaja 2002; White 2005). Unpaid and poorly paid soldiers started to loot and were soon followed by civilians – mainly young men. Numerous businesses, throughout the country, were destroyed by the pillages. Thousands of workers were once again without jobs.

On a broader level, the political turmoil which shook the country during the 1990s and the following decades is hard to summarise. The two Congo Wars (1996-1997, and 1998-2003) which took place in the east of the country against Rwanda and its allies are so complex, that several monographs have been written on the subject<sup>30</sup>. However, it is worth mentioning a few key events from those years. This will help the reader understanding the politics of violence which has affected Congo since the 1990s until the present day.

Mobutu's regime was ended by Laurent-Desirée Kabila, a Rwandan-backed militant who invaded Kinshasa in 1997 with his army of 'little ones' (*kadogos* in Swahili<sup>31</sup>) during the so-called First Congo War. Kabila installed his Government with a *coup*, while Mobutu fled the country. Starting from the following year, the Congo was involved in a Second War against Rwanda and Uganda because Kabila, as head of the country, failed to satisfy Rwanda's politico-economic interests in the Congo. The war soon became a "continental war" (Prunier 2009), with African and Western countries backing both sides. In 2001, three years into the war, Laurent Kabila was assassinated by one of his guards, and the lead of the country passed in the hands of his son and former military chief Joseph. Joseph Kabila was finally made head of a transitional government in 2003, and won the country's first democratic elections in 2006, officially becoming the head of state. Despite the signing of numerous agreements and

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<sup>30</sup> See Turner (2007), Prunier (2006, 2009) and Lemarchand (2009).

<sup>31</sup> The *kadogos* of Kabila were young soldiers aged between 12 to 20 years old. Many of them were recruited by force from their homes and schools, while others joined the ranks spontaneously, lured by ideas of power and booty attached to the figure of the armed soldier. A few *ex-kadogos* I interviewed mentioned how they joined the ranks of the AFDL spontaneously, lured by the possibility to earn a salary (see also Jourdan 2010).

peace deals to put an end to the Second Congo War, the first and second decades of the new millennium have seen the continuation of the massacres between Congolese Government forces and several armed groups in the east of the country<sup>32</sup>. Armed men from both sides have been observed attacking villages, abusing the population and imposing taxes in the mining-rich areas of the East, thus jeopardising the lives of thousands of civilians.

The city of Kinshasa also served as a battlefield during recent armed clashes. In March 2007, a few months after the presidential elections which confirmed Joseph Kabila as president, the city centre was shaken by violent clashes between the personal army of the opposition leader Jean-Pierre Bemba and the military. Similarly, in the wake of the following presidential elections of 2011, military troops patrolled the city to avoid disorder – while actually causing it in first place. Kinshasa's society became increasingly militarised, with soldiers carrying rifles, patrolling or wandering the streets, often drunk or high on marijuana. The two Congo Wars and the following armed clashes in the East were a heavy burden on the economy of the country, already devastated by Mobutu's regime. Public structures collapsed further and the *Kinois* had to deal with a disastrous economic situation: many parts of the city were without water and electricity and the health system barely functioned. Life became dictated by "the violence of the ghost-state" (Bernault & Tonda 2000: 10).

The *Kinois* confronted the absence of the state supervisory through 'villagisation', defined as "the revaluation of the neighbourhood as a locus for social solidarity and protection in the struggle for survival" (Devisch 1995: 593). Following the economic crisis, people have gradually drawn back into the extended families and solidarity mechanisms proper of the village society. Informal activities also increased: since the 1990s, the population has literally occupied the street with food stalls and improvised open-air boutiques and shops (see chapter 3). The street became the major space of socialisation, where people made deals, worked and, more generally, lived.

At the same time, the *mobulu* of the military and the figure of the soldier had a strong impact in the social context of Kinshasa. The social phenomena which developed in the new millennium were the result of the interplay between elements of

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<sup>32</sup> Since the Congo Wars, the eastern regions of Congo have been besieged by entire battalions of deserters from the FARDC (the national army), Mayi Mayi rebels, Interhamwe Hutu, Tutsi-led factions, Raia Mukombozi and troops backed by Rwanda, like the CNDP (National Congress for the Defence of People) and the M23 movement.

pre-existent phenomena, and new forms of *mobulu* at the everyday level, which had been influenced by the figure of the soldier.

Since 2000, street gangs in Kinshasa have been called ‘*kulunas*’, a term which derives from the French *colonne* or the Portuguese *coluna*, and which describes a cohort of soldiers advancing in the bush (see also De Boeck 2011b). *Kulunas* have drawn elements from the *kibills* of the past, organised by a politics of territorialisation, while adopting the ethos of the armed men whose deeds are told on the streets of Kinshasa: pillaging, raping and killings became increasingly frequent across the capital. *Kulunas* terrorised the population through violent robberies in which many victims lost their lives, and attacked *en masse* markets in order to pillage everything. Their actions were so brutal that at the end of 2013 the Congolese government launched the ‘Operation Punch’ (*Opération Likofi*), in order to stop the violence caused by these youth gangs. As history teaches, the government confronted the *kulunas* with a technique which recalls the actions of military and paramilitary squads during Mobutu’s epoch: those who were caught red-handed were executed on the spot. This brutal countermeasure had the effect of stopping the *kuluna* phenomenon for a few months, until clashes between groups of *kulunas* over territories, and violent robberies started again. In 2014, the *kulunas* have returned and the state is reconsidering an ‘Operation Punch 2’ to suppress the revolts. This potential move has received strong denunciations amongst the various humanitarian agencies in Kinshasa who argue such a move presents a number of human rights violations (see chapter 4).

The militarisation of Kinshasa was also visible in the increasing use of military vocabulary in churches, where preachers referred to themselves as Generals and to church communities as garrisons of God or armies of salvation, launching evangelisation crusades (De Boeck & Plissart 2004: 119). Their churches were called Army of the Eternal, Army of God, Army of Victory, the Legionaries of Jesus, and so on. During exorcisms, pastors would brandishing the holy cross as if it was a sword, using it to pierce the bellies of supposed witches in order to exorcise them. On this subject, Pype (2006b: 306) highlights that non-baptised Christians were called ‘soldiers without uniform’ (*basoda sans tenu*) or ‘soldiers without weapons’ (*basoda sans armes*), and analyses how some dances resembled military marches (*Ibid*). In church, the *mobulu* of the military was transformed into a tool of transformation and regeneration. Through the violent and cathartic practices and discourses proper to the

church, the *Kinois* managed to turn the evil back on itself, allowing for the restoration of order and harmony among the family and the community – if only for a short time.

Military metaphors have also entered the mystical world of witchcraft. Witch-children in church were described (and described themselves – see chapter 7) as colonels, generals and even Prime Ministers. According to the *Kinois* I interviewed, children longed to become as powerful as generals, and in order to achieve this goal they behaved like dutiful soldiers who aspired to climb the military hierarchy. Military metaphors were a constant in the *Kinois*' imaginary and they helped the *Kinois* give order to reality. Thus, *kindoki* presented an imagined state, much like the Congolese state, with army officials at the apex<sup>33</sup>.

Ironically, the same witch-children who were accused of being generals and colonels in the world of witchcraft, would organise themselves according to military ranks once they ended up in stables of street-children. Children would give themselves grades, and would carry out their activities and share their small income according to their position in the hierarchy. Military ranks gave them the opportunity to integrate within a group, find their social niche and also find protection from external attacks. Once again, the *Kinois* (in this case, children) who were subjected to the *mobulu* of the state, have been able to appropriate and transform it into a positive tool for survival in everyday life.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have shown how the *mobulu* perpetrated by the state through wars, clashes, and politico-economic choices, has reflected in *mobulu* in the *Kinois*' everyday lives. Nonetheless, many young men have been able to appropriate some elements of this *mobulu*, and create a number of empowering social phenomena in different epochs. The city which was built as the expression of the Belgian colonial power, and strictly administered through mores and rules, became the major site for the expression of the malcontent of the youngest segment of the population. Bands of *bills*, *sapeurs* and *évolués* were able to canalise the *mobulu* upon them, in order to invent creative coping mechanisms and social phenomena. For example, the *bills* were born out of the economic insecurity which left hundreds of young men roaming on the streets of

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<sup>33</sup> Lattas (1993) and Rowlands and Warnier (1988) have highlighted how also in different context, witchcraft is modelled on the structure of the state apparatus.



colonial Leopoldville. These young people were able to convert the Cowboy movies which were meant to render them servile subjects and to create a completely new phenomenon, drawing from Cowboys and their moral qualities a new ideal of masculinity. This has now re-emerged with the *kulunas* of recent years, who have appropriated the *mobulu* of the soldiers who fight at the borders of the country and re-contextualised them in Kinshasa. If on the one hand, the mimesis of the actions of the soldiers (pillages and physical violence) resulted in more *mobulu* for the population of the city, it also allowed unemployed and uneducated young people to find other avenues for social empowerment and prestige. Likewise, the *sapeurs* were an interesting phenomenon, in that they were able to transform *la Sape* from a conforming colonial movement before Independence, to a subversive post-colonial one.

The *Kinois* have also responded to the political violence of the state in surprising spiritual ways. Pentecostal awakening churches have become crucial sites of solidarity and compassion for the *Kinois* in the face of the different forms of *mobulu* – colonial oppression earlier, and post-colonial hardship later. Moreover, they have found in the mystical realm of witchcraft a site through which to take control over their own life by exorcising the evil of society. Although on the one hand witchcraft accusations and exorcisms have a therapeutic effect on many *Kinois*, on the other they result in an increasing number children being accused of witchcraft (see chapter 7). Children accused of being witches have to undergo psychological and physical violence, which culminate with them being on the streets. However, once in the street, children have been able to master this space, make it their own, and benefit from a number of activities, among which working in the informal economy, stealing, taking advantage of the care of non-governmental organisations, and enjoying a freedom they would have never been able to experience otherwise. It is not an exaggeration saying that many street-children, despite the traumas of witchcraft accusations and exorcism procedures, were able to create a better life for themselves on the street than many other children did at home with their families.

The phenomena described above offer intimate insights into the emerging world of Kinshasa. These phenomena were the result of the interconnection of practices and imaginary coming from multiple directions. The example of the *bills* show how these street gangs were the result of the watching of Western American movies, shown by European missionaries, and re-appropriating the themes and characters in these films by the Congolese population. The *kulunas* were the product of war and martial art movies

which included characters such as Rambo or Bruce Lee, also the armed men fighting at the border of the country, and the re-contextualisation of each of these by the young people of Kinshasa. It was the same case for the *sapeurs*, who dressed in European designer clothes and whitened their skin to appropriate the power of the Whites. Kinshasa has become a cosmopolitan place, where local and translocal elements combine, giving shape to the most surprising phenomena. This process is not static, but has continued to change at incredible speed over the years, contributing to the development of old phenomena, and the creation of new ones.

In the next chapter, I will show how the *mobulu* of the state influenced the development of informal economy in Kinshasa and I will analyse some of its major features.

- CHAPTER THREE -

‘MAKING DO’: ECONOMIC INVENTIVENESS IN FACE OF *MOBULU*

There was a time during my fieldwork whereby every time there was a knock on the door of our *parcelle*, Julia Wembi, Joseph Mutambu and I went to hide inside the house. Water supply in our home was so irregular that we had refused to pay the last few bills, which everyone in our neighbourhood considered too expensive (CDF 18,000, around \$20 per month)<sup>34</sup> for the type of service we received. We knew that the agents of REGIDESO, the state company charged with water supply, were passing door to door collecting money. The last time they came, Joseph and Julia told them that they had no intention of paying. However, as soon as the two agents saw me, they started to threaten Joseph and Julia that they would immediately block the pump in the garden (our only source of water within the *parcelle*) if we refused to pay. As I was white (*mundele*), people thought that money was not a problem in our house.

Joseph and Julia had to pay a bribe of CDF 3,000 (around \$3) in order to be left alone, with the pump still working. Once they had agreed on the price of the bribe, I went to talk to the agents. Justin Nsenga was assistant professor at the University of Kinshasa (UNIKIN). His wages were so low that he had to search for a second source of income to bolster his salary. His cousin, who worked at REGIDESO, helped him find a second job. However, wages at the water company were also irregular and Justin had to resort to bribery to survive (although he did not admit this last point). Justin had two formal jobs and an informal one to ‘make do’ (*se débrouiller*). Despite that, he struggled to support his wife and children.

In the months after this episode, we received weekly visits from different agents of REGIDESO each hoping to secure bribes. However, Julia had become blameless, and each time a REGIDESO agent knocked at the door, she would send one of the children to open, saying that nobody was at home. A few months later, we heard through the ‘pavement radio’ (*radio trottoir*) that three functionaries of REGIDESO had been arrested because they made up fictitious bills to extort money from citizens.

The example I have illustrated here engages with the intricate processes apparent within the informal economy (*la débrouille*) across Kinshasa. Here we can see

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<sup>34</sup> It is worth remembering that 70% of the population in Kinshasa lives on under a dollar a day (Lamb 2013), while the monthly salary of a civil servant is around \$70. Thus in comparison, REGIDESO bills were considerably costly.

how people, such as Joseph and Julia, struggled to survive in the face of declining vital services such as a tentative water supply as well as rising financial costs. Inversely, those employed by the state institutions such as those within the water company were also involved in a struggle for survival. The agent I questioned here occupied two formal jobs yet still struggled to survive on the income from these. Here, *se débrouiller* emerges as a core aspect of life in Kinshasa, emerging particularly in the relations between the formal and the informal sectors of life.

The *mobulu* of the state obliged the *Kinois* to resort to alternative coping strategies to contrast the inaccessibility of the economic and job sectors. Although many of the techniques of *la débrouille* involved a perpetration of *mobulu* through cheating and blackmailing, as in the case of the REGIDESO agent, they nonetheless provided the *Kinois* with an income generating system other than the fluctuating market economy. The *Kinois* were able to create a whole other-economy in parallel with the formal one. However, rather than being in antithesis with each other, *la débrouille* and the formal market economy shared many elements. On one hand, loans at interest rates, saving accounts, percentage on profits and credit associations – all mechanisms from the formal economy – were all also parts of the informal one. On the other hand, *la débrouille* was so pervasive and successful among the *Kinois*, that it started to be employed also in the channels of state institutions, as the above example of REGIDESO clearly illustrates. Through the chapter I shall draw on several examples in order to explain how it was difficult to distinguish between formal and informal practices, as the two deeply influenced each other and shared similar mechanisms.

In this chapter I contribute to discussions on *la débrouille* in Kinshasa by arguing that a categorisation of either formal or informal economy risks only overshadowing some very important aspects of this street economy. Rather than being a sub-product of formal economy, I argue that *la débrouille* is a distinct social practice, with its own mores, rules and social spaces. Moreover, by exploring some of its mechanisms in depth, we will be able to grasp some nuances which have been so far omitted within the scholarship on *la débrouille* in Kinshasa. In fact, despite ‘making do’ in Kinshasa being indistinctly referred to as ‘*la débrouille*’ and ‘*la coop*’<sup>35</sup>, I will show that *la coop* was a very particular branch of *la débrouille*. The *Kinois* used these terms differently, depending on the types of activity that people were engaged in. So,

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<sup>35</sup> From the French word *cooperation* (Trefon 2002a, 2004; Nzeza 2004; Petit & Mulumbwa 2005).

on the one hand, buying or selling goods outside of the control of the state (for example on stalls or peddling in the traffic) was simply referred to as *la débrouille*. *La débrouille* can be considered the equivalent of ‘informal economy’, as it was comprised of the full range of activities which were done outside the control of the state. On the other hand, making do by striking deals through the mediation of middlemen was called *la coop*. This often involved purportedly illegal and criminal strategies such as smuggling, cheating and so on. Forms of *la coop* were more complex than direct *débrouille*, because illegal deals required careful negotiation between the parties and had to take place far from indiscreet eyes and ears.

An understanding of the mechanisms of informal economic practices, their instability and the ‘cheating’ (*tricherie* in French) that surrounded it is necessary, if we are to understand the different forms of *mobulu* it created in everyday life. Indeed, although *la débrouille* had the advantage to make cash accessible to everyone on a daily basis, it was governed by unpredictability. Income was in a constant state of flux and the situation was worsened by the everyday cheating and scams. Without a regular income, many people could not afford to send their children to school. This resulted in young men roaming the streets of Kinshasa and becoming *kulunas*, thus contributing to the insecurity of the neighbourhood. At the same time, young people could not marry their beloved ones and start a family because they could not afford to pay for the bridewealth. When they did get together through unofficial unions, they often lacked the financial and familial support of their elders. This resulted in tensions within the family and in the rise of witchcraft accusations, which often involved children.

Moreover, because of the inaccessibility of wealth for the majority of the population, there was resentment and jealousy against those who managed to enrich themselves. The sudden enrichment of people in face of the economic impasse stirred up rumours of witchcraft. Rich people were rumoured to be part of Masonic occult sects, in which they sacrificed members of their families through witchcraft in order to get even richer – a phenomenon called *la magie*. Thus, understanding the mechanisms of *la débrouille* means understanding the background to a whole range of social phenomena linked to *mobulu* in Kinshasa’s everyday life.

I start the chapter with a brief excursus of the anthropology of informal economy, and I argue the importance of understanding *la débrouille*, not simply as a result of the failure of market economy, but rather as a *per se* phenomenon. The interplay between formal and informal practices has created a whole new system, which

has allowed the *Kinois* to build their lives in between laws and rules. In the following section, I analyse in depth the interrelation between formal and informal mechanisms by showing that also in public spaces, officers take advantage of the rules of informal economy to increase their profits.

After an in-depth description of the ‘informality’ of the state, I describe the mechanisms of *la débrouille* in my neighbourhood. I draw from personal experiences and examples from my Congolese family and neighbours to explain how people resourcefully adapted to the changing needs of modern life. I then introduce a particular subset of *la débrouille*, called *la coop*, which entailed middlemen and different operational and remuneration mechanisms.

I proceed to show how informal economy, like the formal one, suffered from the economic impasse of the country. As mistrust increased among the population, people were obliged to rely on other systems outside their close solidarity networks such as rotating credit association, informal micro-lending and saving systems. These systems, which functioned as ‘shadow banks’, relied upon formal economic mechanisms to work. Structural violence caused an economic hardship that could not easily be overcome through participation in the official system: to survive, people were obliged to cheat and display aggression in economic encounters. I conclude my chapter with a critique of usual distinctions made between ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ economic pursuit.

Before I explore the practices within Kinshasa in greater ethnographic depth, I will first seek to contextualise my observations within a wider academic understanding of informal economic practices, both within the Congo and further afield. This context will permit me to illustrate how the arguments of this chapter fit within a wider academic field and also offer some shape to the direction of this chapter.

## **An Introduction to Informal Economy**

‘Making do’ in Kinshasa took different names. ‘*La débrouillardise*’ or ‘*la débrouille*’, ‘*système D*’, ‘*article 15*’, ‘*la coop*’ or ‘*kobeta libanga*<sup>36</sup>’ were terms utilised in daily interactions by the Congolese. Each of these terms describes the Congolese version of

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<sup>36</sup> The expression means literally ‘breaking stones’ and is a reference to colonial time, during which the Congolese were forced to break stones to build the railway between Kinshasa and Matadi. During the operation many Congolese lost their life, and today *kobeta libanga* means “being fearless, daring to take any risk, doing the physically impossible and the morally unimaginable” (Nzeza 2004: 20; see also Petit & Mulumbwa 2005).

what in the social sciences has been termed ‘informal economy’ (Hibou 1999; Chabal 2009; Little 2003), ‘second economy’ (MacGaffey J. 1991) or ‘clandestine economy’ (Reno 2000), as a set of practices distinct from the official market economy promulgated by states. Janet MacGaffey (1987: 23) has conducted extensive research on the unrecorded trade of Zaire’s second economy:

The second economy here refers to economic activities that are unmeasured and unrecorded. Some of its activities are illegal, others are not illegal in themselves but are carried out in a manner that avoids taxation or in some way deprives the state of revenue. These are activities supposedly controlled by the state but which in fact either evade this control or involve illegal use of state position.

Although MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga (MacGaffey, J. 1991; MacGaffey & Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000) have demonstrated that this type of second economy can extend itself beyond national borders and can involve the circulation of huge quantity of money<sup>37</sup>, *la débrouille* described in this chapter consists of the daily activities of the *Kinois*, activities which usually allow them to feed their family once a day. On this same note, Trefon (2002a) in his article on “The Political Economy of Sacrifice” in Kinshasa affirms: “For the vast majority of the *Kinois*, ‘work’ is any small job, activity or opportunity that provides enough Francs to buy food or pay for collective taxi fare” (p. 487; see also Nzeza 2004: 20).

Political scientist William Reno (1995, 1998, 2000) argues that informal economies are more common in “shadow states” (Reno 1995, 1998) where a government is unable to provide citizens with access to employment and basic facilities. “The shadow state”, he argues, “is founded on rulers’ abilities to manipulate external actors’ access to markets, both formal and clandestine, in such a way as to enhance their power” (2000: 434). Through a strict control of people’s access to resources, rulers make sure to control economic markets and ensure their own enrichment. Moreover, rulers of shadow states “promote disorders and uncertainty, and apply economic regulations in a selective fashion, to force even those who find this strategy repugnant to appeal to their favour or flee the country to improve their lot” (*Ibid*: 446). This pushes ordinary people to find ways to ‘make do’ out of the legitimated channels of market economy, into criminality and traffic.

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<sup>37</sup> On the international scale of the informal market in other social contexts throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, see Reno (1995), Ellis and MacGaffey (1996), Chabal and Daloz (1999), Hibou (1999) and Little (2003).

Rulers and the elite not only promote disorders and violent modes of accumulation among their subjects, but they are also the first to make use of illegal channels, including within the government sphere. Mobutu's 'kleptocratic' regime and the fact that he incited his people into stealing "a little in a nice way" (Kabwit 1979: 397) during a public ceremony, stands as evidence of this trend. In addition to the public functionaries, politicians and military officials making the most out of corruption and criminality, there was also a discourse promoting resourcefulness, and toning down the immorality of corruption and cheating (Petit & Mulumbwa 2005). This discourse not only legitimated extortion and swindling as a necessity in a context of 'every man for himself' (and God for all) but also promoted dirty tricks as an expression of astuteness (Rubbers 2009a: 630). As Nzeza (2004: 21) explains: "The new (a)morality in Kinshasa dictates that it is better to sell your soul to the devil than to be scrupulous. The cunning required to meet immediate needs has replaced the respect of any righteous moral code". Trickery and cheating to survive became normal events in life in Kinshasa, and gossip was filled with stories of betrayals and scamming, including between members of the same family.

Scholars who have focused their research on Africa have also analysed how in politically and/or economically unstable countries, informal and formal economies co-exist (MacGaffey J. 1991; Chabal 2009; Hibou 1999; Little 2003). In fact, informality is a key element in the Government sphere: public servants use illicit means to extort money from the population; others use the state and its services as a shield beneath which to operate their illegal deals; and others appropriate state funds for personal use. In the malfunctioning of the state, public sector workers have found additional sources of income. As Chabal (2009: 132) writes:

My argument is not that the state is failing everywhere in Africa but that it is failing enough to make possible an informal political economy of this type, which itself contributes significantly to the further informalisation of the economy.

On the same subject of informal economy, Janet Roitman (2006) analysed the way in which the criminal activities of road bandits in the Chad basin were necessary to the urban economy and financed local administrations through bribes and other informal remunerations. The bandits who smuggled goods and attacked cargos and other vehicles in the border region could be considered as trying to "participate in



prevailing modes of accumulation and prevailing methods of governing the economy, which are typical to most states in the world (custom frauds and granting no-bid contracts to well-connected businesses are not particularly African affairs)” (*Ibid*: 249-250). As informal taxation and banditry, which lay between illegality and legitimacy, seemed to be shared by the police and the regional elites (Roitman 2005, 2006), they were considered legitimate and rational forms of remuneration by the bandits and by the population. These bandits considered their actions like a formal occupation rather than theft or fraud, described as “rational or reasonable behaviour” (*Ibid*). Thus, Roitman (2006: 259) concluded, bandits “steal or traffic as a way of entering into the labour market and participating in a particular political economy. In that sense [...] bandits, smugglers and traffickers seek a certain mode of integration by partaking in recognised modes of governing the economy”.

However, in the scholarship on informality, the informal economy, or second economy, is often described as shadows of the formal, or as a result of it, rather than a *per se* phenomenon. What these discussions fail to conceptualise is that the informal economy has found, in formal mechanisms of production and exchange a useful tool, to develop as a distinct phenomenon. In this sense, my argument is supported by Ferguson (2007) in his article about the new rationalities of poverty, who asks the reader:

Are they [the poor] using the space that democratization has opened up to create new and potentially promising forms of political struggle - not acquiescing in an overarching neoliberal design for society, but rather taking up and creatively redeploying neoliberal concepts and discursive moves in the service of a fundamentally different political end? (*Ibid*: 84)

Although *la débrouille* has appropriated mechanisms of market economy, the two need not be viewed in an evolutionary perspective, or even in opposition to one another. This chapter argues that in the dialectic relation between the formal economy of the state and the everyday informal practices of the *Kinois*, *la débrouille* emerges as a distinct social framework which informs economic practices across the spectrum of Congolese life.

The *Kinois*’ need to fend for themselves and the unreliability of market economy has pushed them to create a new system and conceptualise their economy in a distinct fashion. In the next section, I shall analyse how *la débrouille*, far from being a phenomenon which is relegated to the suburbs of Kinshasa, has provided also many

public functionaries with new (illicit) channels of enrichment, in the face of the inefficiency of the government to provide them with salaries and benefits. The public sector and *la débrouille* merge to such an extent that it is impossible to speak of a formal or informal economy in Kinshasa. *La débrouille* is a new economic *modus operandi*, which cuts across the whole social spectrum and involves the most disparate social actors.

### ***La Débrouille within the Public Sector***

During my fieldwork in Kinshasa, it was extremely difficult to discern between formal and informal or between legal and illegal activities even within the formal channels of the state. The public sector was involved in illegal activities disguised by a veil of official mechanisms, as functionaries applied extra fees for their services and issued unauthorised fines, like the REGIDESO agent example above. To give another example, police officers could issue a fine to a driver because he was not wearing a safety belt, and would ask for immediate payment, although they were not officially allowed to collect money. In this blurred domain, where legality and illegality constantly overlapped, the *Kinois* longed for formal employment but not for the secure income it offered, as one may think. In Kinshasa, in fact, wages were extremely low thus people had other reasons to covet jobs in the public sector. Let me illustrate this with an example from my fieldwork data.

Alain Bilolo worked as a functionary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and lived in a neighbourhood around Pompage. His salary was around CDF 150,000 (\$160) per month. In order to get to work, from Monday to Saturday, he spent between CDF 25,000 and CDF 36,000 (\$30 and \$40) per month. Moreover, Alain was the father of six children (three of whom went to school) while his wife was selling home-made cakes in front of their house for CDF 200 each (\$0.20). *La débrouille* by his wife earned her around CDF 40,000 (\$40) per month – if she worked constantly every day. When I asked him why his wife did not look for a more remunerative occupation, he replied that he did not have the money to help her start a small business (meaning to

invest in buying goods so that she could resell them at a higher price). On top of an already difficult situation, Alain had not been paid for the last four months<sup>38</sup>.

Civil servants like Alain Bilolo could not rely on wages in order to make a living for themselves and their families. A state job was attractive for different reasons. First, a formal job provided an employee with social capital and respect within his community and kin circle (MacGaffey 1991; Hibou 1999). Second, it offered the opportunity of extortion and favouritism in dealings with the state. The inadequate wages of their full-time employment meant civil servants did not have the time to cultivate the relationships that would help them fend for themselves (*se débrouiller*) outside their official job. This meant that they were obliged to fend for themselves within the formal apparatus of their office.

This becomes clearer through the example of Jeff Mumbela who was a major in the military. I met Jeff through Joseph Mutambu, the man I lived with. The two had lived in the same neighbourhood before Joseph moved to Maman Yemo. Once, during a walk in Joseph's old neighbourhood, we knocked at Jeff's house so that we could greet him. Jeff invited us in and the three of us started to talk about the hardship of the job market in Kinshasa. Such hardship affected not only civilians, but also officials within the ranks of the military, like Jeff:

Jeff: If we had to wait for the money of the state only... CDF 60,000 [\$65]... What am I going to do with that? Nothing!

Joseph: The water bill alone is more than \$20...

Jeff: If you also have a post [*fonction*] that brings money in, that gives us the means to find some money, then it's ok... As you see me now, we're waiting. If they give us the money for the operating costs [*frais de fonctionnement*], heh! We do everything! [*Nous bougeons tout!*]...They give us the money for the operating costs, they say "*Voilà, come and pick up your operating costs*" [...]

Silvia: What is 'operating costs'?

Jeff: It's the money to make the office work.... Buying the ink for the printer, buying some paper, buy some highlighters and pens, toilet paper, etc... In order to make the office function. The

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<sup>38</sup> If we consider that school fees were around CDF 30,000 (\$30) per trimester for primary school, and a 25Kg bag of rice, enough for five people for a month, cost CDF 25,000 (\$25) at the time of my fieldwork, we can better understand the sacrifices the *Kinois* had to endure everyday in order to survive.

computers' maintenance... So every month there's that money that comes in. You have to maintain all those things. If you have to move something, some instruments... Sometimes at the end of the month they give you \$2,000 dollars. \$2,000 in order to service those things. You have to service them, it's mandatory. If you do not do that, after a while the computer stops working, [...] that's no good... Even in the toilet, when we go there, toilet paper [you have to provide for toilet paper]... And the detergents to disinfect the toilet, you see, all these things are money... And when we do the calculation for all those things, the colonel asks me “leave it for now [*tikka liboso*], is this all that is left? Ah, just leave it. \$1,000 [is enough] for those things... How much is it left? \$1,000... Give me \$500...”[*Laughs*]

Joseph: And what can you do...

Jeff: When he takes \$500 and put it in the pocket, he says “*Bon* [well], you are the chief of the office, take, do whatever you want [with the rest]”. And when I am left with this \$500, I've got my people as well! I've got a captain, and another one, and then there is the man in the office who works at the computer... So with the \$500 left, I have to do something with that... First I take out \$300 [*laughs*], I say “Ok, this is for me... There's \$200 left”. I give \$50 to one, \$60 to another one... when there's a \$30 or \$50 left, I tell to the others “Ok I've got a car, you don't have one you take the transport, with that money I'm going to buy the fuel for my car...” They tell me “No major we don't believe you...” So I say “I'll show you”, we go to the petrol station together, I put some fuel in the car and I tell the guy “You see?”, “Ah yes now I believe you”... Et *voilà*... Then I arrive home and we need to buy food, etc... There is always money to spend...

The money for the operating costs came from the State and was meant to be used in order to service the office: repairing machinery, replacing missing material and so on. Instead, half of it was spent on this official purpose, while the other half ended up in the pockets of the public functionaries. The colonel appropriated half of the whole amount for himself, and gave the rest to the major. The major took half of the money left (plus the cost of the carburant), as he was the chief of the office, and shared the rest among the other functionaries. Public money was not invested into the infrastructures: it became a pyramid scheme according to which the higher the office, the higher the compensation<sup>39</sup>. This is why, despite the fact that many positions were often not

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<sup>39</sup> It is worth noting that the street gangs of young people in Kinshasa also share the booty of their robberies according to same pyramidal mechanism used at the Governmental sphere (see chapter 5).

remunerated for months, many people dreamt of an office job. They hoped to enter the system of illicit remuneration within government circles.

As a result of the rampant corruption of the state system, money seldom reached lower levels of state bureaucracies. These excluded officials had to resort to informal taxation for their services, while others were believed to use the skills learnt through employment to cheat the population. For example, when thieves stole a thirty-meter electricity cable in our street, some of my neighbours accused the workers of the National Society of Electricity (SNEL) of the theft, reasoning that the copper within the cable yielded more than their monthly wages. Events such as these were so frequent that some *Kinois* nicknamed this company 'National Society of the Enemies of Light' (*Société Nationale des Ennemis de la Lumière*).

Thus, a whole informal system has emerged in parallel to the official one. Often, together with the official fees, one was obliged to pay administrative expenses (*frais administratifs*) at the discretion of the officer in order to have the job done 'smoothly' (Petit & Mulumbwa 2005). At the same time, public officials used the channels of the state to practice smuggling as a secondary form of revenue. In these cases, informal economies worked in a very structured and hierarchical way, often with the support of the state and its legalised channels such as international trading companies, which in many cases turned a blind eye as long as they maintained their profit (Ellis & MacGaffey 1996). For example during my stay, a wealthy member of the Government I met through friends, often took advantage of her work trips to the east of the country to collect dozens of kilos of potatoes (a luxury item in Kinshasa), dried fish, 'Brazilian hair' wigs and other clothing items that she resold once back in Kinshasa in the informal market.

As Bayart (2009) explains, the predator-like nature of the State has been reproduced at the level of informal economy. Corruption is routinised within state circles, as illustrated above, and thus becomes legitimised in the eyes of the population. If political leaders and military members were 'allowed' to make the most out of illicit means, why should *Kinois* not do the same? On this subject, some of my informants recounted to me the story of an acclaimed thief (one of my informants believed his name was Angoulima<sup>40</sup>) who robbed the residence of Mobutu but after his capture he

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<sup>40</sup> Angoulima, although with a different spelling, figures as a notorious bandit also in the novel "African Psycho" by Alain Mabanckou (2003), a writer from Congo-Brazzaville.

was made vice director (*directeur adjoint*) of a notorious prison. This story, whether it was true or not, indicated precisely the popular opinion of the informality and illegality of the government, perpetuating a myth of sorts that they recruited criminals into their ranks. Moreover, as criminality has been adopted and incorporated in the Congolese state, so many Congolese legitimized practices of criminality themselves. Through informal economy and illicit means of production and accumulation of wealth, the *Kinois* appropriated the mechanisms of *mobulu* of the state and transformed them into an original and distinct economic system.

The governmental sphere was the realm of those adults and elders who successfully managed to cultivate clientelistic networks with those in power. Posts were very limited, and only the best-connected managed to make their way into the halls of governmental buildings, populated by large-bellied men impeccably dressed in their European attire. The state was saturated with these old figures of power, and symbols of the political and economic impasse of the country. Thus, only a limited part of the population had access to the public sector and to salaries. Moreover, wages were so low that workers could not count only on them for their survival and the job title itself was coveted more for the social capital it facilitated. In fact, wages constituted only one of multiple sources of income for the majority of the families in Kinshasa. This leads us to depart from the bureaucratic centre of *la ville* and to focus instead on the streets of *la cité*, which is where mostly young men and women have found a fertile soil to fend for themselves. Here I will explore how young people, and particularly women, have found a fruitful economic strategy in *la débrouille* which has provided them with income on a daily basis.

### **Making Do in Maman Yemo between 2010 and 2011**

During colonialism and the first decades of Independence, *la ville* functioned as a bureaucratic and working hub. Following the deterioration of the public infrastructures and the lack of employment, people have started turning to the streets of *la cité* to carry out every sort of activity. During my fieldwork, the streets of *la cité* were full of stalls where women sold all kinds of goods, money changers called *cambistes* (most of whom were women) exchanged Congolese francs for American dollars, young children, known as *khadafis* after the former Libyan leader, sold fuel and preachers prayed at every corner, square and even on buses in *la cité*. Other young boys, sat in front of

small wooden stalls protected from the sun by huge coloured umbrellas, acted as phone-box operators (the so-called *cabines*). Landlines did not exist in Kinshasa and only part of the population owned mobile phones. These young phone operators thus lent their mobiles to people who needed to make calls. Young men and children polished shoes on the streets, or carried heavy loads for women at the market. Strong men moved things by transporting them on their push-carts. Barbershops and tailors worked not only in concrete rooms but also in the open air, fixing their mirrors on tree trunks or along walls, thus installing their open-air salons (see fig 3). These were only some of the occupations that made the streets of Kinshasa busy, loud, smelly and colourful.

People and businesses also flooded the streets of Maman Yemo and the surrounding areas, and stalls and small boutiques literally invaded public spaces. Wooden stalls were positioned on secondary streets as well as in the main square of the neighbourhood. The stalls and the kiosks provided the neighbourhood not only with bread and powdered milk, but also with various goods for the house and for the school. One of the best stocked was the boutique of Jacques Kinyongo<sup>41</sup>, a small wooden cabin with a grated window in order to prevent petty thieveries. Some mornings I would help Jacques and his wife Carine to sell bread. The procedure was always the same: she bought the bread at the closest available depository and resold it for CDF 50 (\$0.05) more. Bread prices varied according to the quality of flour and the producer, but they were always between CDF 50 and CDF 300 (\$0.05 and \$0.30). During one of our chats, Carine told me that they managed to earn around CDF 35,000 (\$40) per month through the sale of bread.

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<sup>41</sup> In Jacques Kinyongo's boutique one could find bread, peanuts, pop-corn, small cakes, hot tea, biscuits, omelettes and eggs, sugar, milk, coffee, razorblades, shoes and hair strings, A4 papers, envelopes, pens, rubbers, beauty creams for both women and men, talc powder, blue and yellow washing soap, washing powder in fifty gram package, shoes polish, candies, chewing gums, and much more. The banquets scattered along the road sold cigarettes, chikwanges (manioc paste wrapped onto leaves), tomatoes, manioc flour, mango, avocado or oranges (according to the season), cakes, manioc fries, biscuits, pens and pencils, small toys and used shoes.



FIGURE 3: Street barbershop



FIGURE 4: In case of electricity cuts, young people recharged mobile phones on the streets with the help of a generator





FIGURE 5: Food stalls in Maman Yemo



FIGURE 6: Selling bread at the stall of Jacques Kinyongo and Carine Monssengo. Picture taken by Carine

Earning a living was also difficult for the family I lived with. Both Joseph Mutambu and Julia Wembi were unemployed and survived through *la débrouille*. As our neighbourhood hosted a number of primary and secondary schools, vendors (mostly women) gathered outside the schools' entrances each day to sell home-made juice to the children. When Joseph's refrigerator was working, Julia Wembi and I would prepare some monkey-bread ice lollies at home and sell them at one of the schools. Each iced juice was CDF 50 and at the end of the day Julia was able to make around CDF 6,000-7,000 (\$6-7). After deducting the money to buy the monkey bread, sugar, ice lollies bags, and the colorant, we were left with roughly CDF 2,000 (\$2). However, we were forced to abandon our endeavours soon after my arrival, when our street was left without electricity. The refrigerator was reduced to use as a cupboard to save cooked food from cockroaches.

In our *parcelle*, the income came from my research allowance and Joseph's making-do activity. Thanks to a system of money lending between the two of us, Joseph bought large stones and gave them to some women who smashed them manually. Joseph resold the small stones to be used to decorate houses and courtyards, for a higher price. However, this only yielded \$100 US per month, and the job depended very much on the weather. During the rainy season it was impossible for women to work and the house-building market slowed down substantially<sup>42</sup>.

A five-minute bus ride from Maman Yemo led to the busy locality of Pompage on one side, and the locality of D.G.C. on the other. Around these very busy areas, children yelled "*mayi*" or "*mela mayi*" ("water", "drink water") and sold water in small plastic bags for CDF 100 (\$0.10), cakes for CDF 200 (\$0.20) and home-made chips for CDF 100 (\$0.10). Women sold oranges, mangos or avocados according to the season, and again, children zigzagged through cars and buses in the traffic to sell paper handkerchiefs.

Men usually fended for themselves in the transport sector. At the time of my fieldwork, virtually everyone with a car, a Volkswagen van (the *minibus*, informally called 'spirit of death', *esprit de mort*, because of frequent accidents) or a motorcycle

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<sup>42</sup> It is important also to note that Joseph would have never been able to start such business if it was not for my research allowance. The *Kinois* were often blocked by the lack of funds they needed to start up any kind of small activity.

(called *wewa*), worked as a taxi driver<sup>43</sup>. During rush hour, traffic could be terrible, and finding transport - and getting on it – could be an odyssey. But in this chaotic situation young men found a means of profit by yelling out the destinations of buses to the public, so that people could easily find their vehicle. These figures in the transport network were called *atalaku* (literally ‘he who yells’), a Lingala term borrowed from the Congolese music scene<sup>44</sup>. When the buses were full and ready to go, these *atalaku* received CDF 50 (\$0.05) by the driver for their service. Their yelling allowed the driver to work more rapidly and make more money. During rush hours, when it was extremely difficult to find a seat on a bus or a taxi, other young men functioned as ‘booking agents’. One just had to tell them the destination and they would run towards the car or bus even before it had stopped, jump on it and reserve the seat. The cost of this service varied between CDF 50 and CDF 100 (\$0.05 and \$0.10).

Rather than being a simple space of transit from one place to another, the street became a destination in its own right and, more importantly, a productive space. Through stalls and other informal activities, the *Kinois* have constantly transformed the space they inhabit, giving birth to what De Boeck and Plissart (2004: 235) have called an “invisible architecture” of the city. Every kind of monetary transaction was made in the street, in contrast with the impersonal money exchange of formal employment where transactions were made in offices or via bank transfers.

Formal employment was dominated by elderly men and women, whereas the informal economy was very much differentiated according to the type of activity. For example, ‘concrete’ boutiques, pharmacies, and small activities were run by both men and women, on the streets, markets and stalls were the favourite loci of women and children and the transport sector, crossroads and bus terminals were the most visible spots of the informal strategies of young men.

All the activities mentioned above were carried out by people who would keep all the profit for themselves. A woman who sold vegetables at the market did not have

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<sup>43</sup> However, the transport sector was not hassle free. Cars and vans were in very deplorable conditions, and often without the permits or insurance to drive. As such, traffic police and car insurance agents were the worst nightmare for taxi drivers, and used any excuse to extort money. This is why some taxi drivers preferred to drive at night, as there was no control by such agents. However, at night they risked more to be harassed by thieves and armed soldiers, equally extorting money.

<sup>44</sup> *Atalaku* denoted that person that yelled slogans and warmed up the audience before the band started playing, or during the fast-paced dancing parts of the songs (White 1999, 2008). The *atalaku* figures have invaded not only the streets, but also the spiritual environment of Pentecostal churches (Pype 2006b), that often made use of music bands during their prayer sessions.

to share her earning with partners or middlemen. All the money she made was for her to keep. Within this *la débrouille* we have just analysed, there is a distinct form of transaction known as *la coop*, which I will now elaborate on. *La coop* entailed the transaction of money between two or more actors and involved negotiators who would broker transactions and gain a percentage of the profits for their efforts. The phenomenon of *la coop* shows further dimensions of how the *Kinois* were engaged in the act of ‘getting by’.

### ***La Coop: of Skimming Money and Commissioning Agents***

*La coop* denoted a deal outside the legal mechanisms of state regulation, which involved two or more actors and the mediation of a broker known as a ‘commissioning agent’ (*commissionnaire*). In Kinshasa, anyone could be a buyer, a seller or a commissioning agent. For example, in our neighbourhood people used to bring avocados from their trees to Jacques Kinyongo's boutique. They would sell them to Jacques for CDF 300, while Jacques – who operated as a middleman – would sell them for CDF 400 in order to profit for the transaction. The same could happen with any kind of items: vegetable oil, second-hand shoes, etc. Moreover, these types of transaction often took place on the street, outside of the space of the boutique or the shop. Thus, literally anyone could try to sell an item on behalf of a seller for a higher price, in order to make some extra cash.

Commissioning agents facilitated encounters between people who pursued the same interest (selling or buying a house, food, or clothes) and were able to construct social networks through which interested people could buy and sell their products. Sellers demanded these agents whenever they wanted to strike a deal that required acquaintances outside the close network of their families and acquaintances. At the same time, commissioning agents gave sellers an opportunity to save time and do other informal activities, rather than trying to strike a deal by themselves.

The world of *la coop* and commissioning agents was not scam free. Commissioning agents pursued their own personal interests and they would not hesitate to cheat their clients. Although people knew that doing business with these agents was very risky, they were left with no choice, as the state did not offer a valid alternative. Services for the poor were non-existent and people were left to cope among themselves. The buyer had to resort to the commissioning agent with reluctant trust.

I shall now explain the role of these agents through some examples of *la coop*. In Kinshasa, commissioning agents were key figures in the real estate business. Around *la cité* one could find hundreds of cardboard signs saying ‘estate agent’ (*agence immobiliere*). Such signs were placed along busy streets so that people could easily spot them. Next to the signs, men sat on chairs waiting for customers. Any potential customers who might be interested in selling or in renting homes would seek out these ‘estate agents’. At the end of the transaction, home owners would give a percentage of the profits, between 5% and 10%, to the commissioning agent if the house was sold or one month’s rent if rented. This example shows that, although *la coop* was described as part of the informal economy of Kinshasa, it was organised through very formal mechanisms and rules which reminded official estate agencies. However, as I have anticipated, *la coop* was not scam-free, and cheating in the housing sector was very fruitful. Often, fake commissioning agents would try to sell houses which were not on sale, or which had already been sold to another customer. This is why, on the walls of many houses of *la cité*, one could read “this house is not on sale” (*cette maison n’est pas a vendre*) to prevent fraud<sup>45</sup>.

*La coop* could also be done to find a partner. A wealthy patron could ask an agent to procure him a mistress. The agent acting as a middleman, would seek out a suitable girl, and if this person met the approval of the patron, the agent would introduce the girl to him. If the woman became his mistress, which involved lavish gifts of money, luxury items and clothes, she would give a small amount to the middleman for having introduced her to the patron instead of introducing another woman.

Beside these examples, *la coop* was utilised to sell everyday goods such as food and clothes. The money involved in these informal transactions depended on the value of the good involved. I should stress here that although *la coop* seemed to be completely independent from the market economy, as people bought and sold items out of the control of the state, it is worth noting that this is not the case. On the contrary, the mechanisms through which the *Kinois* engaged in all aspects of *la débrouille* were intimately linked to wider shifts across the politico-economic terrain of Kinshasa, as the following example explains.

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<sup>45</sup> On a similar phenomenon in Nigeria, see Smith (2007: 22).

Estelle Swanga was a girl in her thirties who lived in the neighbourhood with her mom. She had contracted poliomyelitis and as a result had a malformed leg which made her dependant on her elderly mother. The state, of course, did not provide any assistance for her condition, and working in the formal sector was out of question, as she could not move easily and was socially stigmatised for her disability. As a result, Estelle had always worked in the informal market, sewing clothes for the people of the neighbourhood, and working occasionally as a commissioning agent thanks to a small stall on the street in front of her *parcelle*. When I asked her about *la coop* and how that worked for her, she explained:

Estelle: During the Mobutu epoch, there was the circulation of money. Someone could stay home all day long, then in the evening, she would go out...When she was back she must have earned something. We lived off *coop* eh, as we say, *cooperation*.

Silvia: And what did you do to 'coop'?

Estelle: We did some commissions... *Cooperation* means that I have got something to sell and I tell Joseph to sell this pair of scissors for CDF 1,000 (\$1). Joseph takes them and he goes and sells them for CDF 1,500 (\$1.5), and the 500 francs (\$0.50)...

Silvia: It's for him.

Estelle: Yes, it's for him... The surplus... This is what we call *cooperation*.

This interview suggests that the crisis of the formal sector had deeply shaped the informal activities it generated. The economic crisis that effected Kinshasa was so pervasive that it also affected the sphere of *la débrouille*. Many adults I interviewed were nostalgic for the first years<sup>46</sup> of Mobutu's reign, which they considered a more fruitful period than the present. While in the past *la coop* was seen as more profitable because it was used as a supplement to the wages of those working in the industries, this did not seem to be the case during my fieldwork, when the majority of men were left looking for occasional jobs in the street. Moreover, because of the monetary crisis

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<sup>46</sup> Many people I met were fond of the first decade of Mobutu's reign. The country was at peace, and the market economy seemed to work enough to allow people to have decent lives and "eat three times a day", in the words of one of my informants. However, things changed with Zairianisation in 1973, when Mobutu put foreign-owned industries in the hand of his Congolese affiliates. Corruption and misrule soon led to the bankruptcy of most industries, and thousands of workers were suddenly left without jobs.

and constant inflation, it has become difficult for people to maintain these cycles of money exchange. The following is an interview that I conducted with Marie and Elodie Kalala, two women living in my neighbourhood, who sold the typical coloured wax-printed fabrics (called *pagne*) through *la coop*:

Marie: Despite the fact that Mobutu was a dictator, there was *coop* [*coop ezalaki*] [...] At that time it was good because our husbands, the functionaries, after work they went looking for extra money, or we did some informal job. It was good because money [gained informally] was easy, and that money, together with the official money of the functionaries, was good. Now, a functionary earns maybe \$50, but the school fees of the child are \$200. So how are they going to pay the school fees, with the salary of the functionary..?

Silvia: But one has to keep doing *coop*, right?

Elodie: *La coop* works now but it doesn't pay well. This is why I want to go to Angola and from there to send the money to allow the kid to study.

The informal circuits of *la coop* seemed to be fruitful only if the formal circuits of employment worked as well. The two circuits interpenetrated each other in such a deep way, that without one, the other atrophied. As such, *la coop* suffered from the fluctuation of the market, and the economic crisis slowed down the informal economy. Even though it may seem that *la coop* was an annexe, a surplus of the formal economy, in reality the two were part of the same system of *la débrouille*: it is in the intersection between formal and informal that *la débrouille* was able to develop as an independent phenomenon.

In this economically insecure environment, the role of the commissioning agent had become even more central to *la coop*, as striking deals had become more and more difficult. In order to succeed in *la coop*, one needed a persuasive and clever intermediary agent<sup>47</sup>, able to strike the deal at the seller's conditions, and to make

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<sup>47</sup> The role of the commissioning agents recalled that of the middlemen hired by Portuguese traders during pre-colonial times. At that time, the middlemen were chosen because of their power to construct social networks. Middlemen were village chiefs, local traders or hunters who knew the correct people and places. Known to the Portuguese as *pombeiros*, these local itinerant peddlers brought Europeans' goods to African producers, who would exchange them for commodities and slaves (Miller 1988: 190; see also Austen 1983, and Austen & Ralph 1999). Such middlemen received rewards for their services, and earned additional goods by blackmailing the families of enslaved young people to liberate them (Miller 1988). As such, they could be considered as

enough profit for himself. Usually, these two factors come at the expense of the buyer, who would probably be cheated or tricked into paying more than he should. This is exactly what happened when Joseph Mutambu and I decided to buy one of those taxis one could see in the streets of Kinshasa. This would have allowed me to move faster in different neighbourhoods for my fieldwork, and it would have benefited Joseph by working as a taxi when I did not need the car.

In order to strike a deal, Joseph asked the advice of Baudouin, an old friend who worked as a driver for the missionaries with whom Joseph had spent twelve years. After seeing several cars, Baudouin finally convinced us to buy a red 1993 Toyota Corolla which did not look very good. However, to Joseph and me those cars all looked the same: we trusted Joseph's friend's advice. A few weeks after we had bought the car, we realised how bad Baudouin had cheated us. The car was falling into pieces, and we were spending hundreds of dollars in repairs. Joseph told me that clearly Baudouin had acted as a commissioning agent for the men who sold us the car. The two men apparently offered him a higher share of the profits than the other sellers. This is why Baudouin was so excited about the car, even though some of the others we saw before were in better condition. This episode illustrates the climate of trickery, fraud and illicit dealings that took place every day in Kinshasa. As the economy was very bleak, those who had the occasion resorted to the illicit and subversive mechanisms of *la coop* to make do.

For the majority of the inhabitants of Kinshasa, *la débrouille* allowed them to earn just enough to get by. Often money was not enough to cure sick children, or for other types of emergency. People did not manage to save anything, because as soon as some money appeared in the household, it was immediately spent in food or other basic items. In order to survive to such hardship, the *Kinois* resorted to a whole series of exchange mechanisms, and informal saving systems within their local community. In the next section, I shall analyse in depth the most common survival strategies in the *cités* of Kinshasa which further demonstrates the relationships between aspects of formal market economic practices and the world of *la débrouille*.

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tricksters, who sometimes deceived both parties and seized illicit opportunities for amassing personal wealth (Austen 1983: 14).



## Credit Mechanisms: Paper Credit Cards and Shadow Banks

As I have already analysed through several examples above, *la débrouille* has many complex dimensions in *la cité* of Kinshasa. Despite the scale of the phenomenon, the earnings of *la débrouille* were not enough to sustain people. This resulted not only in an increase in criminal activities and trickeries, but also in the development of the so-called ‘SOPEKA mentality’, from the union of the expressions ‘buy me [something]’ (*sombela ngai*), ‘give me [something]’ (*pesa ngai*), and ‘give me something as a present’ (*kabela ngai*)<sup>48</sup>. I often heard Julia address her friends (including me on a daily basis) with one of these expressions. I had not witnessed the circulation of small amounts of money, even only a few hundred Francs, among friends and relatives anywhere else with such frequency. People often loaned each other CDF 500 (\$ 0.5), CDF 1,000 (\$1), and regularly exchanged manioc leaves (*pondu*) and other small quantities of food supplies. Among friends and kin, there was a mutual agreement that money or any present would be reciprocated with another present of similar value in a future that could be protracted for a very long time. Among non-kin relations, lending, borrowing, debt and repayments varied according to the degree of trust and acquaintance. Part of the income of every family in my neighbourhood was constituted of these informal agreements and every family had some sort of debts with multiple people – family members and others. Like a chain, the impossibility of satisfying one's own primary needs led to borrowing money from someone else and so on. Often, people found it difficult to sustain such circles of debt, and this pushed them into trickeries to relieve the burden of these payments. For example, in our family, Julia Wembi used to give CDF 20,000 (\$20) to our neighbour Elisée Mugele at the beginning of each month for the oil that we needed for the petrol lamps at home. One day a young girl of Elisée's family arrived, asking Julia for extra money. When Julia asked why, the girl explained that Elisée had bought ‘her things’ (*biloko na ye*) with the money, and they could not buy wholesale oil. As a result, they were left without oil to sell. Julia became agitated with Elisée and the girl, but the money was gone.

At this point, one might ask why many *Kinois* did not try to get out of these cycles of debt. As it was impossible for them to make a living according to the mechanisms of the formal market economy, they had to rely more and more on social

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<sup>48</sup> See also Jewsiewicki (2008).

and kinship networks to survive. Through reciprocity, the *Kinois* had found a precarious way of coping with adversities. Extricating oneself from these circles of gifts and debts would mean becoming socially and economically isolated. According to Chabal (2009: 112):

People's labour is best invested in cultivating the conditions that will sustain the informal economy on which they depend. This involves committing substantial time and resources to ostensibly non-economic activities. For example, it may be more important for some people to propitiate the dead in the village, or to support financially a vast array of distant relatives, than to invest the profits from a shop in town into expanding their business.

In this respect the circulation of money constructed money lending systems and solidarity networks, like those described in the next sections.

#### ■ Rotating Credit Associations: Likelemba and Moziki

Since the 1930s, in front of the necessity of dealing with the depression that hit the Congo as well as the Western world, women organised themselves in systems of financial support (De Boeck & Plissart 2004). *Likelemba* and *Moziki*<sup>49</sup> (or *Muziki*) were rotating credit associations in which all members paid a deposit on fixed dates, the total of which was given to a particular member on a rotating basis. This allowed members to receive the money they donated little by little, all in lump sum, when it was their turn to receive the kitty. Members generally used the money for small investments and exceptional expenses, such as organising a trip, or buying a stock of clothes or food at the central market '*Zando*', which they would then resell at a higher price in the distant *cités*. There was a slight difference in the case of *moziki* which possessed a more festive and recreational character than *likelemba*. Participants in these associations often added a small sum which was used to organise a buffet at the place of the person receiving the kitty.

Many different actors engaged in *likelembas* and *mozikis*. For example, pupils organized their *likelembas* on a smaller scale to purchase fancy clothes, while teachers, policemen, women at the market and office workers made larger investments. Although these associations were born out of the cult of fashion and dressing well, which started

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<sup>49</sup> On *likelemba* and *moziki* see also Comhaire-Sylvain (1968) and Bouchard (2002).

to develop in town from the 1930s (Comhaire-Sylvain 1968, De Boeck & Plissart 2004), they gradually took on a different purpose. In contemporary Kinshasa, members of the associations supported each other by contributing to the expenses of mourning, weddings and other ceremonies<sup>50</sup>. Even though these associations did not generate any surplus for their members, they allowed people to strengthen bonds and relationships.

*Likelembas* and *mozikis* worked on communitarian basis, and in order to be successful they required all members to pay a previously agreed amount. The amount during my fieldwork varied between CDF 200 (\$0.20) for students' *likelemba* to CDF 10,000 (\$10) for business women, and their frequency could be daily, weekly or monthly. The amount of the donation varied according to how often members met, so for example women meeting on a monthly basis could pay CDF 10,000 (\$10), on a weekly basis could deposit CDF 2,000/ 3,000 (\$2, \$3) and women and young people meeting on a daily basis would usually deposit up to CDF 300 (\$0.30) or 500 (\$0.50). However, as Bähre (2007a) also highlighted in relation to South African financial self-help groups, cheating in these associations frequently occurred. Sometimes people did not pay, other times the money-collector disappeared with the kitty.

Despite the insecurity of these informal credit associations, people preferred to run the risks associated with them rather than resorting to banks. Banks were not a popular choice among the poor of Kinshasa for a number of reasons. First, in order to open a bank account, people needed a passport or a national identity card, which most of them did not have. Many *Kinois* were dissuaded from applying for an identity card by the slow and complex bureaucracy, high fees and the further informal taxation which formed part of the process. However, also those *Kinois* in possession of the document were suspicious of banks. In the eyes of the *Kinois* I spoke to, banks were part of that state and bureaucratic system which has cheated them several times, leaving them to fend for themselves and denying them their most basic rights. As such, people did not trust them, and believed their money would disappear in a way (bankruptcy) or another (theft by the very same functionaries who work in the bank). Rather than taking risks with banks, those people who wanted to save their little savings preferred to turn to other members of their community who worked as a sort of 'informal bank'.

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<sup>50</sup> See also Yengo (2006) and Bähre (2007b).

### ■ A Saving System: 'Throwing the Card'

An individual saving system in use during my fieldwork was called 'throwing the card' (*kobwakisa carte*). This system did not involve many participants, namely a card holder (the card simply being a piece of paper by which transactions are recorded), and a second person who would usually be an owner of a small boutique would store the card in a safe place, acting like a bank, or a commissioning agent. It was in the boutique that s/he stored the money of the creditor. This process had a duplex effect. On one hand, it allowed people to save money in what was deemed to be a safe place, as the boutique owner was unlikely to disappear without anybody noticing. On the other hand, it allowed the owner of the boutique to have some extra money in case of emergencies – money that he or she was required to replace before the end of the month, when the creditor would collect the money. Although shop owners could always create trouble by misusing the cash of their creditors, it was in their interest to keep the clients happy, or they would lose their clientele and the income they brought.

The card worked like a savings account. Following a fixed schedule, the owner of the card went to the shop and regularly added an amount to his or her 'account', which would be recorded on the card. The amount was usually the same every day, and varied from CDF 200 to CDF 1,000 (\$0.20, \$1). I never saw anyone in my neighbourhood exceed CDF 2,000 (\$2). At the end of the month, the owner would receive the money back all in a lump sum, minus what the commissioning agent deduced as a payment for his services (usually the equivalent of one day). Like *likelemba* and *moziki*, this system did not generate any surplus. However, it enabled people to store money which would otherwise be spent for family needs. Women comprised the vast majority of 'throwing the card'. They visited stores for grocery shopping, and used this system to save money behind the counter. The system allowed them, at the end of the month, to buy some stock or to pay some bills.

### ■ Micro Lending through Loan Sharks: Banque Lambert

The above mentioned saving systems did not really assist those in financial crisis. Most of the *Kinois* simply could not resort to banks, as they had neither jobs nor capital to secure loan repayments. As such, they found a way to cope with emergencies in the informal channels of *la cité*. When money was needed, people usually asked trusted

members of their kin groups. However, kin seldom had sufficient money to support those in need – or they simply pretended not to have, in order to avoid late repayments. This is why in extreme situations people in need were obliged to resort to non-kin. This gave birth to the phenomenon of the *Banque Lambert* (named after a renowned Belgian bank).

Rather than denoting a place to store and save money (as in the case of banks), *Banque Lambert* denoted a *person* who functioned as a bank. Anyone who had sufficient cash to loan out could act as a *Banque Lambert*. The amount of money could vary from five to hundreds of American dollars<sup>51</sup>. As people were aware that those who resorted to the *Banque Lambert* system were in urgent need, the person functioning as the bank took advantage of the situation by demanding extremely high interest rates.

*Banque Lamberts* were a very common loan system in our neighbourhood and several people had already resorted to them. Joseph Mutambu had to ask for a loan in order to pay the deposit of the *parcelle* in which we were living all together. In order to avoid the interest, we repaid immediately after my arrival, although many people need some time before putting together the sum they borrowed.

In order to better situate these *Banque Lamberts* within the *Kinois* social world, I shall offer the example of Albert Kayembe, a barber in my neighbourhood, who outlines how the formal system failed to provide a living for the *Kinois*, and how people had to resort to the *Banque Lambert*. Once, while Joseph and I were visiting Albert's barbershop for Joseph's haircut, he explained why he became a barber:

Albert:            There are many young people that do not work. And because of that, they have to find other methods to gain something. In here, the situation is serious! We [in my family] are good because...I was a teacher. I saw that teaching was no good, so I asked myself what am I going to do? As I had already studied aesthetics, I tried to find a way to make the teaching and the barber fit together, but I saw that did not work as well... Within private schools in here, they pay badly, so I left.

Silvia:            How much do they pay?

[...]

Joseph:           They pay you \$100 per month, you pay for the rent...

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<sup>51</sup> The currency in these types of exchange was interchangeable. Both Congolese francs and American dollars were accepted during transactions.

Albert: With \$100 it cannot work... [...] How can I raise my children? Meanwhile I started to indebt myself... Do you know the debts of today, that if they give you \$10 you have to reimburse \$15?

Silvia: Is it? Are interest rates so high?

Albert: Yes, with a rate of 50%... In here it's like that.

Silvia: Even among the family?

Albert: Nooo within the family it's another thing.. As I know my relatives, between us there is no problem, he's my brother... You give me \$10, you know well that I am going to reimburse you without interest rates. But apart from them, if someone comes to me [asking to borrow money]... If I give him \$10, he gives me \$15 the following month...

Silvia: \$10, \$15... And what if you give him 50 dollars? [...]

Albert: Well, 50%... He gives me \$75. They give you \$50 and you give back \$75.

Joseph: There are people that do business only with that, they are called '*Banque Lambert*'.

Silvia: *Banque Lambert*? And what does *Lambert* mean...?

Albert: I don't know, it's only the term that they use...

Silvia: This is very interesting... And where are these banks...?

Albert: Everywhere!

Silvia: Everywhere? Even in our neighbourhood?

Albert: Yes everywhere, me too, if you come and visit me... You too, if you do it, you become *Banque Lambert*. If there's someone who does it, they call him *Banque Lambert*. Often you say "I'm going to visit that woman who will lend me 5 dollars", and the person you say it to, s/he already knows that you are going to a *Banque Lambert*, and that later you will have to give back more money... In here it's serious! [*Ici c'est grave!*]

Joseph: Often, as he said, people finish the money before getting the payslip... Let's say that you have \$100: often someone can finish that \$100 even before receiving his salary. He finds himself with nothing to eat. So he gets indebted, he goes to the *Banque Lambert*, children cannot stay like that [without anything to eat]... "Give me only \$5, I'll give it back to you at the end of the month"...and for two days he is ok. Then he sees that it's not

enough, so he goes looking [for other money] somewhere else. The day that he gets paid, the money it's not for food for his family, but to pay his debts!

Albert: You've got \$100, the landlord is harassing you: "It's already the 5th of the month, the 10th, where is the rent?" So you go to the *Banque Lambert* and you borrow \$50. Every end of the month you get \$100. You borrow \$50 and you know already that at the end of the month you have to give back \$75. If you think about your salary, in the end you are left with \$25. You pay \$50 for the rent. In food, in food you spend every day at least \$5. Do the math... In a month, or even a week, you see that with that \$100... [You will not survive].

*Banque Lambert* functioned as a shadow bank. While it took its name from a Western institution, it worked outside the network of the state, embedded within the informal dealings in *la cité*. However, the people of *la cité* who resorted to this type of loan struggled to repay their debts. Paradoxically, many Congolese subsequently turned to their family members asking for help to repay the high interest rate. Many of them thought that their families would not deny them monetary support. Often, however, families could not – or simply refused to – help their members. If this occurred, the debtor still had a few options. Either he or she could repay the creditor by giving him valuables of an amount equivalent to the debt – such as a television or video recorder – or they could resort to yet another *Banque Lambert* to settle their first debts. In some cases, the debtor delayed repayments for as long as possible, which prompted the creditor to take action by sending the police to the debtor's home.

Although *Banque Lambert*, as an informal agreement, did not fall under the jurisdiction of the state, people turned to the police because of their coercive power. By paying a little compensation, police would put pressure on the creditor and threaten future harassment. If the debtor repaid the debt following the police's threats, the creditor would give a percentage of the repaid money to the police, who had thus assumed the work of a commissioning agent. The police, although working for the state, often resorted to these types of informal activities in order to supplement their salary. Police harassment of the population and punitive expeditions to debtors were another clear example of how the public sector and *la débrouille* cohabited in Kinshasa.

More and more frequently, the *Kinois* had to rely on people outside their family circles if they wanted to make a living. Villagisation was not always possible in the context of Kinshasa, thus people resorted to individual transactions based on the model

of bank lending schemes. However, the price to pay for extra-familial assistance was high, as a 50% interest rate applied to loans between non-family members. Once again, this is evidence of the mistrust that reigned in Kinshasa. Such a high rate seemed to be a cautious strategy in this precarious context. The lender was never certain that the borrower could return the money in the required time-period. By asking for a 50% interest rate to every customer, *Banque Lambert* was able to cover some of the unpaid loans. The more modernised and individualised the debt system, the more exploitative and hostile it was. The formalisation of the informal economy was an expensive process.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have described some of the mechanisms of *la débrouille* as they took place in the governmental sphere and in everyday life in the suburbs of Kinshasa. This analysis helps us understand how structural violence and everyday violence were connected, and how they influenced and depended from each other. Although the *Kinois* I interviewed all agreed that the informal economy was unstable and insecure, they also agreed that it was a very fruitful income generating system – for many of them, the only one they could access. By orally transmitting rules and mores through pavement radio, they were able to give a structure to a whole system, *la débrouille*. Far from being a backup in case of temporary crisis of the market economy, *la débrouille* became a phenomenon per se, with its own rules and mechanisms. Once again, the *Kinois* used the *mobulu* of the state as a catalyst to create an economic system which they could master and benefit from.

At the government level, *la débrouille* has become a means through which the powerful assert their patronage to those below them in a pyramid scheme, while taking advantage of the curtain of legality which surrounded the state in order to continue their illegal activities undisturbed. Rather than toning down criminality and illegality, democratisation and economic liberalisation have created new spaces of privilege.

At the same time, also among the poor of *la cité*, the strategies adopted for survival were identical to the ones adopted by the leaders to accumulate wealth and power. Although ordinary people saw the state as the perpetrator of injustices and economic inequalities through its corruption and illegal dealings, they adopted the very same strategies to attain success. As the market economy was not able to provide the



Congolese with the means of making a living, they sought to exploit leaks in the system and constantly renegotiated official rules ‘on the ground’ to earn profit. As such, to put it with Petit and Mulumbwa (2005: 483): “[T]rickery allows the little man – or, more broadly speaking, ordinary people – to rebalance the situation more favourably for themselves: they are simply retrieving what they have lost with the crisis, whose origins are attributed to the state and the economic elite, both accused of immoral accumulation”. Strategies for survival were products of economic hardship but also attempts to impose order from below.

The boundaries between the formal sector of the State and the informal sector of *la cité* were extremely malleable and porous. Throughout the chapter I have given examples of the interpenetration of the two sectors, demonstrating how public servants and ordinary people used the same forms of *débrouille*. The story of Justin Nsenga, the assistant professor and REGIDESO employee who used his office in order to collect bribes, exemplifies this interpenetration. The informal economy worked according to precise rules and mechanisms, as evident in *likelemba* rotating credit associations and in *Banque Lambert* interest rates. In this sense, the informal economy operated with certain mechanisms relative to the formal economy.

Another example of the interpenetration of legal and illegal in *la débrouille* can be found in one of its nicknames: ‘Article 15: fend for yourselves’ (*Article 15: débrouillez-vous*). Informality and formality, criminality and legality are so intertwined, that *la débrouille* found space in an imaginary Congolese constitution. In Kinshasa the distinction between legal and illegal, and formal and informal, was a misleading one, as actors easily shifted between those realms according to the situation. Therefore we can analyse *la débrouille* as an ensemble of formal and informal practices which created a very distinct activity, rather than simply as a mirror of official economy.

*La débrouille* has allowed the population to make do in the face of the hardship of everyday life. The majority were trying to do just get by and make it to the next day. But what of those few individuals who managed to succeed and become rich? People’s success stirred a lot of jealousy within the community abound with rumours of accumulation through deeds of witchcraft. This will be developed in depth in chapter 5, where I analyse the phenomenon of *la magie* – the use of witchcraft in order to get rich. Before doing this, let us explore another manifestation of *mobulu* linked to economic insecurity: the rise of street gangs called *kulunas*.

- CHAPTER FOUR -

**KULUNAS: VIOLENCE AND INSECURITY IN THE STREETS OF KINSHASA**

One of the greatest anxieties in Kinshasa during my fieldwork concerned the position of young men. Through the *mobulu* of the state, these youths were unable to get formal jobs and attain economic independence, and subsequently unable to afford the bridewealth required for marriage. Thus, these young men were unable to achieve the level of status required to achieve adulthood in Congolese society<sup>52</sup>. This confined them into the liminal position of youth and a status of “prolonged immaturity” (Masquelier 2005a: 60) which prevented them from progressing up the social hierarchy. In different parts of Africa, this “lost generation” (O’Brien 1996) has faced marginalisation and unfulfilled adulthood in conditions of instability and deprivation<sup>53</sup>. As a result, in many cases, these disenchanted young people have entered the political space as “saboteurs” whom Durham (2000: 118) describes “as political actors whose politics is to open up discourses on the nature of society in its broadest and most specific terms”. According to Durham (*Ibid*: 113), the potential of these youths as saboteurs comes from “their incomplete subjugation to contexts and co-opters, and to their own power for action, response and subversion in contexts of political definition”. However, as I am about to explain, young people in Kinshasa did not merely subvert political power, but rather appropriated it and transformed it into something else, creating new social practices able to lead them into manhood through other avenues.

Here I draw attention to those disenfranchised young men in Kinshasa who would become members of street gangs known as *kulunas*, engaging in physical violence on the streets. *Kulunas* were one of the main manifestations of *mobulu* in Kinshasa’s everyday scene. Through violence and pillaging, the young men of the *kuluna* street gangs challenged the gerontocratic power hierarchy of society and instituted a different path to attain manhood in society. This new model of manhood was no longer dependent upon economic independence and marriage, but rather through the display of force and the achievement of respect through fights and violence. For many of them, violence and criminality became a way not only to *se débrouiller*,

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<sup>52</sup> See also O’ Brien (1996) on West Africa and Masquelier (2005a) on the Nigerian context.

<sup>53</sup> On this argument see Goldstein (2003), Perullo (2005), Ferguson (2006), Mains (2007), Pype (2007), Rodgers (2007), Jensen (2008), Ralph (2008), Weiss (2009), McGovern (2010) and Newell (2012).

but also to appropriate some of the wealth they believed they were entitled to. Indeed, because of economic insecurity, many young people chose to resort to violent criminal activities as a means of survival. Thus, insecurity at the economic level resulted in *mobulu* among the population, created by the very same victims of the *mobulu* of the state. Through violence and pillages, the *kulunas* denounced the socio-economic inequalities to which they were subjected and which had marginalised them from the social scene, re-entering the stage boldly and aggressively.

Kuluna gangs were organised on a territorial basis. Members of these gangs came from the same neighbourhood – or part of it, such as a section of the area or a square. Many young people within the neighbourhood were attracted to join such street gangs to attain social prestige among their peers and also for protection: being a member of a street gang gave them reassurance that if someone attacked them, members of their group would sooner or later take revenge. Being a member of a powerful, violent gang implied being feared and respected by the population and avoiding hassle from police and even by soldiers, who were often afraid of such gangs.

The *kulunas* in many ways mirrored the figure of the soldier. On the one hand, they organised themselves according to an internal hierarchy that mimicked military ranks. On the other, the population interpreted the actions of *kulunas* using the vocabulary they used to describe raids by armed groups and the military.

In this chapter I explain how *kulunas* drew elements from the military to empower themselves. In the past decades, military coups, political assassination and armed conflict have shaken Kinshasa and the Congo as a whole (as I demonstrated in chapters 1 and 2). In the east of the country, thousands of rebel groups and army battalions fought for the control of the Kivus, two areas rich in raw minerals. Often it was civilians who paid the higher price for these conflicts and rumours of pillaged villages, rapes of women and children, and casualties were common knowledge among the population of Kinshasa. The military violence which affects the country has highly influenced the imaginary of the *Kinois* in everyday life and many young people have found rapid pathways to respect and social status through the figure of the soldier and the use of violence. The *mobulu* of street gangs can be seen as an appropriation and transformation of the *mobulu* of the military against the population. Once again, social phenomena at the everyday level and the *mobulu* that is perpetrated through them cannot be understood separately from events at the macro-economic level of structural violence. In order to understand the relationship between the *kulunas* and the soldiers

they appeared to mimic, I will now offer a brief summation of anthropological discussions of mimicry and mimesis to provide some context for my own contribution to this milieu.

The topic of mimicry and mimesis has provoked interesting debates in recent decades. Ferguson, in “Global Shadows” (2006) discusses Jean Rouch’s “*Les Maitres Fous*” (1954), a documentary which illustrated a Hauka dance movement in Niger, in which members became possessed by spirits of colonial figures, such as ‘governor’, ‘corporal’s guard’, and ‘lieutenant of the Red Sea’. Ferguson notes that some anthropologists interpreted this mimesis as “some combination of parody and appropriation” of colonial features, which was part of a broader “resistance to colonialism” (Ferguson 2006: 159) and to state power. For example Taussig, he continues, described the Hauka movement as “a powerful form of resistance, a veritable subversion of the colonial order” (Ferguson 2006: 162). Ferguson denounced this interpretation arguing instead that members of the Hauka movement did not want to mock the Whites, nor resist the colonial authority but rather, they wanted to be acknowledged as members of the “world society” (*Ibid*: 164), and to be considered worthy of respect and rights like the whites. Hence, according to Ferguson, acts of mimesis do not merely amount to appropriation: they also signify denunciation<sup>54</sup>.

In my opinion, Ferguson’s approach risks underestimating the power of mimesis and displaying a narrow view of people involved in such mimetic appropriation. The Congolese did not only mimic the whites – or the postcolonial state – to denounce their status as passive subjects in the face of the powerful. I find myself agreeing with a number of anthropologists<sup>55</sup> who view mimesis as a central aspect of transformation. As Argenti (1998: 774) argues: “The ultimate aim of mimetic activity is paradoxically the transformation of the object of mimesis. Mimesis marks the addition of an extra element – a supplement – to the exemplar; it signals a process of change”. Argenti (*Ibid*) explains this transformation with reference to a youth dance group from the Grassfield of Cameroon known as ‘Air Youth’. In their performances, members of Air Youth appropriated styles of movement, gesture and clothing proper of the colonial Gendarmes. However, these young people did not openly acknowledge the link

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<sup>54</sup> Such a view is shared by Wilson (1941), who highlights how people in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) displayed European clothes and consumer goods not to resist colonial power, but rather to assert their claims to “a civilised status, comparable to that of the Europeans” (Wilson 1941: 19-20).

<sup>55</sup> See Taussig (1993), Gebauer and Wulf (1995), Argenti (1998), Moore (2011).

between the figure of the Gendarme and the uniforms of their performances. They simply used the habitus of their oppressors in their bodily practices, without making any rational connection to their terrifying actions. To quote Argenti (1998: 774): “Air Youth representations might be, however, more subversive precisely because their exemplar is not immediately discernible in the representation, and because new images arise out of the embodiment of the primary images of state power and violence”. Old images can thus be used to produce new social phenomena.

Moore (2011) picks up on Argenti’s (2007: 28) analysis of mimesis as something that “is not imitative, *it is new*”. In an example, she explains how students in Nairobi found ‘lessons for living’ in some television series and film. These ‘lessons’, rather than speaking of appropriation, affirmation or mimicry, provided: “[N]ew languages of self-description, ways of imagining and handling intimate relations (often through examples of how not to do it), additional images of self-representation, mechanisms for resolving moral puzzlement [...] and how to create and live a life of value” (Moore 2011, ch. 3, section 4, para 2). In an analogue example, she analyses Lisa Rofel’s (2007) description of how people used the media, public discourses and images of modern commodities in order to reframe aspects of self and the world. Also in this case, Moore (*Ibid*) observed that people who learned lessons of living through the media, do not appropriate nor simply mimic certain behaviours. She explains: “The protagonists are not trying to be the same as the images or individuals they see or hear or read about; rather they are trying to see themselves in them, exploring affective dispositions, thinking through the potentialities they are offered” (Moore 2011, ch. 3, section 4, para 2). The media, images of other realities and other worlds allow young people to transform themselves in something different, and build their selves and their worlds in between the local and the global.

*Kuluna* gangs drew a clear link with the military world. Yet by appropriating the language and ethics of the military, they did not merely reproduce the subject of their mimesis, but rather produced a whole new symbolic world which allowed them to reposition themselves in the streets of *la cité*. In fact, *kulunas* were originally born out of the attempts of young men to defend their territory and women from external attacks. However, like the Congolese military which was originally established for protection but soon became a perpetrator of *mobulu*, the *kulunas* transformed themselves from protectors into predators. Among *kuluna* groups, who first mimicked the military and subsequently its negligence, a transformation within the transformation occurred, that

we can term a “mimetic excess”, to use Taussig’s (1993: 252) definition. This mimetic excess allowed them to “double yet double endlessly, to become any Other and engage the[ir] image with the reality thus imagined” (*Ibid*: 255). In this manner, *kulunas* created a new figure which could fit in the local social context of *la cité*.

The chapter is divided in three parts. The first introduces the context of crime and insecurity of *la cité*. In this section I also introduce the figure of the ‘fake soldier’, who were armed thieves dressed in military uniforms, who terrorised the population at night. In this violent context, young people living in the same neighbourhood joined forces, creating local gangs to protect their territory from bandit attacks. The second part analyses how *kulunas* initially played the role of protectors of local neighbourhood. However, like the military, *kuluna* groups eventually created insecurity among those whom they sought to protect. The third part analyses perpetration of crimes by *kulunas* in depth. Not only were *kulunas* described as violent bandits who destabilised entire neighbourhoods, but they were also believed to cooperate with the military and the police in securing bribes. In conclusion, the *kulunas*’ mimicry of military *mobulu* created new spaces for social life and coping strategies.

### **The Local Context of Crime**

There was an unofficial curfew in Maman Yemo. By 8.30pm most people were at home, with the gates of the *parcelles* locked, and their doors shut. The frequent electricity black outs and cable robberies that often left the entire neighbourhood in the dark meant that the neighbourhood of Maman Yemo was a recurrent target for thieves (*moyibi* sg., *miyibi* pl. in Lingala). Some of them were opportunistic thieves, pushed to theft by hunger or desperation. Such thieves would break into homes to take whatever they could resell on the black market – curtains, televisions, plastic chairs, and so on. A barber shop in our neighbourhood was robbed twice. The first time, thieves stole a small television and the curtains, while the second time they took five plastic chairs.

Alpha Mumbela, hired as our sentinel to keep watch over our *parcelle*, also became victim of a robbery. Alpha lived in a nearby neighbourhood called DGC, with his pregnant wife and a two-year old child. One night, he left home around 10pm to come to our *parcelle*. Someone had studied his movements because soon after he left, four young men broke down the rear wall of the house with hammers – their hammering drowned out by the loud music from a nearby bar. They entered directly

into Alpha's room, taking his television and video player. However, improvised thieves such as these, often argued over their share of the booty and inequalities in the distribution created tensions within these groups. The bandits who received the worst deal eventually vented their frustration by moaning among friends, and rumours of the robbery spread.

A week later, an old friend of Alpha's knocked at his door and told him that he had heard rumours about who the thieves might be. Following this encounter, Alpha visited a 'recreation room'<sup>56</sup> (*esika ya kosakana, or esika ya masano*) not far from DGC. Alpha looked around and recognised his television which he had previously marked with a knife on one side. After a long discussion with the young man in charge of the recreation room, Alpha demanded that his television and video-player be returned that evening or he would report him to the police. Alpha retrieved his possessions but was left to pay to repair his wall.

Stories like Alpha's illustrate that often those who conducted such robberies were related in some way to their victims. Often, thieves relied on information of spies who knew the habits of their victims, contributing to a significant lack of trust among the *Kinois*<sup>57</sup>.

In addition to the opportunistic thieves, there were more organised armed thieves roaming the streets at night. These thieves dressed in military uniforms and carried rifles or shotguns, mimicking the weapons used by the Congolese security forces and the police. As such, it was difficult to distinguish them from real soldiers. Once they had chosen their targets, these thieves entered people's homes, threatening to kill anyone who did not co-operate<sup>58</sup>. Such thieves were called 'fake soldiers' (*faux militaries* or *basoda ya lukuta*) by the population of *la cité*. This phenomenon was particularly common in the neighbourhood of Maman Yemo, as the next examples illustrate.

In an episode on 2 June 2011, six men in uniforms forced their way into the house of Jacques Kinyongo, the owner of a bread stall, who lived just next to Maman

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<sup>56</sup> A store where young people could play video games.

<sup>57</sup> This concept of the thief as a 'betrayal', as someone close enough to you to know your moves and attack you accordingly, is an interesting parallel with the world of witchcraft. As I will explain in the next chapter, according to the *Kinois*, the witch made use of other subordinated witches, a sort of 'witch-commissionaires', in order to infiltrate a family and 'eat' its members. In both cases, the danger came from someone very close to you.

<sup>58</sup> People were often beaten or killed as a result of resistance against thieves, although I never heard about rapes occurring in the houses the thieves visited.

Yemo's square, a few *parcelles* from ours. That night, Jacques was guarding another *parcelle* to make some extra money, while his wife, Carine Monssengo, was left at home alone with the children. It was 11pm, and the streets were still populated by a few dwellers. However, nobody dared to stop six men when they entered the house, waking up Carine with the accusation that she was hiding bandits. After some time it became clear that the men were after money rather than criminals. However, Carine had no cash on her and the soldiers left empty-handed and angry. Four of them returned a few nights later, threatening to cut her feet<sup>59</sup> if she did not confess about hiding bandits (or pay a bribe). Carine was unshakable and refused to pay, hence putting her life, and those of her children, at risk. This time the men in uniform also left without inflicting harm. On both occasions, Carine called the police, urging them to do something, but they replied they could not leave the police station or they would get killed. The situation worsened toward the end of my stay when there were two separate cases within a month of each other, of armed men killing a teenager in a street close to Maman Yemo's square because they refused to hand over their mobile phone and pocket money.

'Fake soldiers' is a nickname that denoted both bandits who dressed up like soldiers to carry out robberies, and also soldiers who perpetrated violence against the population. All the civilians I interviewed perceived soldiers as perpetrators of violence rather than protectors. This had been caused in part by the economic crisis leading to the insecurity of wages and the inability of the government to keep a hold on its security forces. Many soldiers took advantage of their uniforms and their weapons to instil fear among the population and engage in *la débrouille* through threats, robberies and beatings. Thus, rather than protecting the citizens from thieves and criminals, soldiers were the first cause of insecurity in town. "Fake soldiers are *mobulu*" (*faux militaires baza mobulu*), some *Kinois* would tell after recalling episodes of violence at their hands. The *mobulu* of fake soldiers was not only the physical threats they posed to the population but also the psychological burden and the atmosphere of insecurity they had to bear on a daily basis. People would be careful to avoid crossing paths with soldiers at night, because they knew that, in most cases, they would be stopped and harassed.

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<sup>59</sup> Mobility was essential to young people's survival and *débrouille*, therefore cutting off feet was possible the worst threat for the people of la cité.



The refusals of the police and security forces in general to intervene, left the *Kinois* with limited options to address *mobulu* in the neighbourhood – often caused by the same people in charge of protecting them. Their only recourse became young people's gangs, which kept away thieves and fake soldiers through intimidation and further *mobulu*. Thus in the next section I shall explain how *kuluna* gangs arose from the need of young men to defend their territories from external attacks, as well as from the possibility to earn wealth through punishing other gangs by pillaging their territory. In this sense, *kulunas'* attacks were yet another aspect of *la débrouille* of Kinshasa.

### **The Origins of Kulunas**

Street banditry was not a new phenomenon in Kinshasa. During the 1950s, street gangs called the *bills*, who I explored in chapter 2, influenced by the Cowboy movies<sup>60</sup>, roamed the streets. Many of the gang's members also practiced martial arts which enabled them to physically compete over territory and girls (Gondola 2009).

According to Eric Bakaji, a friend of mine who was a member of one of these gangs thirty years ago, the term *yankee* replaced the word *kibill* in denoting street banditry at the end of the 1970s. This appellation was still fresh in people's minds at the time of my stay. While I was talking with my friend Joseph about the term *yankee*, he stressed that it was still used today as a synonym for *kuluna*:

Silvia:            So... There are *kulunas*. And who are these *yankees* then?

Joseph:          The *yankees* are *kulunas*, *yankees* have no fear. They take drugs openly. They put their hands in your pocket... It's not as if it's the two of us and I take you and I abuse you. You are all chatting, the three, four of you, I come and I take you by force. Or I put my hand in your pocket. Openly! And if you try to complain, I wound you or also I kill you.

Since the turn of the 21st Century, the term *kuluna* (plural *bakuluna* but also *les kulunas* or *kuluneurs*) has been used to refer to a recent form of banditry on the streets of Kinshasa. Despite the variations in the stories of those I interviewed, there were a

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<sup>60</sup> On the role of the media in influencing young people's imaginary see also Bazenguissa-Ganga (1999).

few patterns that characterised the *kulunas*. *Kulunas* were young people<sup>61</sup> who organised themselves in stables (*écuries*<sup>62</sup>) or ‘battalions’, formed on the basis of territory, loyalty and common objectives. The size of these stables varied from small groups of ten to larger groups of fifty or sixty. The more renowned a group, the more likely it would attract young people of different ages – many in their early teens, who sought social recognition inside the neighbourhood, and protection from the harassment of other gangs. From this brief description we can see that the *kuluna* gangs inherited many traits of the *bills* and *yankees*.

Many of my informants said that at the beginning of the phenomenon, *kulunas* behaved according to the same code of the *bills*, who emulate[d] the moral high ground of Western actors displaying heroism, bravery, and defence of the weak. As such, *kuluna* gangs also served as protectors of the weak in their neighbourhoods. *Kulunas* were ‘strong men’ (*batu pomba*<sup>63</sup>) who trained themselves through sports like boxing and martial arts. As one of my neighbours explained to me:

All *kulunas* started as sportsmen [*sportifs*]. They made themselves able to defend themselves. Not all the sportsmen are *kulunas*, but all *kulunas* are sportsmen.

In the gyms of *la cité* (called *dojos*, Japanese for martial art training centres) young people trained their body to become strong men (*batu pomba*), influenced

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<sup>61</sup> Although none of the *Kinois* I interviewed mentioned gangs of girls, Elongo & Lofoso (2008) in their article mention two *écuries* of *kuluna*-girls in Barumbu: the Red Ants (*Fourmis Rouge*) and the Baby Bottle (*Biberon*). Furthermore, La Fontaine (1970b:203) points out that although *Bill* street-gangs were formed mainly by boys, some girls of the neighbourhood were considered in all respects members of the gang. During my fieldwork, although the girlfriends of some *kulunas* were considered members of the gang, they did not take part in fights and pillaging activities. Thus, this chapter will be mainly focussed on young men.

<sup>62</sup> During my fieldwork, *écurie* was used to signify groups of young people with a common purpose. So *kulunas* were not the only ones to be organised in stables. There were also stables of street-children, while De Boeck (1999) highlights that also the diamond diggers who worked in group in mine sites were organised in *écuries*.

<sup>63</sup> *Pomba* (strong) is the adjective used for people who instil fear and respect because of their physical aspect. Some of my research participants traced the term *pomba* back to the Portuguese word *pombeiro*, which denotes those local peddlers who exchanged European goods for slaves during pre-colonial times (see ch. 3, footnote 47). We could thus compare the fights against *batu pomba* to a memory of the slave trade, during which *pombeiros* were in competition with each other to bring slaves to the colonialists, and increase their social status. It seems that, as Argenti writes, “the appropriation of the state in its various forms represents the continuation of a long-standing process” (1998:772). As for the commissioning agents described in chapter 3, the *batu pomba* are not a phenomenon born in opposition to the state. Rather, these men have appropriated a figure of power typical of the early colonial state and they use to subvert socially accepted rules of behaviour.

largely by American Wrestling matches on TV and action movies featuring Jackie Chan, Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Bruce Lee. Martial Arts and boxing were not seen merely as a sport activity *per se*, but rather as one of the most successful means of gaining respect in the neighbourhood. Rather than trying to explicitly recreate the imagery of masculinity showed in the action movies, *kulunas* aimed to create different forms of sociality and prestige through emulating these images.

*Kulunas* had strong territorial identity. All members of a given group would be from the same neighbourhood and discouraged others from venturing into their territory and causing trouble. As such, *kulunas* were first conceived as defence squads that protected their areas from thieves and other *kuluna* groups. Pablo Bashala, a sixteen-year old ex-*kuluna* who managed to quit the group by joining a Non-Governmental Organisation education programme with some friends, explained to me the logic of violence and protection behind *kuluna* groups in his neighbourhood:

Pablo: Here in Kauka there are several stables. The strongest are the ‘Soviets’ [*Sovietiques*]. They’re like a group of people very clean, very well dressed, they were like a staff [*staff*<sup>64</sup>] of young people who dressed well... Inside that group there were good players, they did good matches... [...] When they went to do competitions, matches, starting from there, brawling broke out... For example someone had loved a girl of another team... And they would start like that. In the group there was an old man, very old, they called him ‘the founder of the Soviets’ [*Fondá Sovietiques*], who started to recruit the boys. These boys then became both *staff* and stable. He started to convert the children and to say: “Those who will harass us, we will beat them”. They created their base on the other side of Kauka. All passers-by, some young guys, would be called, they would be asked where they live... If you are not from the neighbourhood but from another one, they take your clothes, your watch, they take everything away from you. Most of the times, when they collect money from young people, they start to buy white weapons, like knives, etc. When the victim goes back to his/her neighbourhood,

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<sup>64</sup> In 2007, Pye described the *staffeurs* (members of a staff) as the descendants of the *sapeurs*, the well-dressing people of the 1970s and 1980s. Although the *staffeurs* did not wear European designer clothes like the *sapeurs*, they too used to go out and party with expensive girls, displaying their wealth, fine clothes and lavish accessories in clubs and bars. *Staffeurs* as such saw themselves in contrast with sportsmen and young people who engaged in fights, as they incarnated two different models of masculinity (Pye 2007). However, as Pablo’s interview shows, at the time of my research, groups of *staffeurs* and *kulunas*’ stables influenced each other’s masculinity: *staffeurs* started to perpetrate a masculinity based on bodily capital typical of the street gangs, while some *kulunas* adopted a cult of clothes and ostentation typical of the *staffeurs*.

s/he informs that in Kauka they did this this and that... And the others prepare themselves [for the fight]. How does the group become bigger? The young people of a neighbourhood, when they see that their stable [of their neighbourhood] becomes bigger, they are pleased with that, and they can also come spontaneously, also students, to give money in order to buy 'white weapons'.

Silvia: Why?

Pablo: It's to protect themselves. If there's someone who wants to attack [you], they will come and help you out, as you gave them some money. It's for protection.

In a style reminiscent of the Sicilian mafia (Gambetta 1996), *kulunas* were described primarily as protectors, with members of the neighbourhood being required to pay money not only for protection against other gangs, but also to avoid being robbed by the gangs of their own neighbourhood. Local residents had no choice. Security would have come whether they wanted it or not, and it came at a price.

Many informants described *kulunas* as representing and standing up for their neighbourhoods. Thérèse Kabasele, a young woman who worked for a Non-Governmental Organisation that takes care of street-children, told me that at the beginning, the *kulunas* were only encountered in a few areas. *Kulunas* were not thieves, but they were strong men (*batu pomba*) who practiced sports such as martial arts or boxing and who demonstrated their force in organised matches. She told me that some of the first strong men to develop into violent *kulunas* lived around Yolo, a neighbourhood in the commune of Kalamu. At some point, a bridge was built to allow people to cross the stream which separated Yolo from the adjacent neighbourhood. People who wanted to cross the bridge had to pay a toll, either to the inhabitants of Yolo or to the inhabitants of the other neighbourhood – and often to both of them. It was conflict over the ownership of the toll money which eventually triggered a fight between 'strong men' (*batu pomba*) of the two neighbourhoods. The war between the strong men extended to their families and friends, and spread like wildfire to other 'hot spots' of the city. Thérèse concluded by saying that the *kulunas* were now considered to be as dangerous as thieves and witches (*bandoki*).

Analysing the words of Pablo and Thérèse above, we can say that the *kulunas* were born as a new social phenomenon, which united young people's quest for social recognition obtained through the strategy of *la débrouille*. Defending their property was

important not only to affirm themselves in the neighbourhood but also to ensure that no other *kuluna* stables got ahead of them in accumulating wealth – let alone by robbing their own territory. Indeed, gangs acquired power with territory: the more territory they controlled, the more members they attracted.

Although *kulunas* were conceived as groups of young people fighting to defend their territory, they soon became known for the violence of their fights and attacks against civilians. In the next section I shall highlight the rationale behind young people's violence and their quest for manhood through the (mis)use of force.

### **Violence, Bodily Capital and Masculinity**

On one hand *kulunas* were responsible for protecting their neighbourhoods from the attacks of rival gangs, on the other, they were engaged in fights with rival gangs for territorial supremacy and therefore responsible for bringing violence into the neighbourhood in the first instance. In order to increase their influence, gangs often engaged in fights which took place at night in public spaces – such as football fields, school courtyards, squares and so on. Gangs also clashed when one of their members ventured into enemy territory. Clashes in such cases happened in spontaneous ways, such as on the streets next to commercial enterprises or people's homes. When these spontaneous clashes occurred, *kulunas* took advantage of the frenzy to pillage shops (*boutiques*), small stalls and even people's homes. According to local women, the arrival of *kulunas* sounded like the arrival of an armed force. They systematically passed through a street or a market and took whatever they found. They confiscated mobile phones, jewellery, bags, and might even kill if someone refused to give them what they wanted. During their raids, members of these gangs were armed with 'white weapons' (*armes blanches*, meaning knives, broken bottles, razorblades and sticks) and did not hesitate to use them against other *kulunas* or against civilians. The population was terrorised by the actions of these gangs: rumours and gossip of their deeds were told at every corner of the street, with new, atrocious elements added to the plot every time. Stories of *kulunas* were so violent that it is worthy reproducing one of them. The following story of a *kuluna* fight was told to me by a police officer in Limete, who was investigating the case.

I met Thibault Mukwaya following one of my fieldtrips around Kinshasa's *cités*. Joseph and I were in Masina, a neighbourhood in eastern Kinshasa, and I had just

finished an interview with some relatives of a child accused of witchcraft. It was 6 in the afternoon, and it was getting dark. The father of the child insisted on taking me and Joseph to catch the bus, and admonished us to be careful while walking around town at night. He had witnessed *kuluna* attacks in his neighbourhood but always managed to escape before they could attack him. He explained that the situation was getting worse day by day. He knew a police officer in the neighbourhood of Limete (a distant relative) who used to update him on the latest cases he investigated. After begging him, he agreed to introduce us to the officer the following day. Joseph and I travelled to Matonge, where Officer Thibault Mukwaya lived, and were invited to sit under a tree in his courtyard, where he began the story.

On September 2010, members of the gang Nkunda<sup>65</sup> in Masina abducted and raped the girlfriend of one member of the gang New Jack<sup>66</sup> of the neighbouring Kingabwa. A few days later the girl escaped and managed to return to her neighbourhood alive, although members of Nkunda had cut off one of her ears. She was taken to a private clinic in *la cité* of Kingabwa, and started her slow recovery. The *kulunas* of New Jack in Kingabwa were furious. It was not a good time for the gang. They already had enough problems with the new head of the police, whom the people of Kingabwa had nicknamed *Bothersome (Mal à l'aise)* for his violent reprisals against *kulunas*. Due to the actions of *Bothersome* New Jack had already lost two of its fiercest members, who had been captured while they returned to the gang's headquarter with their booty. New Jack had to fight to avenge their loss.

In order to buy more 'white weapons' for the fight against Nkunda, they started to harass the people of their own neighbourhood, robbing them and applying taxation to those who passed through 'their' street. One night, they finally ventured into Masina with machetes and broken bottles. They went to the central market, called 'the Market of Freedom' (*Marché de la Liberté*) where they knew they would find some members of Nkunda. The fight did not last long. They managed to injure many Nkunda members, some of them quite seriously, and dispersed before more of them could gather. They even managed to capture two street girls, believed to be linked to Nkunda, and

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<sup>65</sup> This name was inspired by a former General of the Congolese national army Laurent Nkunda, who later became a rebel and warlord in the Kivus area, in the east of the country. In 2008, Nkunda was deemed responsible for atrocious violence against civilians in the Kivus. In 2009, the Rwandese government decided to arrest Nkunda, to calm rumours that suggested any involvement of the Rwandan government with the warlord operations in Eastern Congo.

<sup>66</sup> This gang were named after a famous American wrestler.

repeatedly raped them before leaving them unconscious in a quiet area between the two neighbourhoods. Both New Jack and Nkunda pillaged around the market – considering the booty as a contribution to support their fights to protect the neighbourhood. In response, Nkunda invaded Kingabwa a few weeks later to revenge the offence, pillaging shops and small boutiques on the streets.

Here we can see how the *kulunas* spread *mobulu* in the streets of Kinshasa. These street gangs shared many attributes with the *kibills* and *yankees* of previous decades, and with the sportsmen (*sportifs*) who trained their bodies in the gym. With the former they shared a masculinity of delinquency and territorialism, informed by the media, and with the latter they shared a masculinity of physical force and bodily capital. In fact, it is through the body that *kulunas*, like sportsmen in other parts of Africa<sup>67</sup>, achieved personal recognition. This was also stressed by Bernard Vangu, a fifty-year old carpenter that I met while I was looking for some furniture for my home in Maman Yemo:

*Kuluna* is banditry, it is the failure of the Congolese state. The state is responsible, it does not educate. A boy who wants to feel like a man, he is not educated... Even the surroundings have some influence on the person... The boys, to feel big, start to beat people up. They take people's things by force.

As the social status of unemployed and uneducated young people could not be affirmed through the same parameters as that of adults (economic independence and household creation), or through success at school, they relied on the only resources they could utilise: the control over their personal attributes and actions. The body and its surface has become the most prominent vehicle of manhood and self-fashioning among the *kulunas*<sup>68</sup>. Following Diouf's (2003) discussion on the symbolic value of the masculine sexual organ, we can say that physical strength "seem[s] to bear (in the literal and figurative sense) the economic and social dream of success and the nightmares of failure" (p.10).

In Kinshasa, adults resented the elements that defined *kulunas* (heavily drinking, smoking cannabis, raping girls). As Diouf (2003: 9) highlights, "sex and violence become rites of passage and initiation which [...] produce a historicity of

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<sup>67</sup> See for example Havard (2001).

<sup>68</sup> On the subject of body modification and on the re-fashioning of the self through the body, see Featherstone (2000, 2010); Masquelier (2005b).

dissidence and dissent”. Within *kuluna* gangs, the display of physical force and the use of violence became an avenue for affirming social prestige out of the forms of manhood and adulthood imposed by society, which expected adults to be wage earners, married and *pater familias*<sup>69</sup>. Violence and anti-social behaviour seemed to split the continuum between youth and adulthood and also to distinguish between different kinds of youths – uneducated and unemployed boys from successful students and young working men.

The street was a melting pot of different kinds of young people, such as street children, gang members, students, and so on. Thus, *kuluna* gangs, as groups based on territorial membership, were able to gather boys and girls with different backgrounds and occupations. Despite this, and although categorising risks crystallizing young people into categories without acknowledging their fluidity, there was a pervasive distinction between *kuluna* gangs and street children (*bashegues*). Street children, who were also organised in stables, sometimes became involved when *kuluna* fought against each other, but their ethics differed and was not characterised by a systematic use of violence. Some street-children I spoke to in the municipality of Bandal highlighted that *kulunas*, unlike the *bashegue*, often were ‘children of the home’ (*belesi*<sup>70</sup>), youngsters who regularly slept at home and had a family to support them.

*Kuluna* gangs drew on elements from both previous manifestations of street gangs and from the masculinity of the sportsmen. But they have also mimicked elements of the military groups. When talking about the *kulunas*, the *Kinois* drew many parallels between the street gangs and the military. The figure of the soldier featured prominently in the imaginary both of *kulunas* and other *Kinois*. *Kulunas* appropriated military languages and codes, often collaborating with state officials and security forces through the exchange of gifts and bribes. This interplay has been so profound that some *Kinois* – both in the street as well as in the local medias, during discussion forums at the radio – used the word *kuluna* to describe some members of the Congolese state, as I shall explain in the next sections.

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<sup>69</sup> On the same note, see Masquelier (2005a) and O’Brien (1996).

<sup>70</sup> De Boeck (2005a) explains how *belesi* derives from *Belgique* (Belgium), the name of one neighbourhood of *la cité* during colonial times, and denotes today *la cité* more in general. Furthermore, he explains how the *Kinois* also used *belesi* to refer to the colonial modern housing constructions, made of bricks and corrugated irons (*Ibid*: 200). From this point of view, we can see how the development of the word has followed a precise pattern of domesticity, from the wider idea of *la cité* to the single inhabitant of the house.



## ***Kulunas: in Need of Military Metaphors***

Already in the 1960s, the *kibills* were inspired by political and military events which occurred across the Congo (Gondola 2009: 91). Names of the gangs (such as ONU, URSS, *Ambassade de Juifs – the Embassy of Jews*, Okinawa) reflected the international attention that was directed towards the Congo in the years after Independence. The language used among the *kibills* included a number of military terms such as “‘curfew’ in their ‘republics’, their creation of ‘township governments’ and ‘local militias’” (*Ibid*: 92). Argenti (1998) also noted how in the Grassfields of Cameroon, “attempts [...] to appropriate and thereby re-invent foreign sources of power have often had a belligerent dimension” (*Ibid*: 769). My aim in this section is to illustrate how the appropriation of the symbolic power of the military by young people has developed and how even the population started to link together the *kulunas* with the military.

*Kulunas* chose their names according to several parameters, each of which were connected to the notion of ‘power’. As such, many stables drew their names from notions of violence and war: the Machetes-Machetes (*Mbeli-Mbeli*), the Cut-Cut (*Kata-kata*), the Red Army (*Armée Rouge*), the Black Army (*Armée Noir*), the Rebels (*Barebel*), the Integrated (*Baintégrés*), the FARDC (Congolese army) and the Zulus (*les Zoulous*). As we can see, many of these names are drawn from military figures and elements that recall the violent clashes happening at the borders of the Congo. On the same note, other *kuluna* gangs drew their names from the realm of the forest, where armed groups fought over the control of the territory, for example the Red Ants (*les Fourmis Rouges*) and the Provoking Lions (*Provoquer Lions*) (Elongo & Lofoso 2008). The nicknames that some street youth chose for themselves also showed an acute awareness of local and global notions of political power. During fieldwork, I met young men called Issa (from USA), Zulu, Reghen (Reagan), Enoch Kabila, and Bemba.

The adoption of a military ideology was not only present in the names of stables, or the nicknames of their members. The hierarchical internal organisation of the stables recalled the structure of the military and government, as Heritier Mbiye, a young *kuluna*, highlighted:

- Silvia: Is there only one who is in charge or are there more than one [within the stable]?
- Heritier: A big one! A big one, the strongest. It’s like in our country, there is the head...the head, then for example there is the prime

minister... Those who have the technique go to pillage, they are the strongest usually. The weakest go to pick up the *makala* (charcoal) in order to resell it, things like that.

On the same note, a couple of brothers living in Camp Munganga during my stay, Etienne and Tati Misutidi, used military ranks to show off and brag about themselves:

Silvia:            So do you like fighting? Or are you scared? I bet it's very dangerous...

Etienne:          Of course I'm not, look at me [showing off his muscles]. Touch! Touch!

Tati:                He's strong! [*Aza pomba!*] If you make him angry... Eh..! He is the supreme chief [*chef major*] of the kulunas! [laughing]

Street gangs were organised with a chief at the head of the structure, who had gained his place by virtue of his physical supremacy and victories in fights against other members. Below the chief there were usually one or more deputies who were charged with different responsibilities such as collecting revenues, organising events, and controlling groups. Gang members gave their revenues to the chief on a regular basis, who kept an amount for himself and then redistributed a small amount to the rest of the gang. This recalled the procedure of redistribution within armed groups in the East as described by Jourdan (2004), who did research in the Kivu region among Mayi Mayi combatants. As he explains: "In most of the cases, the commanders lead their young combatants on to pillage and then the booty is shared out according to rank hierarchy and age" (Jourdan 2004: 164). Moreover, as I have showed in chapter 3, clientelistic networks within the government worked according to a similar logic. Just as the colonel who distributed the money assigned for the office maintenance among his staff, *kuluna* gangs distributed money down from the chief to ordinary members in an analogous way. Again, mechanisms of redistribution connected the leaders of the *kulunas* with the elites of the government, and the armed groups fighting in the forest.

Furthermore, the fights among different stables over territories, the relationship of terror which they established with populations and the techniques they used, recalled the operations of military groups at the borders of the country. Bands of criminals engaged in an "economy of pillage" (Willame 1984: 84, my translation from French),

similar not only to armed groups in the forest but also to that of soldiers who pillaged government offices and private shops to protest against irregular and low wages in Kinshasa in 1991 and 1993.

One afternoon I went to visit Céline Kimbelekete, a mother of five who lived in the neighbourhood of Selembao. Céline had a stall in a street of his neighbourhood, where she sold vegetables, charcoal and other goods necessary for people's everyday survival in *la cité*. Unfortunately, her business was not going too well, as she was attacked twice by a *kuluna* band and was obliged to flee not to be hurt. However, the phenomenon of *kulunas* and the *mobulu* they cause was so normal for people in *la cité*, that she considered it only another daily struggle, to add to the economic insecurity and daily sacrifices. Curiously, to describe their actions, Céline used a language which recalled the infamous actions of the army in the east of the country:

- Céline: You know *kulunas*? They are damaged children [*enfants abîmés*]... Children when they see something on the street, they take everything and then leave.
- Silvia: Are there *kulunas* also in this neighbourhood?
- Céline: There are! They can fight and fight and when you go to watch, they come inside the house, they run together on the street, they pillage everything and then leave.

On the same note, an old man living in Masina whom I was interviewing in relation to the phenomenon of the street-children, started to complain about the insecurity of everyday life in his neighbourhood – one of the most populated and turbulent of Kinshasa. When he mentioned the *kulunas* and I asked him who they were, he replied:

*Kulunas* do combat between gangs among themselves in the neighbourhoods... Others stay in the corners and steal bags or mobile phones to people... It's like an armed pillage...

And even a twelve-year old girl, Adèle Mobimba, who was abandoned by her family because of witchcraft allegations, used the same language to describe the *kulunas*:

*Kulunas*... They like violence. They come at night and fight. They can come to your home, take the money of the school fees [*minerval*], rape women...like

Bemba<sup>71</sup>'s soldiers! Bemba's soldiers used to rape and grind children like *pondu* [manioc leaf stew]...

In the eyes of the population, *kulunas* operated similarly to armed groups, advancing in the field like an army and pillaging whatever they found on their way. According to one of my participants, the word *kuluna* itself derives from the Portuguese *coluna* (column in English), which recalls a military platoon, advancing in the forest before engaging in combat. The same man was of the opinion that the children of Lunda (*bana Lunda*), young men who travelled to a diamond-rich province in Angola in search of success<sup>72</sup>, brought the expression to Kinshasa. These men and women who had to cross the border with Angola, often encountered columns of Angolan soldiers who searched, raped and tortured them in search of diamonds to be smuggled into Congo.

If on one hand, *kulunas* drew from the world of the military in order to empower themselves, on the other hand, security forces and members of the government drew from *kuluna* gangs in order to secure bribes and increase their political power. Again, relationships between the two seemed to work through mutual cooperation, as I shall explain in the next section.

### **Security Forces and *Kulunas*: a Profitable Co-operation**

During my research, I was struck by the accounts of some Congolese, who detailed stories of how some *kuluna* stables ceased to exist because some members got married and found a job which earned them money, while others found roles within the army. I wondered how could those once perceived as bandits be accepted among soldiers, among those who fought against them? This political technique dates back to the regime of Mobutu, who sought to gain better control of the population by employing the actors deemed responsible for disruption to his regime (among which were some former *bills*) and integrating them in his own patronage networks. Having a well-known

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<sup>71</sup> Bemba, the leader of the opposition in the presidential elections of 2007, is now held in custody by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in La Hague for crimes against humanity committed against 2002 and 2003.

<sup>72</sup> De Boeck (2011a; 2011b) agrees that the term *kuluna* references the column of soldiers forming a line and penetrating new territories through the forests of Northern Angola. However, he also adds that the term “derives from the Lingala verb *kolona*, which means: to plant, to sow, to cultivate”, the verb itself being a derivative of the French word ‘*colonne*’ (2011a: 82).

bandit within army lines could provide crucial information on the activity of other gangs. Writing about the *bills* of the 1950s, Gondola (2009: footnote 82) noted that:

Many older bills, such as Vieux Billy, were co-opted within Mobutu's incipient regime. They made up the backbone of Mobutu's CVR [Voluntary Corps of the Republic], the precursor to Zaire's youth party (JMPR) [the official party youth movement]. According to Paul Kabaidi (interview, Brussels, April 6, 2006), a former bill himself who was appointed governor of Kinshasa in the 1980s, Mobutu recruited a large cohort of former bills in several key positions in the armed forces and cabinet; Mobutu's longtime chief of staff, Nimy Mayidika, was a bill and so was General Mahele Lyoko Bokungu, Mobutu's army chief of staff.

When Laurent Kabila set up his government in Kinshasa in 1997 following a coup, he could not enlist the *kibills* like Mobutu did. He had come from the East and was therefore unaccustomed with Kinshasa's social and political scene. However, throughout the years his son Joseph Kabila has tried several times to recruit ex-rebels and other war criminals in order to reduce the threats posed from the outside. Following the peace agreements of 2002-2003, which ended the Second Congo War between Rwanda and the Congo, the government launched a programme to merge the fighting forces of belligerent armed groups in the East with Kabila's forces to create a national army (Eriksson Baaz & Verweijen 2013). This project was implemented in 2005, when the Government launched the National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (CONADER) (Robinson 2012). This initiative sought to disarm child-soldiers and integrate rebels in the national army. The program provided assistance for the reintegration of ex-combatants by offering food, medicines, civilian clothes and last but not least, a monetary compensation in exchange for weapons. This strategy seemed successful in the short term, but in the long term it degraded perceptions of the reliability and professionalism of the army: soldiers and ex-rebels offered their services to the highest bidder, and once their compensation expired, they started to rely on civilians to satisfy their needs.

Programs of reintegration of rebels and ex-combatants were implemented by the Congolese government on a regular basis. However, the poor organisation of such programs had few or no results at all. On the contrary, Eriksson Baaz and Verweijen (2013) suggest that such programmes contributed to the fuelling of militarisation in eastern Congo. This further undermined the precarious situation of the Congolese security sector, viewed by the Congolese as an opportunity for personal enrichment for

ex-rebels, mercenaries and child-soldiers who joined military at the expense of the population thanks to reintegration programmes.

At the same time, in Kinshasa the government launched several programmes of ‘supervision and reintegration’ (*encadrement et réinsertion social*) for the *kulunas*. Reintegration programmes for street gangs were not a new phenomena in Kinshasa (see Geenen 2009). During my stay, posters stating that the presidential party (PPRD - the People’s Party for Reconstruction and Democracy) would take care of *kulunas* and re-educate them, were displayed along the Boulevard 30 Juin, the central avenue which connects *la ville* with the neighbourhood of Kintambo. On the same note, an article of the *Groupe L’avenir* dated 30 March 2011 read: ‘Fighting the phenomenon *kuluna*: the CJK [the Club of Young Kabilists] launches a social reinsertion programme’. Despite their good intentions, the reintegration programmes for rebel soldiers and *kulunas* created confusion. There were rumours circulating in *la cité* positing that there was some sort of co-operation between street gangs and politicians<sup>73</sup>.

During one of my interviews I met two women, Agathe Betoko and Élodie Tshumbu, who worked as social workers and who were repeatedly attacked by *kulunas*. Agathe recalled a time when she was shopping at the market when she heard shouts, ‘*Kulunas! Kulunas!*’ She started to run but fell on top of other women who were running in front of her. Before she knew it, three men were running towards her with machetes. She started to yell and begged them to take everything she had, but ‘leave her the life’. Luckily enough, the men only took her bag and continued with their pillage. Agathe and Élodie both found it suspicious that *kulunas* would be caught red-handed but would still be set free soon after. They explained:

Agathe: *Yankees* and *kulunas* do their things out in the open [*en plain air*], because the State is not able to handle them. Police can also take them to Makala prison, but they know the guards, and corrupt them, or they get out somehow, and become even more arrogant.

Élodie: We have the impression that there is a political group behind them that support them. Otherwise how could they not fear the state and soldiers?

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<sup>73</sup> This recalls the masquerade secret societies of Free Town, Sierra Leone, described by Nunley (1987). Such societies had a very strong connection with the political elite of the city. Politicians were well aware of the influence of youth societies among the population, and supported either one or the other society in order to gain votes and increase their popularity. As a result, some politicians even became patrons or honorary members of these societies (*Ibid*).

Many *Kinois* believed that *kulunas* were integrated into the military machine and informally collaborated with the government. Informants explained how politicians hired *kulunas* to create chaos at the rallies of competing political parties. Geenen (2009) confirms these rumours in her article about street gangs. She writes that after the 2006 presidential elections, Jean-Pierre Bemba, the defeated leader of the opposition:

[W]as said to be planning to call in *bashege* to disturb public order and participate in manifestations in his favour. For *bashege*, attending demonstrations, applauding at political events, or enthusiastically welcoming politicians at the airport, are jobs just like any other (2009: 353).

In the same way as they were believed to collaborate with the military and the political elite, street-gangs were believed to collaborate with the local police at the neighbourhood level. I interviewed some teaching assistants at the University of Kinshasa on the subject of *kulunas*. They explained to me how the co-operation between gangs and police worked in the neighbourhoods they inhabited:

In Masina and Lemba, facing Matete, now there are the *kulunas*... If policemen capture someone of their stable... When the *kulunas* yell ‘supervision’ [*encadrement*] to the policemen, it is to protect their friend. When they say ‘supervision’, the policemen hear that and they know that they will soon have their share, and they don’t arrest him [the *kuluna*]. When they don’t hear that, they arrest him [the *kuluna*]...

Everyone in Kinshasa seemed to share the view that if bribed, every policeman would be willing to co-operate with bandits. The ‘supervision’ that *kulunas* shouted at the police in the example above, bears a sinister resemblance to the governmental programmes of ‘supervision and reintegration’ (*encadrement et réinsertion*). In the recuperation programmes sponsored by the government, *kulunas* were supposedly re-introduced into society through training in the agricultural sector and apprenticeships. In *la cité*, by contrast, the police were introduced into the *kuluna*’s world of criminality and corruption. *Kulunas* supervised the police according to their own laws, and in the process taught them how to abide by the rules of the street.

Many rumours circulated in Kinshasa about the co-operation between *kulunas*, bandits and the security forces. The same teaching assistants, who told me about the ‘supervision’ of the *kulunas*, explained how a thief had helped a police superintendent ‘make do’. The wife of the superintendent was giving birth to a baby at the hospital, but

she could not afford the hospital fees. The thief then gave some cotton fabrics (*pagnes*), which he had just stolen, to the superintendent, who used them to pay hospital fees. The thief was released soon after.

Another story that circulated during my fieldwork described the adventures of a stable of nineteen members called *Moziki* (interestingly, like the mutual help association described in chapter 3) whose members lived in Masina. On New Year's Eve, the members of *Moziki* stole \$1,850 from a party in town. At around 1am, they started to celebrate in their neighbourhood. When they saw the police superintendent passing by, they told him: "Boss, your beer tomorrow" (*Mokonzi, masanga nayo lobi*), meaning a monetary compensation. The day after, *Moziki* gave the chief \$250. In contrast, the government had paid the superintendent CDF 50,000 (\$55) as a monthly wage, plus one kilo of rice and a quarter of chicken as Christmas bonus.

Stories like the ones above show the disenchantment of citizens towards the state. People felt that not only ordinary policemen, but also members of government were enriching themselves to the detriment of the population. During Mobutu's regime, the *Kinois* called corrupt Government elites 'dinosaurs' which Devisch (1998: 236) describes as "self-appointed and often quite uncultured male leaders" who preached the return to a non-existent past of 'authenticity'. During my stay in Kinshasa, some *Kinois* I interviewed referred to the elites as 'kulunas in ties' (*kulunas en cravate*). I learnt this during a conversation with my friend Joseph and Pastor Joël Lwango, a man whom I interviewed one evening about witch-children. Attacks from *kulunas* were such a recurrent and worrying phenomenon for the *Kinois*, that whomever I interviewed, even on the most disparate topics, always wanted to share some gossip on the phenomenon:

Joseph: The term *kuluna* does not only refer to young people... There are also some *kulunas-in-ties* [*kulunas en cravate*]...

Pastor Joël: Yes there are also the *kulunas-in-ties*...

Silvia: What is *kulunas-in-ties*?

Pastor Joël: Big men who have been destroying the enterprises for years!

Joseph: The politicians who are there [at the government] and who steal..

Pastor Joël: We call them *kulunas-in-ties*...



Joseph: They are pillaging the country...

Silvia: So people speak about *kulunas* of the state?

Pastor Joël: Yes, the Ministers... Because what the little *kulunas* do, they steal bags... The *kulunas-in-ties* destroy big enterprises!

The term '*kulunas in ties*' illustrates how people conceived of the flows and the exchange of *modus operandi* between *kuluna* stables and ruling elites. It was difficult to identify who imitated who – whether it was the *kulunas* imitating the political violence of the Congolese government, such as assassinations and torture – or whether politicians were influenced by the violence of the streets. It seems as if *kulunas* and *kulunas-in-ties* always informed each other, creating perceptions across the *Kinois* of how *mobulu* flows back and forth between the gangs in the streets and the corrupt officials of the state.

In the eyes of the population, the *mobulu* they had to bear on a daily basis came from multiple directions and several actors: they had to cope with *kulunas* and their violent attacks; they had to be careful not to cross paths with police officers or soldiers, who would harass them as soon as they saw the possibility of quick cash; and they had to pay the consequences of the ineptitude of the state and its institutions, which worked very poorly and only through the channels of corruption and favouritism. *Mobulu* flowed between these different contexts, making it difficult to speak distinctly of 'state violence' or 'local, everyday violence'. Violence in Kinshasa was something which came from every direction and from which it was impossible to escape. In the face of this situation, some people – for example, *kulunas* and police officers on the street, as well as civil officers and *kulunas-in-ties* at state level – would ride the wave of *mobulu*, appropriating it and transforming it into a mechanism of 'making do' from which they could profit.

### **Moral Geographies and Figures of Power: the Forest and the Soldier**

In this chapter I have placed the phenomenon *kuluna* within the context of *mobulu* of Kinshasa. The *kulunas* were born out of the impossibility for young men to find a job and become independent. In the face of the limitations caused by the state through unemployment and economic hardship, these people created their own social niches for

manhood and social recognition in the street. The *mobulu* of the state was transformed by young people into a new social phenomenon, through which they asserted their presence and agency within society through violence.

Furthermore, I have analysed here how structural violence and the everyday violence of *kuluna* gangs interplayed and informed each other. For example, political events like military interventions have influenced the imaginary of street gangs in Kinshasa. The violence of soldiers, their actions and ethics were appropriated and transformed by some young men who pillaged the population, raped girls and fought against different gangs in the street. Inversely, *kulunas* cooperated informally with politicians and the security forces by creating chaos at political rallies, or bribing police men at the neighbourhood level. The explicit co-operation between the state and *kulunas* increased the atmosphere of mistrust and fear within the neighbourhood, as people had to watch out for both bandits, and security forces.

Some scholars of political studies and anthropology in Africa have all highlighted how the continent has seen an increase in criminal organised activity following the rise of liberalisation – both political and economic (Reno 1998, 2000; Bayart, Ellis & Hibou 1999; Comaroff & Comaroff 2006). Just as Reno (2000) describes many postcolonial states in Africa as “shadow states”, Bayart, Ellis and Hibou (1999) have highlighted how in several African society, the “felonious” state and all its members uses its institutions and apparatuses for criminal scopes. Smuggling, frauds, corruption and all kinds of illegal dealings are all perpetrated through the formal channels of the state, making it difficult to understand where legality gives way to illegality, and formality to informality. To put it with Hibou (1999: 75-76):

The weakening of regulatory mechanisms and the disappearance of the need to provide any economic justification for money transfers [...] have all created new opportunities for company fraud. [...] Financial liberalisation has also blurred the frontiers between what is and is not legal by facilitating the transfer of capital and property from the illegal to the legal sector and vice versa.

While scholars’ attention has been focused on the “criminalisation of the state” (Bayart et al. 1999), this chapter has shown how a ‘statalisation of criminality’ has taken place on the streets of *la cité*. *Kulunas* draw on models of military and state hierarchy to organise their ranks, and collaborate with the security forces. In this context of *mobulu*, the image of the soldier deeply influenced the ideology of banditry

in Kinshasa. The soldier embodied notions of wealth, booty and notoriety. In this sense, people saw warfare and pillage as a career opportunity. Unable to gain access to wealth through conventional channels such as the job market, young men saw pillaging as a rapid means of enrichment. Moreover, action movies depicting heroes such as Rambo as models of masculinity, courage and strength, contributed to the glamorisation of the figure of the soldier, rendering it even more attractive for the young people of Kinshasa<sup>74</sup>.



FIGURE 7: Figures of success in young people's imaginary: a commando soldier, Obama, and white people. On the table there are several types of home-made distillates, the action movie Delta Force and a Bible.

*Kulunas* reproduced the actions of armed groups who fought on in the mystical realm of the forest, on the country's borders. Some names of *kuluna* gangs such as the Red Ants or the Provoking Lions can be read as signs of the desire of young people to master the powerful and obscure forces of the forest. In many pre-colonial African societies, the forest was the locus of occult powers *par excellence*. However, following

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<sup>74</sup> On this subject see also Richards (1996).

large scale migration to towns, and urbanisation throughout Africa, it is no longer only the forest that scares the population; several scholars have highlighted how the city has gradually acquired the same character of dangerousness, death, mystery and witchcraft as the forest (De Boeck & Plissart 2004; Argenti 2007; Devisch 1995; Richards 1996). Argenti (2007: 212) writes: “The city is subsumed within the imaginary space of the forest and the night, playing the role of a surrogate hunting ground for those who venture into its chaotic and undomesticated spaces”. While for most elders, the street and the forest were both spaces of the wild and of evil (see also Pype 2007: 263), for many young city dwellers they represented a locus of possibilities and of uncanny enrichment. This “call of the city” (Devisch 1995: 602) resulted in an increasing number of young people trying their luck in the streets of Kinshasa.

In the streets, *kuluna* gangs mimicked the military as a means of carving out a unique social space for themselves which they invested with their own meanings, hierarchies and norms. Argenti (1998, 2007) and Moore (2011) highlight how young people do not want to become the same as the figures they mimic – be it the gendarmes in the case of the Air Youth masquerade in Cameroon, or the characters and personalities in the media in the case of young students in Nairobi. Rather, young people draw from them in order to explore different possibilities for their lives, in order to transform themselves. As the economic insecurity in Kinshasa has deprived young men of any formal means of acquiring adulthood, they have been able to create a unique social space, in which they used images of the soldier and of the forest to transform themselves into something different – into men, or to better say it, ‘strong men’, *batu pomba*.

The hierarchy, norms and meanings of *kuluna* groups were distinct from other forms of affiliation such as the family or ethnic ties. In the situation of economic hardship which engulfed Kinshasa, in which customary obligations based on ethnic affiliation were faltering, the *kulunas* were able to create another form of identity, based on territoriality. Once again, territorial identity closely recalled that of armed groups. As Bayart (et al. 1999) observed, within armed movements “the degree of ethnic cohesiveness is often exaggerated” (p. 41), because young people are recruited from a great variety of social backgrounds.

By mimicking soldiers, *kulunas* transformed and manipulated reality, creating a new social niche in which they could give shape to their own *persona*. This recalls the *sapeurs* of post-Independence, who created a reality within a reality with its proper

rules, based on social recognition through fashion. However, in the same way that *the sapeurs* dressed eccentrically to break with colonial impositions and with the dressing style of the ruling elite (Gandoulou 1989a), the *kulunas* pushed their mimesis to excess. *Kulunas* were protectors who became perpetrators like the military, and who found in pillaging and violent fights a way to re-design reality according to their bodily capital. In a world of *mobulu* and violent competition, they could aspire to be someone.

## Conclusion

In the second half of November 2013, the Congolese state started an operation to put an end to the phenomenon of the *kulunas* in Kinshasa. The ‘Operation Punch’ (*Opération Likofi* or *Opération Coup de Poing* in French) aimed at taking all the perpetrators of disorder of the city before justice. The operation, which lasted until 15 February 2014, was brutally carried out: the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) and UNICEF denounced the disappearance and the assassination of many young people and children following the beginning of the operation (see Bangré 2013; RDC 2013). According to the Congolese press and to my informants in Kinshasa, many young people were shot on the spot rather than imprisoned, their bodies carried away and later thrown into the Congo River. Although these rumours and indirect accusations have not been confirmed by the government, they were powerful vectors of fear and terror, especially among the youngest segment of the population. The government, once again, was trying to keep its population under control through *mobulu*, literally by punching away any counter-platform of power in town.

Operation Punch seemed to have a near instant impact. At the beginning of 2014, people could walk safely around *la cité* during the day and by night. However, a few weeks after the official end of the operation, some *Kinois* started to complain about a re-insurgence of the phenomenon: *kulunas* were still in circulation and they had started to loot in some neighbourhoods of the city. The *kulunas*-in-ties at the government level started to collect complaints and rumours suggest a second Operation Punch is being considered.

Many among the *Kinois* praised the effort of the government to re-establish order and peace (*kimia* in Lingala) in Kinshasa – even though through further *mobulu*. However, many others did not fail to note with irony how the fate of the elderly

*kulunas-in-ties* was once again linked very much to that of the young *kulunas*. The *kulunas-in-ties* used the *kulunas* as scapegoats for the *mobulu* of the city, while they continued undisturbed to jeopardise the political and economic stability of the country through their politics of *mobulu*.

Despite violent state intervention and governmental re-education programmes, the *kuluna* gangs still persist. Their persistence suggests that they are not merely a resistance or a denunciation to state failing but, as Argenti (1998, 2007) and Moore (2011) argue, a distinct opportunity for young men to plot a new route to manhood and a new approach to life in the city. This route is not only a means of ‘making do’ in face of economic hardship but is actually becoming a desirable option for young boys. Young people feel that the customary prerequisites to reach adulthood (economic independence and customary marriage) no longer represent them in the cosmopolitan social arena of Kinshasa. Disentangled from the social rules imposed by the elders, *kuluna* gangs offer a unique social space for the disenfranchised young men, who have been able to turn the *mobulu* of everyday life to their own benefit.

**- CHAPTER FIVE -**

***LA MAGIE: UNDERSTANDING WEALTH THROUGH THE LENSES OF THE OCCULT***

This chapter illustrates how the *mobulu* of everyday life and the volatility of wealth in Kinshasa have resulted in rumours of occult dealings, according to which people who wanted to become rich had to sacrifice their relatives in the world of witchcraft (*sorcellerie* in French, *kindoki* in Lingala). The *Kinois* baptised this particular use of witchcraft with the aim of enriching oneself as magic (*la magie*). People described *la magie*<sup>75</sup> as another manifestation of *mobulu*: those who entered its mechanisms would become involved in spiritual killings, sacrifices, lies and betrayals at the expenses of their family members.

The invisible *mobulu* of *la magie* was directly linked to the visible *mobulu* of everyday life, and to the elusiveness of wealth. Wealth in Kinshasa was a chimera, a mirage which most of the *Kinois* would witness from a distance without ever being able to reach it. As a consequence, those able to attain it were treated with suspicion and all rumoured to be involved in occult dealings. These rumours represented a means for those *Kinois* ‘making do’ on the streets of Kinshasa to make sense of the inequalities of everyday life, and thus ‘make do’ within their own lives. This chapter thus is dedicated to rumours of *la magie*, the use of witchcraft for lucrative purposes.

Kinshasa is a cosmopolitan city in a constant process of becoming. Its urban layout is developing according to a model of progress and future which compares this big metropolis with those across the rest of the world. Huge shopping malls, functional hospitals, skyscrapers and luxurious resorts were advertised across Kinshasa during my fieldwork, with their architectural plans shown on huge panels disseminated around the city. The *Kinois* I interviewed looked at these images with a mix of admiration and scepticism: these buildings were so elaborate and ostentatious that they seemed to belong to another place or another time. And yet, despite the huge wealth inequality between the elite and the poor and the economic crisis that affected the vast majority of the population, the city layout was developing rapidly with construction sites a common sight in many neighbourhoods of Kinshasa like la Gombe, Limete, Kintambo and so on.

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<sup>75</sup> As introduced in chapter 1 (footnote 5), I prefer to remain faithful to the original term ‘*la magie*,’ which is used by the *Kinois* in their gossiping.

Buildings and architectural operas were not the only things advertised around the city. Mobile phones and over such electronic devices, cars, offers for airlines, supermarkets, and all other kinds of western goods were part of the imaginary of the *Kinois*, some of whom were able to go about in expensive cars, to dress impeccably and live a life of comfort.

Wealth was visible to everyone in Kinshasa. It was changing the city, its layout and the dreams of its population. Despite that, the majority of the *Kinois*, those that survived through *la débrouille* and *la coop*, were not able to benefit from this wealth<sup>76</sup>. The majority of the population lived on less than one US dollar per day (De Boeck 2011a; Lamb 2013; Ouayoro 2013) and had no clear idea of how the market economy worked. Modern means of communicating and circulating wealth such as the internet rendered one's possibilities of enrichment more varied but also more invisible. Capital itself (a new economic term) was a form of wealth that was *invisible* to the inhabitants of the city. Furthermore, wealth in Kinshasa was rendered fleeting by the multiple economic crises, the inflation, the corruption, the cheating and the clientelism that still characterised the politico-economic context of the country.

The mechanisms of the formal market economy were obscure, unpredictable and dangerous. As such, people who mysteriously managed to tame the mechanisms of that elusive market and experienced sudden enrichments were believed to resort to the occult powers of witchcraft (*kindoki*). In this case, however, such powers were no longer employed with the express purpose of killing other people for jealousy or revenge, or to make them fail in life, but rather in order for someone to become successful and rich<sup>77</sup>. The *Kinois* called this particular phenomenon *la magie* or else *franc-maçonnerie* (Freemasonry), the two terms being interchangeable. Indeed, people who wanted to get wealthy were believed to have joined occult Masonic sects in which they were asked to sacrifice a member of their family to Satan. Following this sacrifice, the person would start to gain incredible wealth.

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<sup>76</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff (1999: 293), alluded to the contradictions of the market economy when they described it as: “[A] world in which ends far outstrip means, in which the will to consume is not matched by the opportunity to earn, in which there is a high velocity of exchange and a relatively low volume of production. And yet, we repeat, it is a world in which the possibility of rapid enrichment, of amassing a fortune by largely invisible methods, is always palpably present”.

<sup>77</sup> This “witchcraft of the wealth” (Geschiere 1997) was also common in other African contexts, and can be traced back to the changes that the economic environment witnessed following colonisation. On this subject in Cameroon, see Ardener (1970), de Rosny (1985), Pool (1994), Geschiere (1997) and Argenti (2007).



Rumours of magical riches affected also those people who joined one of the new Japanese spiritual movements that became fashionable in Kinshasa since the 1980s, such as the Mahikari<sup>78</sup> and the Church of World Messianity<sup>79</sup> (*Église Messianique Mondiale, EMM*). Although all the people I interviewed had claimed to have never set foot in such churches, they were all convinced that their members worshipped Satan and pursued wealth through mystical means. I mentioned several times to my Congolese family that I was interested in understanding how *la magie* worked, and that in order to do so I wanted to visit some of the sects in which it was said to be practised. However, Joseph always clarified, quite imperatively, that whilst I was living with him and his family, I could not approach any of those sects, for reasons that will become clear in the course of this chapter.

The cosmology of the *Kinois* is very varied and complex, and gathers together a number of witchcraft and anti-witchcraft agents: *kindoki* is the vessel of witchcraft in order to harm others for jealousy, revenge or hatred. In order to understand the identity of the witch who committed the killing, members of the deceased's family resort to diviners (*ngangas*) or, increasingly more, to one of the thousands of Pentecostal pastors which heal people from witchcraft in the name of Jesus in Kinshasa. In addition to this, in the last two decades, a few people seem to have found a distinct way to enrich themselves through *la magie*. The *Kinois* I spoke to described *la magie* as a nuance of *kindoki*, a specific branch of witchcraft employed in order to become rich. At the same time, in fact, they still acknowledged that people who enriched themselves in the Masonic sects resorted to the mechanisms of *kindoki* in order to do so. Only this time *kindoki* is used for a different purpose; accumulating wealth.

Writing about witchcraft has always raised terminological problems, as many of the nuances are lost in translation. Throughout the years, terms for witchcraft have evolved, as some have fallen into disuse and been replaced by new trends. Fetishism, *sorcellerie*, sorcery, magic, witchcraft: in some cases, sorcery has been described in contrast to witchcraft – the two differing in scope and actors (see Evans-Pritchard 1937); other times, old-fashioned terms charged with colonial ethnocentrism were replaced by what were perceived to be more accurate definitions<sup>80</sup>; and more recently

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<sup>78</sup> [www.mahikari.org](http://www.mahikari.org)

<sup>79</sup> <http://www.johreiafrica.com/Default.aspx?idioma=en-us#>

<sup>80</sup> On the decline of the notion of the 'fetish' for '*sorcellerie*' or 'witchcraft' see Bernault (2013) and MacGaffey W. (1977).

some of these terms have been used as synonyms of the same concept (see Meyer & Pels 2003).

In his recent publication “Witchcraft, Intimacy and Trust” (2013), Peter Geschiere explores the dangers that the term ‘witchcraft’ poses to academic studies on this topic. In his words:

[T]he very term threatens to suck academic studies into all the inconsistencies and shifts that seem to be characteristic of this field. The solution might not be to try to impose an analytical delimitation of notions that have acquired such presence in everyday life – this might lead to a quixotic struggle to control a notion that is so powerful because of its slipperiness. An ethnographical approach might be more useful (*Ibid*: ch. 1, section 1, para 4).

As Geschiere (2013: ch. 1, section 3, para 4) suggests, the power of witchcraft lies in its fluidity and in its “deep subversive tendency diffusing and confusing any conceptual distinction”. Witchcraft is embedded within the social world around it. In the modern ever-changing society, in which new forms of wealth and power are generated at a constant pace, witchcraft transforms in order to keep the pace with the changes. As Geschiere affirms, “[w]itchcraft, both as a notion and as a set of practices, certainly has a history, but it clearly has to be seen as an event that constantly produces new forms” (2013: ch. 1, section 5, para 7). In Kinshasa, the term *kindoki* has grown and developed through gossip throughout the years. The changing nature of *kindoki* – which now can be used to become rich – and its adaptation to new situations which, to recall Pritchard’s famous saying (1937: 513), demanded new magic, made it normal for people to speak about witchcraft with different terms such as *la magie*.

We can now better understand why I have felt the need to analyse the notion of *la magie* in depth, how it differs from *kindoki* and what it means for the *Kinois*. Rather than categorising and classifying witchcraft, it is my intent to give voice to the *Kinois* and use my ethnographic material to show how they themselves used this term in interviews and informal chats. The challenge in these situations is, as Geschiere puts it (2013: ch. 1, section 3, para 12), “following people’s struggle for clarity in a minefield of ambiguities and slippages”. Let us not forget that *kindoki* and *la magie* are present in Kinshasa in the form of rumours and gossip (see chapter 1). Informants do not hesitate to change small – but significant – details within their stories in order to make them make sense according to the different context and the different time they are recalling the event, and to whom they are telling it. Sometimes, terms are interchanged and

mechanisms of the two phenomena overlapped, making it difficult to draw a clear distinction between the two. This is due to the strong link between *la magie* and *kindoki*, which can be seen as the two sides of the same coin. Thus a detailed analysis of both terms is necessary if we are to understand the multiple forms of *mobulu* in Kinshasa's everyday life.

The chapter starts with a brief overview over the cosmology of Kinshasa, in order to highlight the subtle nuances between the different manifestations of witchcraft. This will lead us into the world of *la magie*. The analysis of *la magie* starts with a case study, in order to better introduce the reader to its mechanisms with an example from Kinshasa's everyday life. I then take the discussion further by elucidating how associations which have come from the West such as Freemasonry and Japanese spiritual practices have influenced ideas of wealth consumption and of the occult. Furthermore, I will delineate the role of Pentecostal pastors in influencing the attitude of the rest of the population towards these new Japanese churches, described as the work of Satan.

I continue the exploration of *la magie* by analysing how it is not only linked to personal wealth, but also to notions of technological progress and socio-economic development. However, in order to work and make someone rich, *la magie* requires sacrifices. Through several examples and a case study, I describe the side effects of *la magie* and how it prompted rumours of wealth but also sudden deaths, disease and sacrifices. I conclude the chapter by going back to the power of *kindoki* to transform in keeping up with the world around it and with the socio-economic changes which affects the metropolis of Kinshasa. Rumours on *la magie* are ways for the *Kinois* to make sense of the inequalities brought by market economy.

### **The World of Witchcraft in Kinshasa: *Kindoki*, the *Nganga* and *Magie***

*Kindoki* marks a central tenet of the cosmological world which surrounds the social worlds of the *Kinois* in Kinshasa. To use Niehaus' definition (2010), *kindoki* in Kinshasa is "deep-knowledge": it is a subtext to all social encounters, which did not need to be verbally acknowledged to exist (*Ibid*: 66). During my stay, whenever I spoke to people, *kindoki* would take the shape of a heavy silence following the explication of some extraordinary event regarding the sudden death of a young man, the loss of a job

or the physical or mental deterioration of someone. *Kindoki* was the untold reasoning heard after the official explication. People would say: “a truck hit him while he was crossing... The others with him were not even injured, whilst he died”, or “we went to the hospital but he is still sick...” However, once people opened up and delved beneath the facade of initial explanations, they revealed an entire universe of rumours and gossip (*basongi-songi*), rich in mystical details, suspicions, and accusations of witchcraft. *Kindoki* was part of the *Kinois*’ life and was inseparable from it. One way or the other, the *Kinois* had to engage with *kindoki*. In the event of a strong sickness, for example, even those people who tried to consider other reasons (low immune system, inefficiency of the medicines) other than *kindoki*, at last were drawn into *kindoki* suspicions by the rumours of other people, who would comment maliciously: “how is it possible that s/he is always sick when that other person is around...?” *Kindoki* was a universe which was impossible to avoid.

Since colonial times<sup>81</sup>, witches (*ndoki* singular, *bandoki* plural) were believed to use *kindoki* in order to harm or kill those who they envied or hated, or to avenge some wrong. From this point of view, *kindoki* is a weapon of vengeance, death and destruction. Most often in the last decades, accusations of *kindoki* have taken place between family members across different generations. The development of market economy, and the western education and lifestyles of the last decades, have all been targeted at a young public. This shifted the power within society, which for a long time was based on gerontocracy and was thus unquestionably bestowed upon the elders. This shift of power, together with the economic crisis, gave rise to intergenerational tensions between the elders and the youngsters of the family<sup>82</sup>, which have resulted in *kindoki* accusation between the two (see chapter 7).

However, in recent years, *kindoki* in Kinshasa has started to be used also against non-kin members. For example, many *Kinois* whom I interviewed often accused their neighbours of trying to kill them through *kindoki* because they were jealous of the

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<sup>81</sup> On *kindoki* in rural milieu during colonial times see MacGaffey (1970a, 1970b, 1986).

<sup>82</sup> Argenti (2007) highlights how during colonialism, the elders of the family would sell their children to slavery. In the same way, people involved in the witchcraft of the wealth in Cameroon were required to sacrifice members of their kin. This time, however, it was children and social cadets who were believed to sell elderly relatives in order to become rich. The discourse of the witchcraft of the wealth has thus become the site of a “struggle for appropriation by both opposing factions” (*Ibid*: 116), in which elders portrayed young people as traders in human people as they were in the past. Also in Cameroon, witchcraft was pictures like a site of ongoing struggle between generations.

success of their business, or family. Thus, any disease, accident, sudden death or misfortunes in Kinshasa were traced back to the actions of witches, who were believed to try to impede the other person to be happy and successful through witchcraft. The mechanisms of *la débrouille* in Kinshasa were so unstable that it was hard to keep up a business regularly, and periods of unemployment or sudden bankruptcy were a frequent occurrence. When this happened, rumours were always blaming witches for wanting to harm others. Getting by was a daily fight not only against the fluctuations of *la débrouille*, but also against witches' ordeals.

Witches were believed to fly naked at night through 'mystical' airplanes, and to go spiritually killing their victims during their sleep. People who died suddenly and inexplicably, who felt increasingly tired or grew sick for no apparent reason, were all rumoured to be victims of witchcraft ordeals. The more victims the witches killed, the more power and influence they acquired in the world of *kindoki*.

Often, witches did not operate directly against their enemies but used emissaries who killed on their behalf. Indeed although *kindoki* could also be passed outside the kin circle, the harm could only come from someone very close to the victim. In order to get close to the victims and kill them, witches would first bewitch the victim's children. So for example, in order to kill a woman, the witch needed first to bewitch one of her family's children (her son/daughter, nephew, small brother/sister), who would in turn kill her at night through *kindoki*. As such, bewitched-children functioned as emissaries of another witch.

Witches were thought to lure children into *kindoki* through gifts of food, such as bread and small cakes, considered as the medium par excellence of the transmission of *kindoki*. According to the *Kinois* I interviewed across the city, the food that witches gave children would transform into a piece of human meat at night. After the child had accepted and eaten the food, at night the witch was believed to visit the child spiritually while s/he was sleeping, and ask him or her to sacrifice a family member or family members in order to repay the debt s/he had accumulated with the witch: the human meat the child had eaten needed to be repaid through another human life (see also Pool 1994). This has given rise to the phenomenon of the so-called 'witch-children' (*bana bandoki*), children who were believed to have been lured into witchcraft by senior witches, and who later 'ate' the spirits (*ésprits*) of their family members in order to donate them to their superiors.

Fighting witches and neutralising witchcraft ordeals was the duty of a few specialised agents in Kinshasa. In some neighbours in the eastern area of Kinshasa, and knowingly mostly among the Yaka populations from the Bandundu region, witchcraft was counteracted by the diviner (*nganga*) and his charms (*minkisi*)<sup>83</sup>. The *nganga*, like the witch (*ndoki*), was a figure inherited from the pre-colonial rural milieu, where diviners would be consulted in order to understand one's affliction, illness or death, and to find a solution to it. The client never went to the diviner himself, but rather it was members of the matrilineal and patrilineal family to go in his or her place. Because the diviner had to divine on the present causes of affliction of the client by looking at his or her past through divination practice, often the client's family would seek out a specialist far from their neighbourhood, so that the diviner's clairvoyance could not be polluted by acquaintance.

The diviner would enter a state of trance and, through the help of a slit drum and a divination basket, would start consulting the oracle. The divination basket included pieces of fabric or other personal items from the client (including also modern items such as mobile phones), and a set of figures and substances of animal and vegetable origin. These objects were tossed up by the diviner in changing configurations in order to search for the causes and reasons of the client's affliction (De Boeck & Devisch 1994). The divinatory séance concluded with a verdict, for example the identification of a culprit, and a prescription. Often however, divination sessions, rather than solving conflicts, brought more dissent within the extended family, as the culprit was most of the times a kin member. This is why often people preferred to avoid the diviner, and pushed the suspect to confess and repay the wrong through a compensation for the victim of witchcraft<sup>84</sup>.

During my fieldwork, the *Kinois* I interviewed rumoured that people turned to *ngangas* not only to detect witches, but also to reach personal goals in an illicit way. For example, some among the *Kulunas* and sportsmen described in the previous chapter were believed to use charms (*minkisi*) during their fights, and to visit *ngangas* in order

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<sup>83</sup> On divination practices in Kinshasa as well as in the rural milieu see Devisch (1985, 1991, 1993), Devisch and Brodeur (1999) and De Boeck & Devisch (1994).

<sup>84</sup> There is a similar rhetoric here to the ways in which the *kulunas* collected 'protection' money. Whereas the neighbourhood paid the *kulunas* to protect them but also not to rob their houses, the suspect of witchcraft dealings had to pay the relatives of the victim in order not to be pursued by the diviner. *Kindoki* – like *kuluna* briberies, offered both a loss and a gain: both were double-edged swords but negotiated by the *Kinois* who needed to 'make do'.

to become unbeatable in combat. In the same way, politicians allegedly consulted *ngangas* to gain political influence and votes during the elections. Other people might consult *ngangas* to make someone fall in love against their will, or to acquire the skills necessary to cheat someone and steal his or her wealth. According to all the *Kinois* I spoke with, *ngangas* were consulted for amoral reasons, and it was considered amoral to consult *ngangas*.

In Kinshasa, divination had lost much of its primary positive role. Indeed, the term the *Kinois* used to describe divination was *fetichisme*, which held a rather negative connotation. This was the same for the *nganga* himself, who was often addressed as *fetisheur*. These terms, derived of the Portuguese word *feitiço* ('the thing made', 'effect') and *feiticeiro* ('the expert'), had been assigned by the missionaries and the colonists to describe the cosmology of the local population. Notably, in the eyes of the missionaries and colonists, this cosmology held the characteristics of irrationality, paganism, occultism and ignorance. Thus in Kinshasa, as Bernault (2013) claimed, "Congolese speakers largely appropriated the French colonial repertoire of the fetish and internalised its derogatory and incapacitating undertones" (p.62). The term was readily adopted by the new prophets and pastors of the Pentecostal movements, who described the *nganga-fetisheur* as a dangerous and destructive agent of tradition, in contrast to the constructive healing power of the pastor, summoned up directly by God (Devisch 1996a, 1996b; Pype 2006b). *Fetisheurs* in Kinshasa were believed to handle witchcraft through the power of tradition. As such, *fetichisme* recalled notions of the occult linked to a rural past from whom many city-dwellers were estranged.

Whereas *ngangas* were described by the majority of the *Kinois* I spoke with as customary agents who fought *kindoki* with *kindoki*, other figures which counteract witchcraft with new weapons have emerged since the 1980s. The thousands of pastors and prophets which have dotted Kinshasa with their independent churches were described by the population as the most legitimate fighters of witchcraft. Their power was believed to come directly from God, and they fought *kindoki* through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Bible and the holy cross. As explained in chapter 2, the *Kinois* have been able to rework the Christianity brought by the missionaries and have translated the ancestors, spirits and witches of the past in the language of the Bible. The fight against witches has become the fight of God against the Devil. Thus, it was only through God and his word that witches could be successfully defeated. Exorcisms, quarantine treatments for witch-children and long prayer wakes were believed to be the only

means to expel witches and evil spirits from one's life, and to allow the person to go back to his or her everyday life with renewed strength.

Unlike *kindoki* and *fetishisme*, *la magie* was not traced back to a traditional rural past, but was rather believed to be born out of the interplay between *kindoki* and something that came to Kinshasa from the exterior, from the “worlding” (Simone 2001, see chapter 2) of the city. Other synonyms for *la magie* in Kinshasa were occultism (*occultisme*), Freemasonry<sup>85</sup> (*franc-maçonnerie*) or science (*science*). As we can see from these appellations, the *Kinois* believed that *la magie* developed from Freemasonry (which is believed to have a strong occult component) and from the ‘witchcraft of the White’<sup>86</sup>. Like Freemasonry, *la magie* also operated through sects. People who wanted to achieve success in life were believed to join these sects and to sacrifice a body part (an arm, or a few years of life) or a member of their own family in order to gain personal success. This is why it was the wealthy who were suspected of being part of these sects, in which, according to the *Kinois*, they ‘touched *la magie*’ (*bazwaki magie*).

The distinction between *magie* and *kindoki* emerges here in the ways in which each are understood to take place. For *magie* people said “*azwaki magie*”, meaning “s/he took *la magie*”, whereas for *kindoki* they said “*aliaki ndoki*”, “s/he ate witchcraft”. The verb ‘to eat’ means to gain power in several African cultures (see for example Bayart 2009; Geschiere 1997; Mbembe 1992). Moreover, *kindoki* was believed to be passed covertly through food by witches, while people who wanted to become wealthy were said to enter the circles of *la magie* on their own free will. The fact that the *Kinois* used a different verb to describe the acquisition of witchcraft in *la magie* shows the different connotation that these two phenomena – *kindoki* and *magie* – had in their imaginary.

Here, I begin to explore the distinct niche within which the contemporary phenomena of *la magie* emerged by presenting a case of *magie* which happened in my neighbourhood. Through this case study, I aim to show how *la magie* differed from

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<sup>85</sup> Freemasonry is an international movement born around the late 16th-early 17th century in Europe. It promotes charitable work and self-help and propagates a form of civic morality. Masonic craft is accompanied by secret rituals, which have inspired conspiracy theories among non-masons (Ellis & Ter Haar 2004: 75; see also West and Sanders 2003). Congolese Freemasonry is very different from European masonry, as it is rumoured to have a strong mystical component and is centred on the idea that masons make a pact with the Devil in order to become wealthy.

<sup>86</sup> Since early colonisation, Europeans as well were believed to bear occult powers, as highlighted in the accounts of several scholars (MacGaffey 1970a, 1970b, 1977; White 2000; Bernault 2006; de Rosny 1985; Geschiere 1997).



*kindoki*, but also how the two interrelated in the imaginary of the *Kinois*. Through deaths, sacrifices and cheating, both were considered a source of *mobulu* for the *Kinois*, who traced back every misfortune, death or accident to occult dealings.

### **A Suspicious Death: on *la Magie* and Diamonds**

One day, early in the morning, I was woken by cries and noise coming from the street. I went out just in time to see a few women carrying the body of a young boy towards the main road of the neighbourhood, in the direction of a medical clinic. Among the women I spotted Antoniette Mukoko, from the *parcelle* at the top of our street: an accident had happened in her compound. That morning, like every morning, the children of the family were getting ready to go to school after eating *bouillie*<sup>87</sup>. Little Jacques Ndiwa was already dressed and ready to go, when he saw a mouse in the backyard. He grabbed a long iron pipe, leaning against the blue electric wire that served as clothes line, in order to kill the animal. Shortly after, Antoniette came out of the house and saw her child standing in the middle of the backyard. She shouted at him to go to school but the child would not answer. Only when she moved towards him did she notice that Jacques was not moving. She screamed, took a plastic chair and pushed him away from the iron pipe. She was too late – her son had been fatally electrocuted. Long time ago, the blue electric wire in the courtyard was used to bring electricity from the neighbours' *parcelle* to another *parcelle* across their plot. Apparently the cable had been disconnected for so long, that the family recycled it and used it as a clothes line. Inexplicably, that day, electricity was running through the cable.

While Antoniette and her friends were at the clinic on the main road, trying to save little Jacques, Antoniette's husband called to check if she had received the money he sent her. He worked near the Angola border, doing business in the diamond trade. A couple of days later, he was back in the neighbourhood, mourning the loss of his child with the rest of the family.

A few months after the accident, I went to visit Pastor Cedrick Ndiwa, whom I met at Jacques' funerary ceremony (*matanga*). He was friend with a member of Antoniette's family and a pastor in another neighbourhood of Ngaliema, not far from

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<sup>87</sup> Boiled mash made from corn flour, sometimes with added sugar.

where I lived. During my visit, the story of Jacques came up in the conversation and I took the opportunity to ask him what he thought about Jacques death:

Silvia: So in the end, did they [the family] find the source of the problem of the death of the child in our street?

P. Cedrick: Bon, there was... *Voilà* it was a problem of witchcraft [*sorcellerie*]. I was there observing. I saw that... God spoke to me and told me that there was a problem of witchcraft. Because a child who just woke up, he saw a small rat, he went over there and he died. That was a problem of witchcraft. As you know, his father...

Silvia: His father was travelling, right?

P. Cedrick: He was travelling, as he works in the diamond trade... And you know, with diamonds there is a lot of witchcraft... [...]

Silvia: Really?

P. Cedrick: Madam, it's very difficult to catch them [diamonds]. So you have to sacrifice, to give someone... When you do, the person that you have sacrificed, it is him whom they will transform into diamond... The diamonds of *la magie* [*les diamants de la magie*].

The interview above shows how the *Kinois* gave shape to reality through rumours of *la magie*. It was known that Jacques' father had a fruitful business in the diamond trade, as it was known that Jacques had been electrocuted. *La magie* provided the link between the two facts and created a relation of causality in retrospective. Jacques' father was believed to have gained wealth through acquisition of diamonds in return for Jacques' death. In a circular logic, then, this discourse was used to give meaning to reality, and understand events and their connections. Moreover, in this interview we can see how people used different terms even in the same occasion, to describe the world of *la magie*. First, they tried to explain the death of the child with the French term *sorcellerie* (witchcraft, in Lingala *kindoki*), but a few phrases later they delved into the topic and explained that it was actually a problem of *magie*, which involved accumulation of wealth.

De Boeck (1999, 2000a, 2001) has worked extensively on the mystical powers of diamonds. The diamonds in the Lunda Norte region at the Angolan border, where young people ventured in order to try their luck, were rumoured to be so difficult to get, so fleeting and dangerous that diamond smugglers were believed to resort to mystical

powers in order to catch them (De Boeck 1999: 788-789). De Boeck analysed the episode of a man who turned to a witch in order to find diamonds. The witch exhorted the man to sleep with a menopausal woman, or to sleep with his mother. However, after the mother fled in order to escape her incestuous fate, the man decided to sacrifice the life of one of his children, who died suddenly without being sick (*Ibid*). In another episode, similar to Jacques's story, De Boeck and Plissart (2004: 219) reproduced the story of Mado, a diamond digger in Angola. When one day, on the way to the mine, she reached a river and saw corpses being hauled up from the river, she immediately interpreted those deaths as the sacrifice to produce diamonds. Diamonds were created out of those people. In the same fashion, gossip around my neighbourhood depicted little Jacques as the sacrifice for his father's diamonds.

The story of little Jacques outlines a number of key aspects which I will allude to in the chapter – the need to 'make do' causing people to go further than before, how accidents are explained through *kindoki*, but how *la magie* is interpreted through new avenues for wealth making. From this point of view we can say that the phenomenon of *la magie* holds strong connections with the development of market economy and the hardship of 'making do', as I am about to analyse.

'Making do' in Kinshasa was extremely difficult and uncertain: people worked all day long in the streets in order to be able to feed their family for the day. However, one of the key elements of *la débrouille* is cheating and scams. Thus, there was this feeling among the *Kinois* that for every person who got rich, another got cheated and impoverished. This was evident also in the example of Baudouin and the car sale in chapter 3: Baudouin was able to make money by cheating me and Joseph into buying a car which was not worth our money. This is linked to the fact that according to the *Kinois*, the world of *la débrouille* is a 'zero-sum universe'<sup>88</sup>, in which "the wealth of one person [can] only be at the expense of another, by means of theft or trickery" (Ellis & Ter Haar 2004: 120). Thus, for every person who succeeded, another one had to fail – and vice versa, for every person who failed and struggled in *la débrouille*, someone else was getting rich through cheating.

*Kindoki* and *la magie* were also considered to operate along these 'zero-sum' lines whereby no success or wealth was without sacrifice, as I am about to show. The mechanisms of *la magie*, its differences from *kindoki* and the relation between the two

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<sup>88</sup> See also Rowlands & Warnier 1988:123; Comaroff & Comaroff 1998:289; Austen 1993:92.

were explained to me during a conversation I had with Pastor Delphin Peyelinga, who preached in a Pentecostal church in Yolo-Nord, a neighbourhood in central Kinshasa. Pastor Delphin had been preaching for several years, and had witnessed the development of *kindoki* within the urban milieu of Kinshasa. This is how he related *kindoki* with its new manifestation, *la magie*:

Silvia: There are some people who speak also about Freemasonry [*franc-maçonnerie*]... Is it another type of *kindoki*?

P. Delphin: Freemasonry... *La magie*... It is *kindoki* but it's different. It's *la magie*. *Kindoki* is something that comes from our customs. But *la magie*... Those are things that are adopted in this world [that arrived from the outside]. For example they can say "Silvia, if you want to have a lot of money... If you want to have big cars, big jeeps, you have to take this [*la magie*]". But you are going to have all that you asked. But, the bad thing is that, every month, or every day, or every year, you have to sacrifice something. You can sacrifice your child, your husband, your woman, your friend, depending on the contract<sup>89</sup>.

Like *la débrouille*, *la magie* was considered as a zero-sum universe in which the wealth of someone came at the expense of someone else's life. Both people who wanted to kill and get rich accessed the same mystical power of *kindoki*, and had to sacrifice a relative in order to activate it. However, unlike *kindoki*, *la magie* did not originate in the 'village'. Pastor Delphin Peyelinga said those things "are adopted in this world". Others highlighted that *la magie* did not come "from our customs" (*la coutume*). *La magie* was something that had an intrinsically foreign character, as it had been introduced from the outside – ironically, a point made by a pastor, himself a figure from outside the *Kinois* world.

The *Kinois* soon baptised the use of *kindoki* in order to get rich as *la magie* and Freemasonry. In fact, people involved in *la magie* were believed to become part of occult Masonic sects, in which they were required to make sacrifices in order to increase their wealth. In the next section I shall explain the rationale behind these rumours, and why people associated *la magie* with Freemasonry.

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<sup>89</sup> While *kindoki* was passed through food unbeknown to the victim, *la magie* was something that people chose quite spontaneously: "depending on the contract" signals a mutual agreement between two parties.

## Freemasonry and Japanese Spiritual Practices: from the West to Africa

As in other West-African countries<sup>90</sup>, wealthy people in Kinshasa were believed to enter occult sects of the order of Freemasonry and Rosicrucianism<sup>91</sup> which provided them with wealth in exchange of the sacrifice of a relative. These two movements, which were exported to Africa during the colonial era, counted many Heads of States and members of parliament among their adepts. The success of secret lodges of European origin in Africa was partially due to the fact that African societies were already familiar with these kinds of organizations. Before colonialism, hunting and warriors' societies and men's secret associations (often called 'leopard men') were integral part of the fabric of rural communities. In the Cameroon Grassfields, secret societies and their masquerades<sup>92</sup> supported or contested the power of the palace (Argenti 1998, 2005). In Sierra Leone, secret societies were supported by political leaders, who used the influences of such groups on the population to gain votes and increase their popularity (Nunley 1987). Secret societies were an extremely important form of social organisation in West and Central Africa: they formed the basis of local government, performed executive and juridical functions, and acted as trading agencies, boosting the economy of local communities (Nwaka 1978).

Many of these secret societies were incorporated into the colonial government, which saw in them a useful tool for their indirect rule. Freemasonry was introduced to the Congo by the colonists and during the years following Independence, has been popularised among the Congolese elite. The local notion of secret societies and the global organisation of Freemasonry mingled together. Many *évolués* considered Freemasonry as a means of social promotion able to put them side by side with members of the colonial state.

Cohen (1971) posited that one of the main reasons for the success of Masonic lodges in Africa was the consolidation of a true brotherhood among its members. In

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<sup>90</sup> On Freemasonry in the African context see also Cohen (1971), Probst (1989), Bayart (1995), Ngolet (2000), Ellis and Ter Haar (2004), Tonda (2005) and Geschiere (2010).

<sup>91</sup> Rosicrucianism made its appearance at the 16th century as a society cultivating "arcane or esoteric spiritual knowledge" (Ellis & Ter Haar 2004: 76). Rosicrucianism developed in parallel with Masonic lodges and often it is considered as yet another Masonic lodge, rather than a per se association.

<sup>92</sup> The masks worn during the masquerades suggested that the power of the society was secret and mysterious in nature – as mysterious as witches and forest spirits. In fact, these masquerades operated through the same occult mechanisms of witches, the king and diviners, or those able to detect witches (Argenti 1998: 755).

unstable and fleeting politico-economic circumstances, members found in Freemasonry “welfare and social security benefits” (*Ibid*: 433) that expanded beyond the unstable network of kin. Freemasonry offered a means of securing one’s income by establishing useful links with influential persons, such as superiors within the civil service. If wealth was insecure, social elites turned to clientelism, both at the national and international level, to ensure their prosperity. Masonic lodges protected social and economic privileges and provided “the means for the articulation of the organisational functions of a political group [...] in sharp contrast with the loose and feeble political organisations” (Cohen 1971: 444). As such, membership to Masonic lodges in Kinshasa were an attempt by the local elites to ‘make do’ and to cope with insecurity.

Although Masonic lodges offered many sociological advantages as explained above, the *Kinois* always emphasised their occult side. One should remember that in many African societies, power and witchcraft were perceived as two sides of the same coin (Rowlands & Warnier 1988; Geschiere 1997; Ellis & Ter Haar 2004). This means that in Kinshasa, masons who held senior positions were believed to make use of *la magie*. By contrast, any person who managed to tame the mechanisms of market economy and to accumulate some wealth was believed to be part of a Masonic lodge<sup>93</sup>.

The *Kinois* I interviewed also used the term ‘*la magie*’ and ‘*Freemasonry*’ to describe the new Japanese religions that arrived in Kinshasa in the second half of the twentieth century, and which have attained increasing popularity in the last decades. These religions, like Masonic sects, were believed to spread *la magie* through prayers and rituals. One of these movements was called Mahikari, an oriental mystic religion of Japanese origin that combined the spiritual doctrines of Buddhism and Shintoism. Precisely, Mahikari focused on:

[T]he practice of *okiyome*, which consists of the transmission of divine light through the palm of the hand of an initiate to another person or to any animate or inanimate object in need of purification or protection. [...] The power to transmit the Light resides in an amulet [...] which is surrounded by numerous taboos (Melton & Baumann 2010: 2748).

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<sup>93</sup> This occult reading of free-masonry is in line with many conspiracy theories which have set foot on a world scale since the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall (West and Sanders 2003). Many of these conspiracy theories involving Freemasonry and the Illuminati among others, have taken up an occult dimension, and people believe that members of secret lodges make rituals that put them in touch with the Devil, evil spirits and witches.

This movement had a number of elements in common with another Japanese sect in Kinshasa, called Church of World Messianity (*Eglise Messianique Mondiale/Sekai Kyusei Kyo*)<sup>94</sup>. This sect focused on a few basic practices, like the spiritual appreciation of beauty through floral arrangements (*Ikebana* in Japanese), and the practice of purifying the spiritual body through the imposition of *Johrei* (light of God radiating from the palm of the hand). As Melton and Baumann (2010: 2568) clearly explain: “*Johrei* is administered by a member who, wearing an amulet, or *ohikari*, raises the palm of her or his hand over the recipients, who may or may not be believers, and imparts to them the divine light of healing”.

In Kinshasa, the doctrines of Japanese sects found a fertile soil to germinate. Elements of these doctrines mingled with those of local cosmologies. In fact the laying of hands and the use of amulets by the leaders of Japanese sects, resonated with the exorcism procedures of many Pentecostal pastors and prophets. In the eyes of the population, these figures operated through the same mechanisms, as they healed the sick by releasing mystical powers out of the palms of their hands. Furthermore, the vocabulary used by these churches was easily assimilated in the cosmology of Kinshasa: on one hand, oriental spirits and deities found translation in the cosmological world of Kinshasa, populated by witches, evil and good spirits, but also by God, the Holy Spirit and the Devil thanks to the influence of Pentecostalism; on the other hand, the *Ikebana* flower arrangement by the Church of World Messianity and the amulets used by the spiritual leader resonated with the healing properties of plants and charms which diviners (*ngangas*) prepared to counteract witchcraft.

Japanese churches have been able to integrate themselves in the religious context of Kinshasa well enough to grow a respectable audience, thanks to the similarities between their practices and those of Pentecostalism. However, they nonetheless were considered by all the *Kinois* I interviewed as spaces of *la magie*, and as such, dangerous and illegitimate. I argue that this is the result of the influence of Pentecostal pastors, who depict these new Japanese religions as bewitched and satanic.

Meyer (1992, 1995, 1998, 1999b) and Van Dijk (1995, 1999) have illustrated extensively the role of Pentecostalism in denigrating and ridiculing those religious practices linked to a rural and customary past. To put it with Meyer (1995: 237), Pentecostal churches have “an uncompromising attitude towards traditional religion,

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<sup>94</sup> On this topic see Lambertz 2012.

which they depict as sheerly diabolical”. As I have explained in chapter 2, Pentecostals fostered the idea that all those religious practices which resort to means other than the Word of God to heal their followers were the work of the Devil. For example the divination system illustrated above and the figure of the *nganga*, the diviner, have been the target of strong attacks and denigrations by Pentecostal churches. However, in order to keep pace with the changes in the social context of Kinshasa, Pentecostal pastors have started to denigrate also more recent and more global religions, which are coming to Kinshasa from the outside rather than from the village. By describing the Mahikari and the Church of World Messianity as spaces of the Devil, Pentecostal pastors once again reasserted their power within the religious context of Kinshasa. We can say that this was their way to ‘make do’ in face of the challenge of other competing religions. As a result, many people I interviewed, including my Congolese family, saw these churches as dangerous places, in which the Devil was worshipped and death took place. Pentecostal pastors ‘Christianised’ the cosmological world of Kinshasa, depicting their churches as the only legitimated places where people could fight the evil by the power of God, in sharp contrast with other religious practices, which were depicted as satanic.

According to the *Kinois* I interviewed, Freemasonry and Japanese sects provided their adepts with illegitimate wealth and fortunes. In fact, wealth was considered legitimate and legitimately acquired only in the context of Pentecostal churches. Pentecostal pastors exhorted their followers to earn wealth legitimately “by the sweat of [their] brow<sup>95</sup>” rather than through *la magie*. At the same time, they quoted psalms from the Bible, and asked followers to donate money to God, who would reward them a hundredfold. Thus, whilst the *Kinois* saw wealth acquired through oriental sects and mystic lodges as illegitimate, they perceived wealth coming from God as a positive good.

In this section, I have explained why Freemasonry and oriental sects were read through the lenses of *la magie*, a vision fostered by the thousands of Pentecostal pastors of Kinshasa. In the next sections, based on my ethnographic material, I shall focus on the mechanisms of *la magie* in Kinshasa, and how people associated it with notions of the West, modernity and progress. Through interviews and a case study, I will illustrate how the *Kinois* read the inequalities of everyday life and any accumulation of wealth through the lenses of *la magie*.

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<sup>95</sup> From the Bible, Genesis 3:19.



## ***La Magie, Modernity and Progress***

In the eyes of the *Kinois* I interviewed, Masonic lodges were organised according to a hierarchy of grades. The master of the lodge was believed to consult a very powerful magician (*magicien*)<sup>96</sup>, who could access the world of *la magie* and initiate the other members to the cult. Satan himself was said to have initiated the magician, who operated according to Satan's will<sup>97</sup>. In order to enter a Masonic lodge and to become wealthy, people were required to sacrifice members of their families. One *Kinois* told me specifically that each member of the lodge in turn had to sacrifice a relative to Satan, much like the members of the *likelemba* credit association described in chapter 3. Should a member refuse to sacrifice a relative, he or she would be obliged to sacrifice themselves. Hence rumours about chronic disease, physical malformations and the sudden death of wealthy persons were often linked to Satanic dealings.

As wealth was acquired through *la magie*, the power of the rich was perceived as *mobulu*. During my fieldwork, members of the government and of the military were described to me as powerful masons, who had joined Masonic or Rosicrucian lodges for selfish goals. By joining such lodges, they became part of a circle of power and wealth that allowed them to safeguard their riches (see also Cohen 1971). This was also highlighted in the words of Pastor Kelly Tchibani of the church Resurrection in Selembao, who believed that members of the elite were all involved in rumours of *la magie*:

There are many ways to handle witchcraft. For example in the field of the job market, like the lodges of today, the sects in Europe, Freemasonry [*la franc-maçonnerie*], all of them, if you want to become powerful, to be at the head of the United States, become a mason! Like Obama, he did not have choice, he did not want to enter [*la magie*] but because of the imperium of power...

According to pastor Kelly, as well as many other *Kinois* I interviewed, members of the Government were not only *kulunus*-in-ties who destroyed the country's economy by pillaging its resources, but also masons and witches who obtained their offices and

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<sup>96</sup> As explained in the introduction, the *Kinois* had conflicting ideas about who the agents of *la magie* were exactly. Some people mentioned a diviner rather than a magician, while others mentioned a powerful witch (*ndoki*). However, the *Kinois* agreed that these agents were the emissaries of the Devil and subverted the law of procreation and kin solidarity by killing members of their family – rather than taking care of them.

<sup>97</sup> On similar accounts of 'satanic riches' see Meyer (1995) and De Boeck (1999).

wealth through the use of *la magie*. Some research participants considered the Head of the State to be one of the top masons of the country. Rumours in *la cité* posited that Joseph Kabila ordered the assassination of his own father Laurent in 2001. In the eyes of some *Kinois*, Laurent Desiré Kabila's assassination was the sacrifice that his son Joseph had to make to assume power and govern the country. Once again, a youngster was believed to have superseded the power of the older generation.



FIGURE 8: A DVD sold on the streets of Kinshasa: “The rulers of the world: the Illuminatis”. By Alibaba, made in Iraq. Front and back covers.

Not only was *la magie* believed to bring wealth within people's lives, allowing for their personal development, but it was also believed to be the cause of the development of society at a broader level. Technological progress, western commodities and development in the field of medical research, urban planning and so on, were all believed to be the result of *la magie* which came from Europe. As one *Kinois* once told me, “*la magie* comes from the Whites” (*la magie, ça vient des Blanches*). Some people referred to it as ‘white magic’ (*magie blanche*), or ‘*la magie* of the Whites’, as opposed to the Congolese witchcraft (*kindoki*). Frédérique Tshibuabua,

one of the staff members of a Congolese Non-Governmental Organisation that I visited regularly, told me:

It doesn't make sense saying that witchcraft doesn't exist, because it exists! We have black witchcraft, in the same way that you have white *magie*. For example, in Europe one can also produce bill notes without using the machine to manufacture the fakes. Simply imposing the hands on a paper, and pulling some smoke on top of it, and then closing the book, the magician is able to produce bill notes. Or for example Zidane... Zidane touched his ring before kicking a penalty. It doesn't matter that he didn't score; in any case he tried to use *la magie*. Another example: what for you is doping, for us is *la magie*.

People saw 'white magic' (*la magie*) as the antithesis of 'black witchcraft' (*kindoki*). Whilst the latter was employed to block people's activities, the former was used to develop in life (*évoluér*) and to master modernity, progress and their products – such as forging dollar bills<sup>98</sup>. In fact, in the eyes of the Congolese, development (*développement*<sup>99</sup>) and *la magie* were two sides of the same coin.

The same was highlighted by Djenny Swanga, a sixteen-year old girl living in Maman Yemo. During our interview, she wanted to stress the different way people from Europe and people in Kinshasa deal with occult powers. What is interesting is that while Frédérique in his interview above seemed almost to place *la magie* and *kindoki* as opposites, in her interview Djenny speaks of only one witchcraft, which the White and the Congolese put to use for different reasons:

Witches they destroy people by giving them diseases...They only make people suffering. For example the witchcraft of Europe is visible... In here people also say that Europeans are witches, but Europeans put their witchcraft in practice with things they do... Creations, airplanes... But we the Congolese, we don't put witchcraft in creating something, we're only there to make others suffering. We don't think good of others, we only want to hurt them.

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<sup>98</sup> Rubbers (2009b) as well highlights how in Haut-Katanga people believe that "Whites' opulence derives from the power of their spirits – a power demonstrated by the extraordinary goods imported from the West – and from their capacity to master the spirits in Africa" (p. 278). Moreover, some of the people Rubber interviewed "alluded to Whites' invincibility to witchcraft, magic practices (evidenced by fantasy and horror films) and occult associations (the order of Freemasons or the Rosicrucians). In all cases Whites were credited with supernatural powers explaining the supremacy of their science and technique" (*Ibid*).

<sup>99</sup> The *Kinois* use indistinctively the French word *développement* (*botomboli* in Lingala, from the verb *kotombwama*, to go up) to denote both personal success in life (wealth) and scientific and socio-economic development (progress). The two meanings are one and the same, as in their eyes progress is good because it allows people to become wealthy.

Despite the variations between one informant and the other, all informants agreed that people involved in *la magie* and people involved in spiritual killings for the sake of harming others, used *kindoki* for the opposite reasons. Whereas the use that the poor made of *kindoki* was seen in antithesis with development<sup>100</sup>, as witches blocked people's social and economic development, *la magie* was considered part and parcel of development. In the words of the *Kinois*, development needed *la magie* to exist.

According to the *Kinois* I spoke to, the Whites created airplanes and made scientific discoveries, which were both the cause and effect of development. As such, development in Kinshasa was a product of *la magie*: the more a country was developed, the more *magie* was involved. On the other way around, the more a country wanted to develop, the more *magie* it needed. This meant that all large foreign companies that had brought 'development' to Kinshasa from the West, such as the United Nations, the World Bank, or Doctors Without Borders, were rumoured to be involved in *la magie*<sup>101</sup>.

Although the *Kinois* associated *la magie* with progress, riches and comfortable lives, they also acknowledged the other side of the coin: sacrifices had to be done in order to get rich. While often this involved sacrificing other people, such as relatives or very close friends, in other cases the sacrifices affected the very same people who resorted to *la magie*. While so far I have focused on the wealth and the progress that derives from *la magie*, the next section is devoted to the obscure side of the phenomenon, to deaths and sacrifices.

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<sup>100</sup> On a same note, Smith (2008) highlight how in the Taita Hills of Southeastern Kenya, development derives its meaning from its contrast with witchcraft and the two exclude and inform each other in ambiguous ways.

<sup>101</sup> This is also confirmed in Ellis and Ter Haar's work (1998, 2004) who report the words of a Congolese preacher called Evangelist Mukendi. In his book "Snatched from Satan's Claws", he describes the world of witches as organised like a modern metropolis and equipped with a huge airport. Some of the witches transform themselves in Whites and: "get out of their 'planes' and enter into bigger ones [...] destined to Europe, America or any other countries of the world. Their purpose is to acquire jobs in those countries posing as specialists or expatriates, to earn big salaries to be used for the international organization of sorcerers of the world" (Mukendi 1991 quoted in Ellis & Ter Haar 1998: 184). On a similar story see Meyer (1995), who tells the story of a Nigerian man who published a booklet on his journey to the world of the Devil.

## The Side Effects of *la Magie*

Rumours and gossip regarding *la magie* were a daily occurrence in *la cité*. Allegations of *la magie* were only ever made *a posteriori*, after sudden deaths had occurred within wealthy families. Here the deceased were seen as sacrificial victims for *la magie*. Thus, the sudden death of a partner or a child within a wealthy family raised suspicions against spouses and parents.

*La magie* involved serious side effects and required enormous sacrifices. Raphaël Malemo, a pastor who preached in a charismatic church in Ngiri-Ngiri, in central Kinshasa, expressed this as follows:

P. Raphaël: If you want to get rich with *la magie* you have to sacrifice someone: your wife, your child, your husband, or your friend... But if you don't want to make any sacrifice... For example I know a big man [*patron*]. He's a man, but every month he has got the period.

Silvia: Eh! A man?

P. Raphaël: Yes! A Man! But he has got a lot of money.

Silvia: And what does this mean?

P. Raphaël: That it is *la magie*! So he's going to get the money but he has got the period. This is his life, this is their lives.

Silvia: Ah it's the sacrifice, right?

P. Raphaël: But you can see that he has a lot of work to do, and that he earns a lot of money... He distributes money here and there... But, there are some things [some cons]. I know another man... In his life, he cannot sleep during the night.

Silvia: Really?

P. Raphaël: So he sleeps during the day. If he sleeps during the night, it's over.

Silvia: It's over?

P. Raphaël: You don't wake up anymore.

Silvia: Eh!

P. Raphaël: That's why you see a big man around 10pm, 11pm, he goes to the bar, women, and whatever else, until the morning. He's got a lot of money.... In another case... You know, I know a couple. The husband can transform into a python. Every midnight, he transforms himself. His wife has the antidote, a magic ring. When he transforms, the python eats the cardboard and later he vomits dollars<sup>102</sup>. Then, after five or six cardboards, his wife uses the magic ring to hit him three times on the body, and the python transforms itself into the man.

Masons who spent their fortunes on alcohol and women were believed to engage in lavish potlatch-style expenditures (buying beers and paying prostitutes for themselves as well as for their friends) to assert their power. The bar at night became the place where they spent mystical wealth<sup>103</sup>. Moreover, people who engaged in *la magie* twisted social and physical rules: they could transform into animals, they could engage in perverse sexual practices – like sleeping with one's own mother, as illustrated above – and men could have periods. Stories of incestuous behaviour signified the distinctive character of *la magie*. To put it with De Boeck (1999) people involved in *la magie* in Kinshasa “inverts the natural flow of the life-stream from ascendants to descendants” (*Ibid*: 189) in order to achieve success.

Although *la magie* was able to make someone wealthy, the price to pay was very high and could often result into the death of the person involved in such dealings. People could enrich themselves one day, but die the next. This contributed to foment gossip over the mystical character of wealth. Wealth and *la magie* were seen to work in the same way: both were fleeting, unstable and involved taking high risks. The next case study illustrates the pervasiveness of rumours of *la magie* in Kinshasa, as this episode concerned some relatives of the family I was living with.

### **A Suspicious Death 2: of Death, Money and a Climber Plant**

While I was in Kinshasa, a case of *la magie* happened in Julia's enlarged family. The husband of one of Julia's sister-in-law, who used to work for the Congolese government, died on a mission abroad. His body was found in his hotel room in a

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<sup>102</sup> On similar stories of wealthy snake-people who vomits money see De Boeck & Plissart (2004) on Kinshasa and Meyer (1995) on Ghana.

<sup>103</sup> On the link between mystical powers, wealth and the ostentatious distribution and consumption of beer and women see De Boeck (1999), and De Boeck & Plissart (2004).

neighbouring country and death was apparently due to a heart attack. I was extremely surprised when the night after his death, while we were sitting in our veranda waiting in vain for the electricity, my friend Joseph said that he wanted to tell me “the true story” of the deceased.

The man, Eliah Manuana, had managed to attain a position of power within the government after entering a Masonic sect. In order to maintain his power, he was required to make a sacrifice, and he decided to sacrifice his own health for money. Eliah had a large sore on his leg which would not heal<sup>104</sup> and caused him a great deal of pain. The sore appeared shortly after his affiliation to the sect. After some time Eliah married his first wife, with whom he had four children and whom he later tried to bring into the sect. Joseph told me that Eliah’s wife also joined the sect out of love, and initially agreed to sacrifice one of her children. But she soon regretted her choice and decided to quit. However, she had to pay for her decision with her own life.

A few days before her death, when she was already seriously ill and could not move from her bed, she called her two older brothers. She told them the full story about her and her husband’s *magie*, and asked them to visit their natal village in the east of the country to stop *la magie* from harming other members of her family. Once there, they needed to climb onto the roof of their family house, where they would see a plant with flowers (*uwa* in Swahili, the language spoken in the east of the country). In order to render *la magie* powerless, they were required to uproot the plant. The two brothers went to their family home in Bukavu by plane. But once in the East, they magically forgot why they were there. They started to visit different relatives and friends whom they had not seen in years, and got lost in the frills of celebration.

Entire weeks passed and they had to come back to the capital. As soon as they put their feet down at Ndjili airport in Kinshasa, they abruptly woke up and remembered what they were supposed to do back at the village. They remembered the reason for their trip, and realised that they had failed in their mission. This is why *la magie* was still inside their family and why Eliah died. Apparently, the children of the man did not want to enter *la magie*, but rumours of their involvement in Masonic sects already started to circulate at their father’s funeral (*matanga*).

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<sup>104</sup> Such sore was believed to be *mbasu*, an infection of the skin which provokes nasty ulcers. *Mbasu*, in the *Kinois*’ imaginary, was believed to be caused by mystical powers, in this case *la magie*.

The example of Eliah Manuana's death explains the dangers of dealing with *la magie*, including the sacrifice of kin, wealth, sudden death, and gossip that it entails. We can say that Eliah sacrificed himself rather than to kill any of his relatives. As Geschiere (1997) put it in regards to witchcraft among the Maka (called *djambe*): "[o]ne can even say that the *djambe* armor – although strengthening the "big men" in certain respects – makes them more vulnerable in others" (p. 94). In fact, sacrificial death and misfortunes were more likely to happen to people who made use of occult powers.

In this example we notice once again the interplay between the ideas of *kindoki* and *la magie*. It is thanks to occult forces present in the village (the symbol of a customary past and *kindoki*), that *la magie* can operate. The plant with flower (*uwa*) is like a charm, something that allows occult powers to flow not only between reality and witchcraft, but also between the village and Kinshasa. For many city-dwellers who migrated from the rural areas, the village was still an important benchmark for kinship networks and mystical powers. Moreover, according to Joseph, plants like the *uwa* were very common in people's houses. This denoted once again the danger of witchcraft, which could affect any family without members noticing it – apart from the person who made use of it. Nobody could be sure of anything or anyone, not even in their own households.

*La magie* was a source of *mobulu* not only for the direct forms of harm against relatives in the form of sacrifice, but also for the climate of mistrust and danger it creates within the family. When rumours of Eliah, the protagonist of the case study above, started to circulate about his belonging to an occult Masonic lodge after his death, this affected his daughters, who were suspected of being drawn into *la magie* themselves. The circle of whispering and accusations against the daughters highly affected their everyday lives. When I left them, they were trying to clear any involvement in *la magie* by venting their frustration with as many relatives as possible, and circulate a counter-rumour of their innocence. Thus, the invisible *mobulu* of *la magie*, through rumours and gossips, directly affect relationships in everyday life, contributing to more *mobulu* and insecurity at the material level of everyday life, particularly within the family and within the local community. We can now understand Joseph and Julia's concern when I initially expressed a desire to visit a Masonic lodge: they were afraid that I might be persuaded to sacrifice a member of my (Congolese) family in exchange for wealth.



## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have introduced the reader to the complex world of witchcraft (*kindoki*), and in particular to the manifestation of *la magie*. These two are very complex and often contradictory practices: they share many elements yet at the same time maintaining a degree of uniqueness and differentiation. While *kindoki* was used in order to make people fail because of jealousy and hatred, *la magie* was used in order to become rich. Through examples and case studies, I have demonstrated how people circulated rumours according to which rich people would sacrifice members of their family in the world of witchcraft to increase their wealth through magic dealings.

The world of *la magie* is a world of multiple forms of *mobulu*, such as killing, betrayals, secrets and lies. It is a world of predatory consumption, a consumption which requires the extinction of other people for the sake of enrichment. At the same time, *la magie* recalls the “predatory economy” (Devisch 1995: 610) of *la débrouille* in Kinshasa, according to which people resorted to petty thieveries, cheating and scam in order to survive – often at the expenses of someone else. From this point of view, *la magie* is deeply interrelated to the concept of *se débrouiller*. *La débrouille* is a more practical means of survival, which allowed people to empower themselves in face of conditions of economic impasse and state negligence – that is structural *mobulu*. Recent economic developments (or lack thereof) and the unpredictability of *la débrouille* have transformed social life and brought some young people into a fierce and often violence fight for survival. For example, the *kuluna* street gangs analysed in chapter 4 have taken it upon themselves to secure a passage to adulthood not waiting for the state. Like the physical forms of *mobulu*, *la magie* provides both a space of danger but also one of opportunity.

This chapter speaks to all the over-arching themes threaded throughout this thesis: showing the interplay between the *mobulu* of the state, the *mobulu* of everyday life and the *mobulu* of *la magie*, and how these multiple dimensions contribute to shape notions of *mobulu* in Kinshasa. The *mobulu* employed by many young people to make do both in material and invisible ways, is not simply a destructive force, but we could describe it as a predatory force, a force which appropriate other forms of *mobulu* – state *mobulu* and everyday life *mobulu* – in order to create new avenues for empowerment.

The poor of *la cité* faced the inequalities of everyday life through rumours and gossip about *la magie*. From this point of view, discourses on *la magie* helped the

*Kinois* shape and make sense of their social worlds. By accusing the wealthy of making occult dealings, the poor of *la cité* invested themselves with agency that diverted them from the “empire of modern passivity” (Bastian 2001: 89). Moreover, *la magie* helped the *Kinois* re-build a sort of morality in face of adversity. Through rumours of *la magie*, the poor were able to see rich people into a new perspective: the poor might lack the wealth to live comfortably, but they considered themselves to be honest people who earned a living through the sweat of their brow. Contrarily, the elite earned their wealth through illegitimate mystical forces. The elite and the powerful in society were described as *mobulu*, because they were rumoured to have acquired their wealth through the channels of *la magie*.

In the next chapter, I will illustrate how the *mobulu* of everyday life has affected relationships not only within broader society, but also within the intimate sphere of the family, challenging pre-existing rules and structures and bringing transformation and tension – and more *mobulu* – among family members.

- CHAPTER SIX -

**HOUSEHOLDS IN KINSHASA: BETWEEN FLUIDITY AND RELUCTANT SOLIDARITY**

On Thursday evenings, Joseph Mutambu and I had the habit of attending prayer meetings at the local branch of the Primary Living Church Communities (*Communautés Ecclésiales Vivantes de Base*, CEVB) in Maman Yemo. During these meetings people discussed themes from the Gospel or the Biblical reading for the next Sunday mass. The meetings took place in the courtyard of one of our neighbours. In one of these meetings, after the initial prayer, the host, called *moyangeli*, affirmed that the theme of the meeting was unity in marriage and he asked for people to contribute and give their opinion.

That day, a large group of young people aged about eighteen, was present. One of them stood up, encouraged by the presence of her friends. In Lingala, she blamed kin for causing problems for married couples:

They [the parents] know that the couple is married, but rather than let them enjoy their goods, they still come to ask money from them... The father of a girl, when she gets married, says to his daughter: "Oh, when you arrive there [in the new household], do not forget about me [*kobosana ngai te*]"... How can the couple live in harmony? And then, for example, the married woman wants to help her family but she does not want to irritate her husband with requests of money. So she takes money in secret, like that, *cache-cache* [hide-hide]... When the man finds out the 'hide-hide' he will get mad, and this is going to cause problems.

The host then gave the floor to a woman in her sixties, who replied:

Once you get married, you are not excluded from the extended family (*libota munene*), you are still part of that. If your father or your mother needs something, why can't you help them? Yes, parents should not be too much demanding of their children, they do not have to ask too much, but when problems arise, you should always help each other. You cannot cut us out.

In the context of Kinshasa, the family (*libota*) had undergone several changes. Such changes were certainly due to the economic crisis, which had eroded solidarity among family members. Money and wealth were so insecure and volatile that it was impossible for family members to help each other as it was expected from them. At the same time, however, changes within the family were also caused by intergenerational

tensions between the youngsters and the elders of the kin, as the youngsters challenged the authority of their elders on a daily basis, by denying them any control or decision over their lives.

The brief example I have illustrated above demonstrates the intergenerational tensions emerging in Kinshasa which I will discuss in the course of this chapter. In fact, whereas in the past, the elders were considered the holders of political and spiritual power within the family, today their decisional power has been compromised by young people's emancipation thanks to market economy and the world of salaried labour.

Kinshasa was born as a trade post for young, fit-to-work men. The wealth that young people earned in town clashed with the social power of the elders in the village: the first was a modern power which was produced in the city, the second a customary one which was valid in the village. The city itself, as a new, cosmopolitan space influenced by lifestyles and custom from a number of different places, contributed to emancipated young people from gerontocratic hierarchies of power.

The city became the *locus par excellence* of the tensions between the older, customary power of the elders, and the newer social power of youth. This has also been demonstrated by the rise of the *bill* street gangs and the *sapeurs* since the 1940s. These two groups were the first to challenge the gerontocracy of power, and opened the way for a number of phenomena and movements which challenged the hierarchies of power in several fields of society: in the realm of *la débrouille*, in which women and young people really took over; in the new construction of manhood through force of the *kulunas*; and in the new disproportionate enrichment of young entrepreneurs through the obscure channels of market economy – entrepreneurs who were rumoured to be involved into the witchcraft deeds of *la magie*.

In the same way as they did in other fields, young people seemed to take over also in the more intimate circle of the domestic sphere. In Kinshasa, the autocratic figure of the *pater familias*, the head of the family, has been eroded. Because of the lack of employment and the economic crisis, young people in Kinshasa struggled to find the resources necessary to create a family. It became almost impossible for young men to pay the bridewealth that sanctioned official marriages. Thus, the majority of young couples were almost obliged to subvert the power of the elders creating unions which ignored bridewealth. These unions were often short lived, because family elders often disapproved of them, and denied couples economic and emotional support. In the absence of official approval and support by the elders, younger people looked outside

their unions for self-help, creating a chain of short-lived unions with different partners. By creating their own unions and leaving parents as passive spectators, young people have ‘killed’ the authority of elders. Such social parricide, as I call it, and the shortened unions that resulted from it, profoundly affected the structure of the household. The households of *la cité* were very fluid units, whose membership varied drastically through time.

I aim to show here how the economic hardship and the intergenerational tensions at family level have rendered households very unstable units, contributing to increasing *mobulu* within the family, which often resulted in witchcraft accusations – and therefore more *mobulu*. Thus, ‘the violence in the house’ (*mobulu na ndako*) was at the same time cause and effect of further *mobulu*, which often took on a mystical character.

The scholarship on households in Africa has shown how in the African urban areas, it has become nearly impossible to define households in terms of static criteria such as ‘nuclear family’ or ‘unilineal cluster’. Ross (1996) in her article on domesticity in South Africa, proposes to define the household as a unit whose members were tied by the common responsibility to contribute to its maintenance. On the same note, Murray (1981), in his book on migrant labour in Lesotho, describes the household as formed by both “those who eat from one pot” and “those who make us live” (*Ibid*: 47-48), meaning those who bring income to the household. From this point of view, the two authors above saw economic co-operation as a more appropriate criterion of defining households than co-residence. In fact, the “practices and functions of (re)production and consumption” (Ross 1993: 35 in Spiegel et. al. 1996) that characterised the family were often distributed in space, as relatives moved between different homes, and contributed to the maintenance of different domestic units. Households were thus extremely diversified<sup>105</sup>, and many families were ‘stretched’ in space. This prompted Ross (1996) to describe households as “the (temporary) *loci* of densely packed social conglomerates that altered rapidly overtime” (p. 56), a phenomenon that she baptised as “diffusion of domesticity” (p.58).

These explanations do not fully capture the family context of Kinshasa. By focusing only on domesticity, Murray (1981) and Ross (1996) exhibit an over-optimistic view about household creation. My own research data suggest that there was

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<sup>105</sup> On the same topic in other African contexts see also Niehaus (1994) and Ferguson (1999).

something about households in Kinshasa that was not domestic at all, because of the easiness with which strangers entered the intimate sphere of the house. Domesticity in this context becomes a very misleading concept. Rather than the mutual care and cooperation typical of the extended family, households in Kinshasa were affected by sudden changes to living arrangements (coerced child fosterage, or unexpected and unwanted guests for prolonged time), and often mistrust. This made households in Kinshasa extremely different from the model based on cooperation and trust of the extended family as described by Ross (1996, 2003). This suggests a new household pattern, which I call ‘*exo-household*’ because of its power to bloat the household and incorporate people who are considered extraneous and external to the domestic kin network. Exo-households gained dependents that were reluctantly accepted, and who sometimes put the lives of household members at risk through witchcraft.

However, I also argue that there was a hidden order which lay beneath the apparent disorder of *exo-households*’ formation in Kinshasa. In the precarious economic and living conditions of *la cité*, families were affected by new rules and survival strategies, based on the fluidity of young men and women and their capacity to adapt to everyday hardship.

The chapter starts with a brief description of the family in the pre-colonial era and the changes during colonialism, when the state imposed the nuclear family as model of domesticity in Leopoldville. However, politico-economic changes made it impossible for people to construct viable nuclear households. The *Kinois* rather reworked the notion of the family and re-evaluated solidarity mechanisms proper of life in the village. However, economic limitations made it difficult for city dwellers to satisfy the requests of their extended families. As such, borrowing Bähre’s (2007b) definition, I argue that Kinshasa’s families were tied by bonds of “reluctant solidarity”, torn between customary obligations, the difficulty to fulfil them, and their quest for independence.

If the notion of the family changed through time, so did the household. Exo-households resulted from the mobility of young people, who navigated between the city and the countryside to make do through *la débrouille*, and entered into short-term unions. I then use the example of the *exo-household* of the young couple I lived with, Joseph Mutambu and Julia Wembi, as an extended case study, to show the fluidity of young people and their resilience in coping with economic hardship, customary obligations and the double-edged mechanisms of reluctant solidarity in Kinshasa.

## **From the Unilineal Family to the Colonial Invention of the Nuclear Family**

Vansina (1966) states that during the first half of the twentieth century, the populations of the Bas-Congo and Kinshasa regions were organised by matrilineal families in terms of descent, inheritance and succession<sup>106</sup>. As Doutreloux (1966: 121) highlights:

The nuclear group is not the couple and their children, but the minimal matrilineage constituted by a brother and one or more of his sisters and their children. These different nuclear groups, assembled under the authority of the firstborn, form the matrilineage, *mvumu* (my translation from French).

However, marriage was virilocal and the custody of the male children was patrilocal, which led to great mobility in residence (Vansina 1966: 26). The mechanisms of mobility and the circulation of women and children between families were at the base of alliances between different domestic groups. As such, marriage and progeny were political tools that assured the existence and development of a given kin group. Marriage was generally sanctioned by the payment of a bridewealth, which according to Vansina (1966), at the beginning of 1900, was still purely symbolic in many regions, particularly within matrilineal societies. Once a couple was officially married, the extended family provided economic and social support for the new couple and their children. In this way, the broader kin group sought to alleviate social tensions (such as the jealousy between co-wives and their children) and economic obligations (such as bridewealth and ritual payments).

At the beginning of its development, Leopoldville was inhabited by young male Congolese workers who were brought into town as labourers from all regions of the country, and who were housed into labour camps (La Fontaine 1970a). At the time, women were forbidden from entering Leopoldville (Gondola 2009: 79), which functioned merely as a trade post and as industrial station rather than as an urban centre.

The situation started to change in the 1930s. The Belgian government, aiming to create a middle class among the Congolese, started to focus on educating the population, and to establish Western life-styles and institutions such as the nuclear family (Comhaire 1956b; Hunt 1990). This is why from the 1930s, women started to be

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<sup>106</sup> Except from the Tio, among which the descent was bilateral (Vansina 1966).

allowed into town. Many of them migrated to join their kinsmen, whilst others arrived in town in order to escape the polygyny and patriarchy they were subjected to in the village<sup>107</sup>, and for the possibility of independence and enrichment the city represented.

The model of the nuclear family (*famille nucléaire*), which was soon adopted by *évolués* eager to integrate the practices of the colonial state, was sponsored not only by the colonial administration but also by the missionaries. The latter aimed at creating “important connections between Western family ideology, the colonial construction of womanhood and domesticity, and the emergence of a colonised urban elite” (Hunt 1990: 448-449). The nuclear family focused on the conjugal couple as the locus of domesticity, a vision which diverged from notions of the extended family and solidarity mechanisms endorsed in the rural areas.

Whereas the model of matrilineal families, focused upon the authoritative maternal uncle, prevailed in villages, the model of the nuclear family in town empowered the figure of the husband-father. The rise of the figure of the father accorded with Christian teaching, and was reinforced by the fact that only men could obtain salaried employment in town (Comhaire 1956a: 12). The power structure within the nuclear family strongly collided with that of the extended kin, as fathers claimed power over their children while maternal uncles claimed power over their nephews. This tension was still present in many families during my fieldwork, and people were still trying to re-define their idea of families and figures of authority within them.

Despite colonial efforts to reform the family according to the nuclear model, it was impossible for the Congolese to live by this standard. As Comhaire (1956a: 11) put it, “[b]esides tradition, low wages, unskilled employment, and the absence of private property all contributed to defeat the progress of the nuclear middle-class family”<sup>108</sup>. Although the colonial government had discouraged collaboration between nuclear

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<sup>107</sup> Hunt (1991) explains how women in villages were subjected to small and large forms of polygyny. While the first was quite common among the population (see also Vansina 1973), the second interested mainly village chiefs. Some chiefs used to paid bridewealth for most girls born under their jurisdiction and they set up very high bridewealth in turn for those who wanted to marry them, making these girls impossible to marry. At the time, men were eager to marry several women because they needed as much labour force as possible to help with the rural labour imposed by the colonial regime. Thus, the chiefs would ‘lend’ these girls to poor villagers, who in exchange of these temporary wives, would offer them service in plantation work or gifts (Hunt 1991: 479).

<sup>108</sup> It was only in 1954 that, according to La Fontaine (1970a: 57), “Congolese have been able to buy the freehold rights to their plots. [...] The occupant was free to build on his parcelle, and when he left it he could sell the building or other improvements”.



families and other relatives in the rural areas, the exchanges between urban and rural kin gained renewed strength during the great depression of the 1930s, when the Congo and European industries were hit by the global crisis. Left without a job, many young people who had found in the city a place to disengage from customary obligations, rediscovered in their familial solidarity networks a source of survival (see also Ferguson 1992: 89).

The economic crisis that followed the depression had a huge impact on the development of the urban layout of Leopoldville. Although at the end of the 1940s the houses provided by the government to the workers were “built for nuclear families” (La Fontaine 1970a: 5), households in the *cités* and the *zones annexes* were overflowing due to the huge number of relatives, who took advantage of the renewed solidarity networks between kin in the villages and kin in town.

Rural-urban ties and the collaboration between extended families continued to affect the socio-economic context of Kinshasa during the 1950s and after Independence. Janet MacGaffey (1983) analysed the ties that existed between Kinshasa and the Bas-Congo village of Mbanza Manteke in 1965. Her data “reveal the interdependence of village and town and a form of family organization adapted to mobility within the total urban-rural social field” (MacGaffey 1983: 69). Because “the matrilineage offer[ed] security when necessary” (*Ibid*: 82), many city-dwellers found that their familial bonds assisted them in making a life in the often harsh living conditions of Kinshasa.

Solidarity and cooperation within the domestic groups were also central to life in Kinshasa during the 1990s when, following Mobutu’s broken promises of political and socio-economic progress, healing churches preached a break with modernity and a return to “aspects of the lineage mode of production and family solidarity patterns” (Devisch 1998: 239). At the same time, the revaluation of the small neighbourhood of a few matrilocal households – a phenomenon which Devisch calls “villagisation” (*Ibid*) – helped in creating a new sense of communalism and confronting everyday hardship. Relationships between urban and rural dwellers kept informing everyday life in Kinshasa in the decades that followed, as explained in the next section.

## The Notion of the Family in Contemporary Kinshasa

At the time of my fieldwork in Kinshasa, the western concept of nuclear family (*libota*) and the unilineal extended family (*libota munene*) coexisted. Family was defined primarily according to the nuclear model of the married couple and their children. However, such nuclear families have joined together with couples formed by brothers, sisters and parents, forming what the *Kinois* called ‘enlarged family’ (*famille élargie*).

Central to this idea of the family as a whole was the notion of ‘African solidarity’ (*solidarité africaine*), an expression popularly used in Kinshasa as well as other regions of the country (see for example Petit & Mulumbwa 2005). The adjective ‘African’ was used by the *Kinois* to denote the difference between what they perceived as their way of life, made of sharing and helping, as opposed to a Western life-style, which they described as individualistic and characterised by selfish accumulation. This expression denoted the customary exchange of money and favours between members of the extended family as a way of helping each other and strengthening bonds of dependence. These solidarity mechanisms often took place through the circulation of children between households (also called *libota*, like the family, or *bana ya ndako*, children of the house) of the same extended family. On the one hand, children from the city were sent to the village to learn about customs and kinship ties; on the other, children from the village were sent to town to receive schooling (see also Comhaire 1956b).

My research participants described African solidarity as the cornerstone of village life. Adults and elders in Kinshasa depicted the village as the locus of moral and social order *par excellence*; the place in which customary rituals and gerontocratic hierarchies were respected; where the bridewealth was a symbolic exchange of small gifts, and where exchange and reciprocity networks still operated. However, rather than reflecting the truth, such statements about the village offered a covert critique of the city and of the independence of young people<sup>109</sup>. In fact, some studies highlighted how families in the village were affected by a very high rate of divorce<sup>110</sup>, while the

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<sup>109</sup> On this topic see also Ferguson (1992: 85), Geschiere and Gugler (1998: footnote 1) and De Boeck and Plissart (2004: 40).

<sup>110</sup> See Vansina (1973) and MacGaffey J. (1983) in regard to the Bas-Congo region, and Hunt (1991) in regard to the Great Lakes region and the eastern regions of the country. For example, Vansina noted that among the Mbe, “52 per cent of marriages ended in divorce per actual marriages” (*Ibid*: 103).

bridewealth in many cases was far from being symbolic<sup>111</sup>. Discourses on African solidarity and on ‘the village’, in many cases just an imaginary abstract concept, symbolised an idealised way of life which stood in stark contrast to the unstable domestic context of Kinshasa. Migration from village into town, migrant labour, conjugal dissolution, low-life expectancies, poor living and economic conditions, and inadequate health care have led to the formation of diverse family and household structures. Among all, there were two factors which I believe were particularly central in this process. First, the fluidity of young people in the informal economy, and second, the fluidity of young people in bonding together in informal alliances. Both phenomena involved mainly youngsters, those “social shifters” (Durham 2004) who were most able to shift between rural and urban milieus, and local and global life-styles and economies.

### **Young People’s Fluidity in the Informal Economy**

Migration flows *between* rural and urban areas (rather than simply *from* rural *to* urban areas) have always characterised Kinshasa and its hinterland. Whereas rural dwellers were attracted to the city because of the possibility of employment in the new market economy, urban dwellers have re-evaluated the country in times of economic impasse. As De Boeck and Plissart (2004: 44) put it, “whereas the city has become peripheral and in some respects village-like, the bush in the place where dollars are generated, where the good life is shaped and where villages are transformed into booming diamond settlements” (also see De Boeck 2000a, 2001).

During my fieldwork, many *Kinois* engaged in trade with the neighbouring villages, collecting food and later reselling goods in town. Trade often concerned not only rural areas nearby the city, but also distant regions and foreign countries, such as Angola and the neighbouring countries along the eastern border of Congo<sup>112</sup>. A distant cousin of my friend Joseph used to travel by boat from Kinshasa to Kisangani, a perilous trip of roughly 1,700 kilometres by boat, which lasted about three weeks. He would sell bags full of shoes and clothing in the East, before returning to Kinshasa by the same route with fresh food from the rural areas. Traders like him spent long periods

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<sup>111</sup> Accounts that describe village life and customary practices in villages from the 1900 describe an increase in the price of the bridewealth linked to the influence of the market economy and the trade with the Europeans (see Vansina 1973: 89; Hunt 1991: 479).

<sup>112</sup> On this topic also see MacGaffey J. (1991), De Boeck (1999), and MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga (2000).

of their lives between two or more households in different and distant contexts, often building parallel lives and parallel families.

As a result of this mutual exchange between what has become an economically 'peripheral centre' (the city) and a 'central periphery' (the rich and prosperous rural areas), many households in Kinshasa temporarily hosted kin from the village. Men and women moved back and forth between urban and rural areas, or between different areas of the same city, and it was exactly this movement of people that enabled families to survive. Constraining people into the boundaries of one single household, or one single social context (like the city as opposed to the rural milieu) would have meant to limit their survival strategies and possibilities of success (see also Ferguson 1990a, 1990b). *La débrouille* required a certain fluidity to be effective, and family structures had to stay fluid in order to soften the blows of the unstable market economy.

### **Young People's Fluidity in Marriage: Modern Forms of Alliance**

Young people's fluidity in romantic relationships was the second factor of diversification and instability of households in Kinshasa. As I mentioned above, the payment of bridewealth established the prerogative to marry and form a family. At the time of my fieldwork, a couple who wanted to fulfil all obligations had to undergo three different marriages: a civic marriage (*libala ya l'état*), religious marriage (*libala ya ndako ya nzambe*), and customary marriage (*libala ya coutume* or *libala ya bakoko*, the latter meaning 'wedding of the ancestors'). The most important of the three, the one who gave officiality to the union in front of the elders of the family, was the customary marriage.

In Kinshasa, a proper customary marriage involved three stages. The first was the introduction of the groom-to-be to the bride's family (a procedure called *presentation*), during which the two families met for the first time and agreed on the bridewealth. The second was the offering of a little-bridewealth (*pre-dot* or *petite dot*) to the woman's family by the man's family, which functioned as a sort of 'deposit' of the bridewealth to come. The third was the offering of the final bridewealth (*dot*, or *mbongo ya libala*, money of the wedding), followed by a lavish party with banquet and music.

Due to economic restraints, many young men, although eager to become engaged to their beloved ones, were encountering difficulties in paying the bridewealth.

Several Congolese complained to me about the inflation of the bridewealth, described by many *Kinois* as much more opulent than in the past. A bridewealth at the time of my fieldwork included outfits and accessories for the parents of the bride (including Italian branded shoes, expensive watches and belts for men, and expensive Dutch-printed African fabrics for women), several boxes of beer and non-alcoholic drinks, goats and cows (the type of cattle depending on the region), food stock, items for the house and cash in American dollars.



FIGURE 9: During a bridewealth ceremony: a member of the groom's family presents gifts to a member of the bride's family. Among the items we can see a suit, shoes, belt, a shirt, and a machete. However, the list (on the table) was much longer and involved also kitchen tools and cattle.

The cost of bridewealth had become prohibitive, often exceeding \$1,500. According to Wyatt MacGaffey (1983: 179), the inflation of bridewealth was the result of “the engagement of most men of working age in wage-labour from about 1900 onwards, and represent[ed] a kind of tax levied on the capitalist sector by the villagers”. Increased educational participation also contributed to the increase in bridewealth. Many girls travelled to Kinshasa to enrol in university. Education was prohibitively expensive compared to the economic possibilities of the *Kinois*, and through

bridewealth husbands were expected to repay the debt girls incurred with their families because of education. As a young man who recently married explained to me:

Here in Kinshasa, women are seen as merchandise. They cannot ask 2,000 dollars for a woman! And today, with the education system, it is even worse, because when they give their daughter for marriage, the family says that they spent a lot of money to educate her, so the bride wealth should pay for that too. If the woman really wants to emancipate herself and have equal opportunities, she should start to change the bridewealth mechanisms and stop being considered as value of exchange!

Formal education was considered the key to succeed in modern society and to access western commodities through the salaried market (La Fontaine 1970a; Bongo-Pasi Moke Sangol & Tsakala Munikengi 2004). As such, girls were valued not only for the offspring they produced, but also for the possibilities of access to the job market. Girls were considered as a source of wealth because of the western education they received. In the eyes of the *Kinois*, university titles were the key to access the job market. Thus, without considering the economic crisis and the fact that most of Kinshasa's young people stayed jobless after university, parents required the groom-to-be to make up for the precious investment they were about to lose by wedding their daughters.

It is worth noting that the elders of the woman's family decided the price of bridewealth, while the elders of the man's family were supposed to help him collect the amount required. As such, marriage between the couple was a familial affair, linked to solidarity mechanisms among the kin group. However, not many people in Kinshasa could count on the help of their extended families due to low life expectancies, familial tensions or simply because of poverty among their relatives. This, as well, has resulted in intergenerational tensions, as young people interpreted the expensive bridewealth as a means whereby the elders of the woman's family obstructed their marriages.

In the face of this difficult situation, many young *Kinois* have found alternative solutions by adopting different sorts of unions, that entailed the payment of a smaller amount of money.

### ■ Shortened Marriage (*Mariage Raccourci*)

In shortened marriages, the families of the young couple made an initial, provisory agreement through the payment of a small, symbolic bridewealth. This form of marriage developed in the same way as the normal customary marriage, but did not proceed to the final payment of the bridewealth. As some *Kinois* explained to me, the man gave the ‘little-bridewealth’ as if to reimburse the family of the woman, who would feel ‘robbed’ if they were not compensated for the loss of their daughter. A rhetoric of stealing was used, which denoted the constant tensions between generations<sup>113</sup>. The daughter then went to live in the man’s household, with the implicit assumption that he would pay ‘real bridewealth’ as soon as he was able to collect the money.

The shortened marriage had the function of lowering the tensions between the two families, and set up the basis for acceptance into the solidarity networks of the extended family. For example, my friend Joseph offered only four boxes of drinks (two of beers and two cold drinks), a goat, and a little sum of money (\$150) as bridewealth to the family of Julia Wembi. Even in this case, however, tensions arose when some of Julia’s older relatives started to provoke Joseph by verbally abusing him and denigrating him during the ceremony. In fact, some relatives found it offensive that such a small amount of bridewealth was given for their daughter, and tried to dissuade Joseph from becoming engaged to Julia. However, due to the economic hardship of people in Kinshasa, many families acknowledged the difficulty to collect the entire bridewealth, and agreed to this type of union.

This form of shortened marriage had a double function: on the one hand, it allowed the young couple to start building a family. On the other, it allowed the elders of the woman’s family some control over their son-in-law, as the debt of the bridewealth was not yet paid. At the same time, the elders of the man’s family held some authority because the young woman was still not officially part of their family. This put great pressure on the girl, who was treated with less respect, and who was constantly on probation, to see if she could make a good wife.

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<sup>113</sup> The same rhetoric of stealing is visible in a Kongo text introduced by MacGaffey (1986): “Supposing a young man were simply to elope with a woman, ‘stealing’ her [*vo ukwelele mu zaku ngolo, nkento kayiba*], subsequent difficulties would be on his own head” (Cahier 384 in MacGaffey 1986: 28).

■ 'Staying Together' (Yaka Tovanda) or 'Free Union' (Union Libre)

Another very common form of union was called 'come, let us stay together' (*yaka tovanda* in Lingala). This form of union was not legitimised by either bridewealth or pre-bridewealth, and was known as a 'free union', although in some cases a payment could be made *a posteriori* (see below). Unlike in the shortened marriage, *yaka tovanda* was a temporary, emergency union for young people who had a baby out of wedlock. In order to understand how *yaka tovanda* worked, we need to look at its most common mechanisms.

During my stay in Kinshasa, an unmarried girl who became pregnant had two options: abortion, which was performed illegally by nurses at home or in one of the poorly-equipped private clinics of *la cité*. According to some women I spoke to, the abortion procedure involved the ingestion of strong medicines and plant remedies, together with very violent methods to expel the foetus, such as beating and summary incisions. However, this was a very risky procedure and complications were very common, which often led to the death of the girl. The second option was to keep the baby and have a child born out of wedlock, with all the consequences that it involved.

When an unmarried girl confessed that she was pregnant, her outraged family arranged a meeting with the family of the young man, whom they believed to be the father. Once the man had admitted the fact, the man's family was obliged to host the pregnant girl during pregnancy and birth. In this way, the father of the child was made responsible for any medical expenses during the child's delivery<sup>114</sup>.

After the birth, the young couple, either because under pressure by their families, or because they were not sentimentally attached to each other, often decided not to stay together. This meant that the girl returned to live in her natal household. At this point the father was supposed to make a small payment for the baby (*doter l'enfant*), called 'child-price'. Only after the payment of child-price could the father and his family claim any rights over the baby. If the couple decided to stay and live together, the young man was supposed to make a payment for the woman rather than for the baby itself. This payment, rather than being a child-price, was an *a-posteriori*

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<sup>114</sup> The situation was more complicated in the case of a man having more than one relationship at the same time. In this case, the pregnant woman could not go and stay in the man's household, where in many cases the other woman (the rival, *mbanda*) lived. As such, the pregnant girl stayed with her family while the man contributed to the girl's expenses 'from the distance'.



form of the little-bridewealth for the woman. However, even after the payment of the little-bridewealth, these types of marriage were extremely fragile. The grandmother of a child born out of his son's *yaka tovanda* union explained me:

In 90% of cases, they [the young couple] will not stay together in the future. If the boy, when he grows up, finds another woman, the first woman will have to go back to her place. And about the child, it will be decided together [among the two families] if he has to stay with the mother in her household or with the father and the step-mother.

In many cases, young men did not want to pay for the child-price nor the *a-posteriori* pre-bridewealth. They considered the baby as the result of a youthful error and neither they nor their partners wanted to engage in any relationship – let alone marriage. Many men were involved in different relationships at the same time, and could not afford to sustain the child and to pay for the child-price, which would mean officially acknowledge one relationship. Thus, the child born out of wedlock continued to live in the mother's household.

Other times, however, it was the mother who decided to leave her child behind and move on to form a new relationship. In fact new partners often disapproved of children born from their partners' previous relationships: step-mothers, step-fathers and their respective families were often the first to try to get rid of the children, making life for them almost impossible or accusing them of being dangerous witches (see next chapter). In this case, the child could either stay with the woman's extended family, while the mother went to live with his new partner; or s/he would be sent to stay in the father's household, even if the latter had not paid for the child-price. This made the position of such unwanted children extremely fragile, as they were sent back and forth between different households, often under very stressful and harsh conditions<sup>115</sup>. This facilitated the rise of witchcraft accusations against children, who were seen as to embody unresolved debts between the families.

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<sup>115</sup> The situation for the children became even more fragile when one or both of their parents started to neglect them or died abruptly. Children were left without any kind of familial support, with nobody to fight for their inclusion within the family. Many people often refused (or found an excuse) to host them. Sometimes however, because of reciprocity mechanisms, avoiding responsibility for the child was simply impossible, and children were obliged to live in families along with people who did not really want them. This created tensions that often result in witchcraft accusations against the children.

The liminality of children born in *yaka tovanda* marriages became apparent during an interview in which Bernard Kabuaku, the father of a six-year-old girl accused of witchcraft, explained their family problems to me. Bernard was a young electrician who lived in Kingasani, a neighbourhood so overcrowded that it became known by the *Kinois* as ‘People’s Republic of China’ (*Chine populaire*). During a chat in the courtyard of his *parcelle*, Bernard explained to me how he was forced to leave his previous neighbourhood. During heavy rain, a power cable detached from an electricity pylon and landed in a puddle on the street. Two women were fatally electrocuted as they walked home and Bernard, being the senior electrician of the area, was accused of being responsible for the accident. At that time, his daughter Geisha had already been accused of being a witch and Bernard had no doubt she had caused the accident to undermine him and his business. Neither Bernard nor the maternal family wanted Geisha, who frequently relocated between households and the street. At the time of my fieldwork, Geisha lived in a shelter that had been established by an NGO. The day of our interview, Bernard explained me:

I am the father of the child, who is called Geisha. Her mother gave birth to Geisha when I was still a student. Here in our culture, if you are a student, it is very difficult to live with a girl. This is why, when she gave birth, she went back to her place [meaning that until that moment, the mother of the child was in the man’s household].

I went away to do the military service. After one year, when I came back, she was already with another man. She would often leave the child alone, as she was still in school. Her mother was director of the Catholic school and they often left the child alone in the house of another *maman*<sup>116</sup>... It’s them [maternal family] who said that she had witchcraft. We did not know anything, because they did not want to give us the child...

Often, in the Congolese custom, when you give birth, eh, a pregnant girl, you [the man] have to pay something to get the child back, you have to pay a child-price for the baby, [*il faut doter l’enfant*], you do not marry the woman but you have to pay the child-price. [...] We did not know anything at the time, as they had the baby because of the bridewealth [in this case, child-price, which had not been paid], and we did not see each other. One day, I was here on the street, and I saw Geisha’s mother arriving with the child. And I asked her “Why are you giving us the child without us coming to look for him [through child-price]?” “Oh no, you know, my husband does not like this child...There are many problems... And in our family...It’s better if the child stays here”. *Bon*. We stayed here with the rest of the family, and we also noticed that the child was bewitched. [...]

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<sup>116</sup> Term of respect for a married woman. To be considered a *maman* in Kinshasa a woman needs also to have children. In fact *maman* also means ‘mother’.

That time, at the time of the cable accident, we all moved. Geisha moved too, and we thought she would go back to live with her mother, but her mother was pregnant again and had moved in the household of his husband. When Geisha went back to the maternal household, her [maternal] uncle did not want her back because he said that she had witchcraft, he did not even want to see the child! That's when the child was left on the street. I retired towards Binza, down there, and they called me to ask me where the child was hiding. Hah! I called the mother and I asked "Where is the child...? You have to find the child..."

Although *yaka tovanda* marriages circumnavigated the expenses for the bridewealth, they did not alleviate tensions and conflict within the familial sphere.

#### ■ The Mario Phenomenon

So far I have spoken of the circulation of women between households and I have stressed the fact that residency was always virilocal. In Kinshasa however, men sometimes moved into women's households. 'Mario' was the nickname which denoted young men who engaged in relationships with elderly wealthier women. These women had usually passed the age of marriage: some of them had already been married and divorced; others were widowed, and were the head of a household. Young men were drawn into these relationships by gifts and promises of wealth in exchange for sexual favours. For some of these young men, residency became matrilocal, as they went to live in the woman's household.

This phenomenon, which was already present in Kinshasa at the beginning of the 1960s (La Fontaine 1970a:137), was baptised Mario after the name of a 1985 song by Franco and the Ok Jazz orchestra. The song told the story of a man called Mario who lived at the expense of his older lover, but behaved as if he was the household's head. In a verse of the song, the woman says:

<i>Mobali akuti ngai na bomengo</i>	The man found me with wealth
<i>Asengi akomander ngai na ndimi</i>	He asked to command me and I said yes
<i>Mobali akuti ngai na bangenge</i>	The man found me with fortune
<i>Asengi adiriger ngai na ndimi</i>	He asked to become my boss and I said yes

*Nabandi kobima na ye babandi  
kobenga ye Monsieur*

I started to go out with him, they  
started calling him Monsieur

*Mario avimbi moto akanisi biloko  
na ngai ya ye ah!*

Mario felt bucked up, he thinks all  
my stuff belongs to him ah!

*Ah Mario na baye yo o.*

Ah Mario you annoy me.

The song and the phenomenon it represented, were evidence not only of the increasing independence of women in Kinshasa, but also of the gender-based tensions that emerged, as the emancipation of women clashed with patriarchal hierarchies of power.

This kind of relation did not last long. The couple usually disguised their relationship, which would evoke condemnation by the man's family. Thus, unlike the two cases described above, it was not considered a marriage, but rather an unofficial union which could not be legitimised through bridewealth of any sort.

### **From Modern Alliances to Modern Domestic Units: the Exo-Household**

The three types of unions above increased the circulation of people between households in an unprecedented way. As a consequence, households were very numerous and many family members engaged in different relationships at the same time. The partners in these relations frequently separated and entered into subsequent unions with different partners. This allowed for the constant incorporation of strangers into kinship networks. Thus, in Kinshasa, households were formed not only by kin, but also by temporary-kin (or semi-strangers, depending on your point of view) and the children born from different relationships.

Rather than being bounded by obligations of solidarity and reciprocity, families in Kinshasa were linked by ties of shared debt and delayed repayment. Families often did not want to be linked to persons who entered temporarily the household through *yaka tovanda* or shortened marriage. When these relationships ended, people would rather forget about their connections and unresolved debts, although they were constantly reminded of them by the progeny of these relationships.

Because of the inappropriateness of describing households according to static classifications (such as nuclear or extended cluster) or functional criteria (those who eat together, those who provide income to the household), I propose a new definition. I use

the term 'exo-household' to describe the fluid and fragile domestic pattern in Kinshasa that gathered together kin and non-kin such as temporary partners, close friends and acquaintances. Such households were the result of the hypertrophy of families that could no longer control the movements and affiliations of young people. At the same time, they were characterised by extreme mobility and diversification. The fact that the majority of young people's unions were not officially sanctioned rendered them much more precarious and volatile: this resulted in ex-partners leaving the circle of family and making room for the next one.

A survey of twenty households in the neighbourhood of Maman Yemo illustrates the diversification of domestic units. Among the households, nine of them were headed by a couple, six were 'single-headed' and five were 'sibling-headed'<sup>117</sup>. The average number of per-household members was seven: at the lowest extreme of the range, one household was composed by a single man (rumoured to have been accused of witchcraft by his family and expelled from his home) while another was formed by mother and her daughter; the two most populated households of the sample had twelve members each. Of the six single-headed households, in two cases the partner of the head of the household was outside Kinshasa for work. In other cases it was not the head of the household but some of the dependants who had left for migrant informal labour outside the capital. One should always remember the fluidity that concerned households and the rapidity with which changes took place. As such, household could drastically increase in members or decrease in very short time.

Among the twenty households, five hosted exo-members who were not kin, but temporary partner affiliated through the types of modern union analysed above, or family friends. Six other households hosted young children who had been born from shortened marriages that had already ended. The children were left either with one of their young parents, with the parents' relatives, or with other carers. In total, eleven households out of twenty, more than 50% of the sample contained either exo-members or children born out of temporary unions.

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<sup>117</sup> I define 'sibling-headed' those households that were headed by two or more siblings who contributed more or less equally to the maintenance of the households and its dependants. In one case I registered a couple of brothers; in another, five sisters; and in others, a multiple number of brothers and sisters. For a detailed account of sibling-headed households in a different African context see Niehaus 1994.

<b>Diversification of living units in Maman Yemo</b>		<b>20</b>
Households headed by a couple		9
	With family members only	6
	↳ With children in liminal positions	(3)
	With family members and exo-members	3
Single-headed households	(3 headed by women and 3 by men)	6
	With family members only	5
	↳ With children in liminal positions	(1)
	With family members and exo-members	1
Sibling-headed households		5
	With family members only	4
	↳ With children in liminal positions	(2)
	With family members and exo-members	1
<b>Exo-households (ho. with children in liminal positions and exo-members)</b>		<b>11</b>

FIGURE 10: Number of exo-households on a sample of twenty living units in Maman Yemo.

### From ‘African Solidarity’ to ‘Reluctant Solidarity’

The fast-paced rhythm through which households increased, changed and became exo-households, put the notion of African solidarity under pressure. For many city-dwellers in Kinshasa, African solidarity became more a burden than a security net. Because of the economic crisis, people often found it exceedingly difficult to fulfil their obligations and solidarity requests from their kin.

In this context, solidarity transformed itself into an individualistic ‘everyone for himself’ (*chaque un pour soi*) mentality. This attitude was definitely influenced by Pentecostal Churches, which described giving as a dangerous act, and vehicle of witchcraft rather than solidarity. In their sermons, pastors highlighted how people should live by the sweat of their brows (De Boeck & Plissart 2004) rather than through solidarity. This contrasted starkly with the notion of “villagisation” which stressed the crucial role of the extended family in supporting its members. The pastors knew that the majority of the family in Kinshasa had to resort to kinship ties and solidarity networks in order to survive. However, they continued to stress how solidarity and gifts were vehicle of danger and witchcraft, and were to be avoided. In this way, they contributed to create *mobulu* and tensions within the familial cluster, which was caught in between

the fear to rely on extended networks, and the impossibility of making do by themselves. This, in turn, resulted in more and more people going to church to make amends for their sins and to be purified by the word of God, aware of having engaged in extended solidarity networks and afraid of having caught witchcraft.

This “crisis of the gift” (De Boeck 2005a; De Boeck & Plissart 2004) led many young *Kinois* to disengage themselves from networks of solidarity with their kin at the village (see also Nzeza 2004) and in town. People engaged in what Trefon (2002a) calls “despair solidarity”: “people help each other primarily if they can expect something in return” (*Ibid*: 488). However, because families in Kinshasa were obliged to rely on their kin to deal with the hardship of everyday life, African solidarity became something that was desired and avoided at the same time. People were bound by links of “reluctant solidarity”, as Bähre (2007b) put it, defined as “that help, particularly under conditions of destitution and hardship, [which] does not result in extensive unifying bonds of comradeship, but in small bonds fraught with social tensions” (*Ibid*: 52). This pushed people to look for new survival strategies by playing with kinship terms.

### **The Tactical Use of Kinship Terms**

During the time of my fieldwork, the *Kinois* struggled to position themselves in the continuously changing domestic spaces. In this context, people started playing with kinship terms, in an effort to shape the household and the family unit in the most suitable way for its survival. As Bloch (1971) explains, kinship terms can be used not only to denote kinship roles, but also as a tactical means of transforming social situations. Kinship terms are thus charged with strong political and economic connotations which allow them to be used by kin and by strangers according to the situations at hand.

This was visible in the case of young women who had children outside of wedlock and tried to marry officially through bridewealth. Sometimes single parents found it difficult to re-marry (through proper customary marriage as well as shortened marriage), as many partners did not approve of children born from previous relationships. This is why the grand-mothers (*koko mwasi*) often agreed to raise such children as if they were their own. The children addressed and referred to their biological mothers as ‘elder sibling’ (*yaya*). In the case that the mother’s siblings raised the children as if they were their own, children addressed their biological mother as

‘aunt’ (*maman leki/maman kolutu* or *tata mwasi*, depending on whether the child pretended the mother being the maternal or paternal aunt<sup>118</sup>).

In the same way, if children lived with the father’s family, they often addressed their biological father as ‘elder sibling’ (*yaya*) or ‘uncle’ (*papa leki/ kolutu* or *noko*, depending on whether the child pretended the father being the paternal or maternal uncle). In this manner, young parents were free to pursue marriages. This tactic completely redefined kinship roles within the household for the sake of the whole family, as successful marriages were supposed to bring wealth to the family through solidarity mechanisms.

Maternal family		Paternal family	
Mother	→ <i>Maman</i>	Mother	→ <i>Maman</i>
Father	→ <i>Papa</i>	Father	→ <i>Papa</i>
Elder/Younger sibling	→ <i>Yaya / Leki</i>	Elder/Younger sibling	→ <i>Yaya / Leki</i>
Aunt	→ <i>Maman leki/kolutu</i> (younger/older mother)	Aunt	→ <i>Tata mwasi</i> (the female father)
Uncle	→ <i>Noko</i>	Uncle	→ <i>Papa leki/kolutu</i>
Grandfather	→ <i>Koko mubali</i>	Grandfather	→ <i>Koko mubali</i>
Grandmother	→ <i>Koko mwasi</i>	Grandmother	→ <i>Koko mwasi</i>

FIGURE 11: Kinship terminology in Kinshasa

Sometimes non-kin members were included within an imaginary family through terms of “metaphoric kinship” (Rubbers 2009a: 638). Because of the loosening of solidarity mechanisms, relatives could no longer rely on each other, and people started to build emergency networks outside their own kinship. By addressing benefactors or friends through kinship terms, these people became incorporated into a network of obligations that favoured real-time cooperation and reciprocity disguised under familial ties (see also Rubbers 2009a). The use of kinship terms seems to have acquired not only moral and tactical meanings, but also political ones, because it created ties of patronage and clientelism among business partners.

<sup>118</sup> This terminological distinction is the same in both matrilineal and patrilineal clusters.



In order to show how the family unions and the other mechanisms introduced so far worked in concert in the creation of exo-households, in the next section I will describe the development of Joseph's and Julia's household over the last few years.

### **Joseph and Julia: an Exo-Household in Expansion**

Joseph Mutambu was the youngest of seven brothers and sisters and came from a Budu village in the Oriental Province (see map 1). At the age of twelve, he left his parental house to go to live with his older sister in a village 300 kilometres from home, near the city of Kisangani. When he was sixteen, following his religious vocation, he started attending the 'little seminary' (*petit seminaire*) and study the Bible in order to become a missionary. In addition to his religious training he also had other jobs. During his holidays from the seminary he would travel to the Bomili mine (Oriental Province, eastern Congo) with his older brother. Joseph described Bomili as a large mine that, at least until when he left for Kinshasa, was an artisanal extraction site, not controlled by big companies. While his older brother sold food and other fresh products such as meat and fish (*vivres frais*) to the workers of the mine, Joseph became involved in the diamond trade. He borrowed some money from his family and started to buy diamonds from the mine workers in order to resell them for a higher price at a private counter (*comptoir*<sup>119</sup>) in Kisangani. At that time, a raw one-carat diamond costing around \$250 at the mine, could be sold for \$300 in town. However, usually the workers provided him with lower quality diamonds, varying from 0.05 to 0.50 carats. From the counter in Kisangani, the diamonds would be sold on to foreign investors for an even higher price. Through this trade, Joseph managed to accumulate a large sum of money, also considering that the missionaries provided for food and accommodation.

Later, in 1998, he left the East to complete his studies at the main seminary in Kinshasa. However, the religious vocation and the missionaries disappointed Joseph greatly when they failed to take care of him when he became seriously ill. After twelve years with the missionaries, he decided to quit the seminary and start a new life in Kinshasa.

Joseph contacted Claudine Tshituka, the wife of one of his distant cousins, now deceased, and asked to stay with her until he managed to find a job and become

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<sup>119</sup> On the political economy of the *comptoir* see De Boeck 2000a, 2001.

independent. At the time Claudine owned two *parcelles* very close to each other in the neighbourhood of Barumbu. She lived in the first *parcelle* with her six children and two nephews. The second, smaller, *parcelle* was inhabited by a son of Joseph's paternal aunt, his wife, their three children, and his sister-in-law. It was decided that Joseph would stay with his cousin's family. They gave him a bed, and Joseph started to work on his independence by buying a plot of land alongside the Ngaliema riverbank, quite far from Claudine's households, but close to the communities to whom he used to preach. It was in that area that he met Julia Wembi, his girlfriend and the mother of his future child.

Julia Wembi was a 27-year old Bashi woman from the South-Kivu province, not far from Bukavu in the east of the country. She was born in Burundi, where her family had moved years before because of Julia's father's job. After her father's death in a public transport accident in 1993, and her mother's death in hospital from an unspecified lung disease in 1997, Julia was sent to live with her oldest sister, Aimée Wembi, and her husband, Alain Bilolo, in Bukavu. They treated her as their own daughter, and as the first born child of the family (*l'ainée de la famille*), because she was older than Aimée and Alain's six children. At the same time, Julia treated Alain as her father, and she addressed him with the epithet '*papa*' ('dad' in French). When Alain, who had connections within the government was sent to work in a public office in the capital during 2002, the family moved to Kimbwala, a neighbourhood not far from Pompage in the commune of Ngaliema. The *parcelle* was initially formed by Julia, Aimée and Alain, their six surviving children (one died within a month of birth) and one of Julia's cousins, Grace, who had a very troubled family history.

Grace was the child of one of Alain's brothers. Both Grace's parents had died from sickness and by the age of eleven she was left orphan. At the time of their death, Grace was sent to live with a well-off uncle in Kinshasa. However, the uncle's second wife was unhappy because her husband spent too much resources helping out his own kin. Grace was soon accused of witchcraft by the woman who tried to get rid of her in order to direct the (economic) attention of her husband towards her own children. This was the beginning of Grace's journey between Pentecostal churches and relatives' households in Kinshasa. At the time of my fieldwork she fluctuated between the homes of her paternal aunt and two brothers, one of whom is Alain Bilolo, who denied all witchcraft accusations against her.

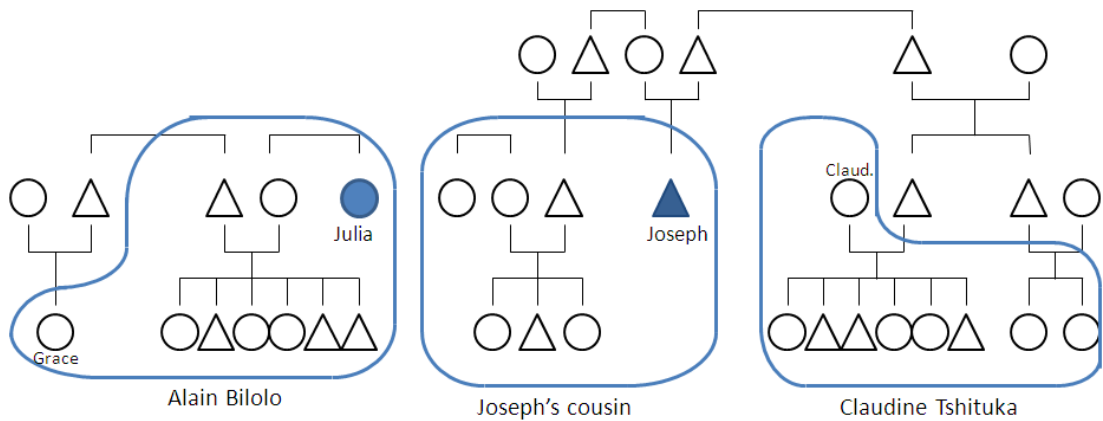


FIGURE 12: Julia, Joseph and their respective households, August 2008

Let us go back to Julia. Julia and Joseph started to see each other in 2008. Actually, Joseph became acquainted to Julia, her ‘father’ Alain and their kin well prior to this, through the pastoral work (*la pastorale*) he did at Kimbwala’s parish. At the time, Joseph was also Alain’s confessor. But this was a few years earlier. Julia found out she was pregnant during the summer 2008 but hid it for many months in fear of her family’s reactions. When she could not hide it anymore, she had to tell the family who immediately contacted Joseph. It was a real surprise for Alain, who would never have thought that his former confessor would impregnate his child. After a long discussion, it was decided that Julia would stay within Joseph’s household until she gave birth. At the time, Joseph still lived in the *parcelle* of his distant cousin. However, as Claudine was Joseph’s closest relative in town, it was decided that Julia would stay in her *parcelle*, a few blocks away.

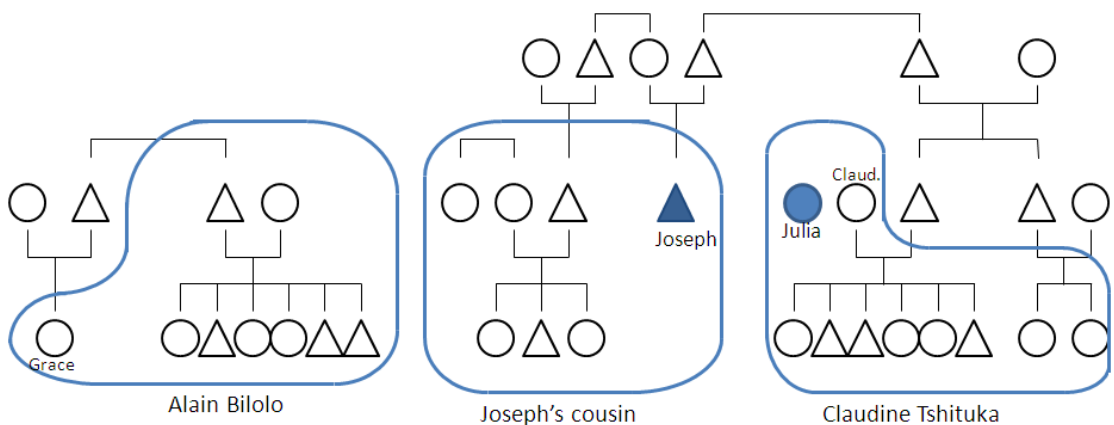


FIGURE 13: During the last months of Julia’s pregnancy, December 2008 - March 2009

After the birth of their son, Joseph did not have a place of his own in which he could welcome Julia and the baby. Julia thus returned to her family with the child, which increased the number of people in papa Alain's household to eleven. Although Julia had returned to her family, Joseph was expected to participate towards the child's upkeep. He would provide them with transport fees to visit him, money for hospital and also for baby care. Joseph could easily afford to pay these expenses, from the money he had accumulated during the diamond trade. However, Joseph still had to pay for Julia's bridewealth, which meant that officially Alain still had the power to make decisions concerning Julia and the baby. Joseph was not yet ready to get officially married to Julia as he lacked accommodation and a regular income. He was not ready to invest money in the bridewealth either, because he was busy building a house.

The diamond trade had brought Joseph quite a large amount of money. He had spent \$4,500 to buy the lot in the Ngaliema riverbanks, and he had started to invest the remaining \$12,000 in building the house. According to his calculation, he could then re-sell the *parcelle* for at least \$30,000. Since the beginning of the construction, Joseph would spend every day in the Ngaliema commune, on the other side of town. Although he possessed a large sum of money, Joseph did not trust banks: their charges were too high and with the economic situation of the country he feared he would lose all his money in one way or another. Rather, he preferred to hide all the cash in a suitcase in his cousin's home.

One evening, after he had returned from the construction site, he opened the suitcase and almost fainted when he saw that of the \$12,000, only \$400 was left. Joseph panicked and searched for his cousin, but he was not to be found. He approached his cousin's wife and asked for explanations. The woman said that her husband had left for the east of the country with Joseph's money. There, he was positive that with this capital he could start a fruitful business as a diamond dealer or as a counter. "Joseph, do not worry, he will pay you back entirely", the woman said. Joseph was furious. Several meetings were held among the family, but none of the family members took responsibility for the cousin's behaviour. It was pointless to go to the police, because Joseph lacked proof, and would need money to bribe the police to conduct an inquiry. After a while, the whole family started to avoid speaking about it, as none of them had money to reimburse Joseph for his loss.

Scandalised by his own family's behaviour, Joseph left his cousin's place and was invited to stay with another distant cousin. He did not feel at ease there either.

After twelve years in the seminary and the recent scam by his family, he desired freedom from his familial network. After a few days, he politely thanked the cousin and decided to look for his own place to live. With the \$400 left in the suitcase, he paid the deposit for a small *parcelle* in Kinsuka, along the Congo riverbanks in Ngaliema, far away from his family's neighbourhood and closer to the family of his girlfriend, Julia.

Joseph started a small business with his sister who lived in the Oriental Province. He would purchase cheap clothes at the central market in Kinshasa and send them by plane to Isiro, a small town of roughly 180,000 inhabitants. The sister would then resell them at a higher price. However, the quality of life, inflation and economic crisis made it impossible for Joseph to rebuild his capital. He could not go back to the East, where the rest of his enlarged family lived. He did not want to leave his girlfriend and their newborn child, and he did not have the money to take them with him and start a new life there. Following an emergency, Joseph's sister could no longer provide him with his share from the sale of the clothes in Kisangani. Joseph was left without funds and any viable form of income earning.

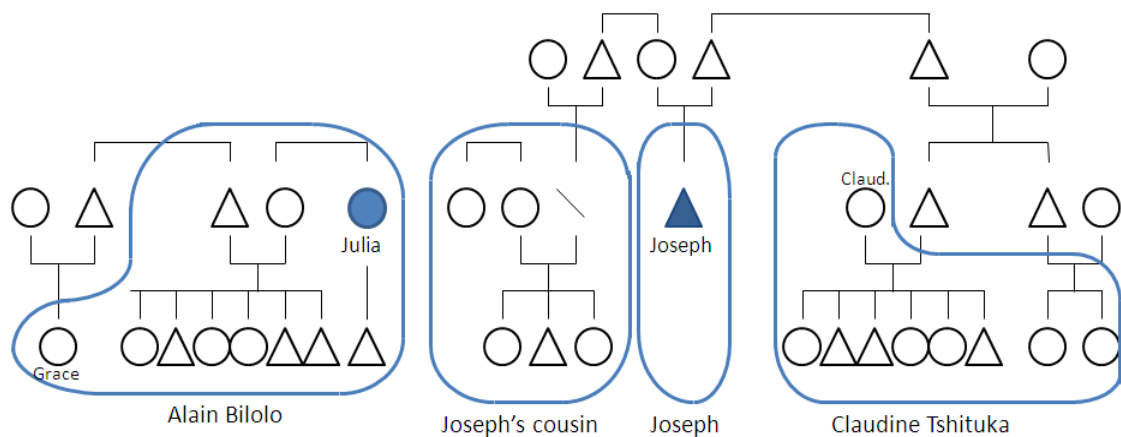


FIGURE 14: After Julia's childbirth, April 2009

It is at this point that I entered the scene. When I started to arrange to live in Kinshasa with Joseph over the phone, he already lived by himself in the commune of Kinsuka, not far from Julia's family's household. Alain Bilolo allowed Julia to live with Joseph and me in the *parcelle* in Maman Yemo. He saw this move as a good opportunity for Julia to build useful contacts in the white persons (*mindele*) community. Although I paid almost all of Julia and the child's expenses during my stay, I was always called *bambina* (Italian for child) by Joseph and Julia, a nickname I had been

given during my previous period of fieldwork in 2007<sup>120</sup>. My role within the family became even more ambiguous when Alain Bilolo started to call me “my child” (*mwana na ngai*) and I started to call Alain’s brother ‘my uncle’ (*papa kolutu*). Even if I was not affiliated to their family through marriage, I became part of Julia’s household in a very particular way. They, but not other members of their enlarged family, considered me part of their family.

While Julia’s family were addressing me in kinship terms, there was some concern over Joseph and his role within the family. In fact, during all the time that Julia lived with us, Joseph had not officialised their union yet. This meant that Joseph had ‘stolen’ both Julia and the baby from Alain, without giving anything in return. Finally, eight months after we moved in together, thanks to a credit-system between me and Joseph, he managed to pay a little-bridewealth to Julia’s family, putting himself in a patron-client relationship with the elders of her family, who are still waiting for the final bridewealth now that I am writing.

Sometime after the little-bridewealth payment, one of Alain’s children moved in with us. Michel Bilolo, who was twelve-years old, became responsible for many of the house chores and for looking after Julia’s baby whilst she was at university. Not only did he work in the house, but he was also a student at one of the secondary schools in the neighbourhood. While we provided Michel with food and accommodation, Alain paid for his school fees. Michel became part of our household, and he soon started to call me *bambina* like the rest of the family.

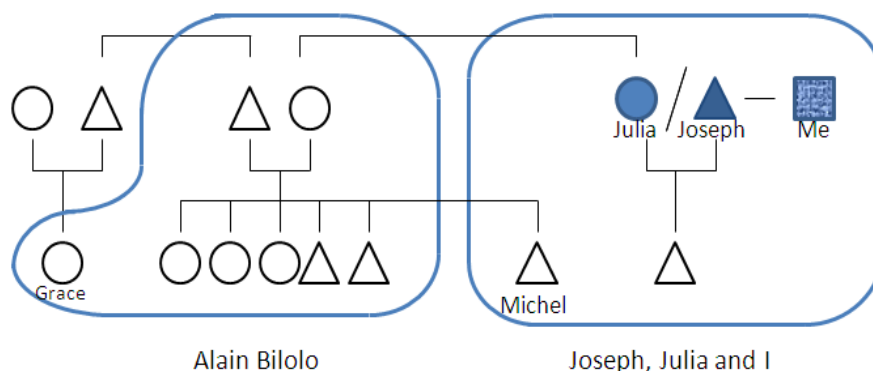


FIGURE 15: After my arrival, January 2010

<sup>120</sup> Yes, I was the main source of income, but my ignorance of the Congolese customs and language confined me to the position of child. This might also be related to the gender tensions described regarding the Mario phenomenon.

During my stay in Kinshasa, tensions arose between Alain Bilolo and his oldest son, nineteen-year-old Wilson. For a few months Wilson had refused to go to school. He would rather spend the whole day with his friends in the neighbourhood. Everything became clear when a young neighbour informed Alain that Wilson was having an affair with his mother. Apparently, his mother would give Wilson money to buy new clothes, and also some extra cash, in exchange for sex. Wilson had become a young Mario. This is why Alain decided to send him abroad to study.

In the meantime, Alain's oldest daughter got married at the age of eighteen. After a formal introduction (*presentation*), Alain's prospective son-in-law paid a little-bridewealth to legitimise their union, and promised to pay full bridewealth in the near future. The girl went to live in the man's household and the two had a baby girl. However, tensions soon arose between the girl and the mother-in-law, who described her as lazy and useless at housework. After less than a year, the girl was sent back to papa Alain's house with the baby, and the marriage broke up. In the meantime, papa Alain's wife, Aimée, had another baby, which brought the number of their offspring to seven. By the time I left Kinshasa, the household comprised Alain and his wife Aimée, their seven children, their newborn grand-daughter and Grace.

After my departure, Julia, Joseph and the child could not return to their previous places of residence. Now that Joseph had paid the pre-bridewealth, he was responsible for Julia and the baby. Allowing them to go back to Alain's would have meant passing him all the rights over them, hence sanctioning the conclusion of the alliance with Julia. Moreover, Julia was pregnant with her second child (who unfortunately did not survive the birth), which made her even more dependent on Joseph, who was supposed to assist her during the months of pregnancy. This is why Joseph, Julia and the baby moved together into the home Joseph was constructing whilst his cousin robbed him. By the time of my departure, again thanks to our credit-system, the skeleton of the house was built. Michel moved with them as well, and while it was still Alain who was in charge of Michel's school fees (*minerval*), Joseph also made occasional contributions for his studies.

A few months later, Joseph's older sister in Kisangani sent her daughter to live in Joseph's place. The girl was meant to start studying Medicine at the University of Kinshasa (UNIKIN) next September. In this case, Joseph's sister paid her daughter's university fees, while Joseph provided with food and accommodation. In June 2012, Joseph's and Julia's second child was born, contributing to the enlargement of Joseph's

household. In less than two years, Joseph passed from living alone to becoming the head of a six-person household.

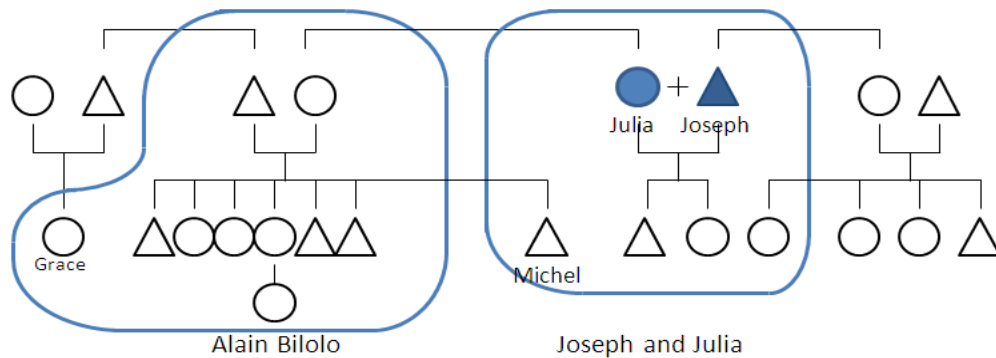


FIGURE 16: One year after my departure, June 2012

One year after Joseph's cousin left with the stolen money, news started to circulate. Soon after his arrival in the East, the man had impregnated a 14-year old girl. The girl's family decided not to denounce him on the condition that he would maintain both the girl and her future child, and that he would pay a bridewealth as soon as possible. The man accepted, but by the time the child was born, he had spent all the money, supposedly on going out to bars and *boîtes* (clubs). The girl's family denounced him, and the man was taken to prison. However, he managed to escape soon after, by bribery according to rumours, and by the time of my fieldwork he was wanted by the police. According to the man's wife in Kinshasa, no one knew where he was, although some people within Julia's family believed the story to be fictitious, in order to prevent Joseph from asking for the money he had lost.

This account of the development of Joseph and Julia's enlarged families gives us an idea of the *mobulu* to which households in Kinshasa were exposed on a daily basis. Tensions between family members, and the difficult economic and living conditions made households extremely unstable and fluid. Although Julia's family was an example of a young exo-household, devoid of many intricacies between elders and young people<sup>121</sup>, it enables us to observe different mechanisms of household expansion – with all the tensions they entail.

<sup>121</sup> I trace this back to two main reasons: the first is the presence of both the head of the household and his first and only wife. This has allowed them to raise their children and be sure that they have been educated according to the parent's standards. The situation would be completely different if one of the two parents were missing, as it would be difficult to maintain all of the children in the



Because Joseph had not paid bridewealth for Julia and the baby, his decision to take Julia to live with him in Maman Yemo created tension with Julia's family, which he had to placate through a small *a-posteriori* payment. Wilson's relationship with his friend's mother jeopardised his relationship with his parents, and also with his friend, creating tensions within and outside the household. At the same time, the failed marriage of Julia's second sister might also stir discontent, because the child born out of wedlock embodied economic obligations between the two families. Tensions could rise in the future over who should take care of the child and who should pay for his expenses (such as schooling or health care), especially if Alain's household is going through a period of hardship.

My arrival in Kinshasa altered the equilibrium between households. By calling me "my child", Alain and his brother sought to pull me into a network of customary obligations and to acknowledge them as household elders. For example, on more than one occasion Alain joked that when I married he would expect bridewealth from my suitor. On another occasion Joseph made similar comments about my suitor paying the bridewealth to him. This shows the fluidity of this strategic kinship system, according to which kinship terms could be used by several social actors to fit different agendas.

The case of Joseph and Julia's household also demonstrates contestation about the notion of African solidarity. The case of Grace, who was first reluctantly accepted in his uncle's household and later cast out as a witch, shows the difficulties of maintaining familial solidarity in the precarious context of Kinshasa.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have shown how the *Kinois*, both cadets and elders, were able to respond dynamically to the hardship of society – the elders by increasing the bridewealth, the youngsters by engaging in virtually bridewealth-free forms of union. The fluidity of exo-households resulted from conflicting relations between generations as well as between genders. Women and young people were "social cadets" (Bayart 1985, 1992 – see also chapter 1) who found in shortened marriages a way to free

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same household for economic reasons, and some of them may be treated like Grace in the past. I have already pointed out that new partners do not generally approve of children born from previous relationships. The second reason why the family has not collapsed yet is because three of the children have not reached the age of puberty and marriage, which contains the possibilities of explosion of the family.

themselves from the grip of the elders, whom they saw as blocking their aspirations through customary practices.

The high price of the bridewealth can be seen as one of the strategies through which the elders resisted young people's emancipation. In this way, the elders made the boundary between cadets and adults more difficult to cross, in an attempt to preserve their gerontocratic authority. At the same time, by agreeing to shortened marriages, elders officialised the relationship of dependence between the young couple and themselves. In fact, this meant that young couples started their relationship in debt.

African solidarity, like the notion of 'the village', was an ideological construction rather than a reality. Since the 1930s, this notion has helped to create an illusionary return to the extended family, as a form of resistance to the nuclear family imposed by the colonialists. However, this notion seemed to work poorly in the social context of Kinshasa. The family became an unstable and precarious nexus, marked by regular tensions and reluctant solidarity which increased *mobulu* in the familial circle and more broadly in society.

The mobility of family members and the instability of the household became almost a necessity, if people were to survive the demands of everyday hardship. Thus, the mobility of young people in the informal economy, and the continuous search for different partners, can be considered as coping strategies which resulted from the *mobulu* within the family. From this point of view, the *mobulu* which interested the household was not simply a generator of intergenerational tensions, but rather a catalyst for new forms of socialisation, unions and independency among many young men and women.

- CHAPTER SEVEN -

***KINDOKI, THE INVISIBLE VIOLENCE OF WITCHCRAFT***

This chapter explores accusations of witchcraft (*kindoki*) in Kinshasa, and how such accusations are the result of multiple factors at play at the level of everyday life. Accusations of witchcraft were always born at the family and household level, and were the result of the *mobulu* of the domestic environment, as analysed in the previous chapter. This *mobulu*, in turn, had roots in the structural violence of the state, which affected everyday life through economic constraints and deprivation.

Changes in the household composition and in the hierarchy of power within the family resulted in family members accusing each other of witchcraft deeds in the aftermath of misfortunes or deaths striking the family. Often it was children, who found themselves in between exo-households and consequently in between domestic tensions, who were accused of being witches. As such, the *mobulu* of economic hardship and domestic tensions at the material level have found expression in *mobulu* at the invisible, mystical level. At the same time, accusations of witchcraft against family members further increased tensions within families. As a result, people accused of witchcraft were often isolated from the family, or, in the case of children, expelled from exo-households. Thus, while the *mobulu* of the state resulted in tensions at the everyday level and witchcraft accusations, the invisible *mobulu* of witchcraft in turn created other manifestations of *mobulu* in everyday life.

While adults accused of witchcraft were usually able to defend themselves, or could provide for their own needs in case of isolation by the family, accusations of witchcraft against children put them in an increasingly liminal position within the family. Children suspected of being witches were mistreated and tortured at home, or taken to Pentecostal church, where the pastor usually acknowledged their guilt and forced them to undergo exorcism sessions (often involving laxatives or other medicines to expel witchcraft)<sup>122</sup>. Other times children were merely abandoned on the street, as the family was too scared of their evil powers to wait for exorcism to have effect. In several cases, it was children who decided spontaneously to quit their households or escape from church, tired of the psycho-physical maltreatments they had to bear. For

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<sup>122</sup> Despite the harsh conditions to which these children were exposed, De Boeck (2005a) praised the role of Pentecostal pastors in getting children out of the abusive familial context, and in allowing their reinsertion within the fabric of the family, once the child has undergone a successful exorcism.

many of these children, living conditions on the street were better than at home, where they were left without food for days and bullied by other family members. Many children thus preferred the freedom of the streets of Kinshasa, where they had a greater likelihood of obtaining food, western commodities and of making friends.

Once on the street, witch-children became *shagues*<sup>123</sup> (or *bashegue*), the street-children of Kinshasa. There, they often organised themselves in stables (*écuries*) who competed against each other over the control of specific territories<sup>124</sup>. Their activities shifted between legality and illegality, and they lived in spots that they created and domesticated between buildings, at the edge of the infrastructure of the city (Geenen 2009). Recent estimates say that in Kinshasa there were between 20,000 and 50,000 street children (Human Rights Watch 2006; De Boeck 2009), many of whom were abandoned or left home following accusations of *kindoki*.

With this chapter I will contribute to the literature on *kindoki* in Kinshasa, which has in De Boeck (2005a; 2009; De Boeck & Plissart 2004) its main exponent. By analysing his work and my fieldwork data, I will elucidate some mechanisms of *kindoki* which I believe require more attention. Whereas De Boeck (*Ibid*) describes *kindoki* accusations as a bilateral process between children and the elders, I argue that children are considered as the intermediaries of the witchcraft between youngsters and elders, rather than first actors. Witchcraft accusations are a process which involves three sets of actors rather than two (see fig. 17). Furthermore, the role of children as intermediaries fits well into the discourse of children as liminal actors within the exo-household.

With the notion of the child as intermediary, I wish to contribute to the anthropology of childhood in Africa by analysing how a particular Western notion of the Child has influenced ideas of childhood in Kinshasa. Children in Kinshasa were depicted as innocent human beings in need of the care of family and school, who could easily be manipulated by external actors or environments and become dangerous – in this case, through *kindoki*. However, the image of the child as innocent and in need of

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<sup>123</sup> The term '*shague*' can derive from two different sources. On the one hand, the word was born when Kabila entered Kinshasa in 1997 with his *kadogos* (child soldiers), who were seen as little Che Guevaras. On the second, the word is an abbreviation from Shengen, where the Shengen agreement was signed in 1985. People can freely travel around Europe as well as the *shagues* can 'freely' access all the resources of Kinshasa without restraints (De Boeck 2006; De Boeck & Plissart 2004).

<sup>124</sup> These groups were however distinct from the *kulunas*. *Shagues* stables arose as a means of survival, while *kulunas* stables arose as a means of competition and aggression.

care as it was perpetrated by Western institutions and most of the *Kinois*, clashed with reality, as children often took advantage of such image and managed to empower themselves in their everyday life.

I will begin this chapter with a brief exploration of existing academic readings of *kindoki* and witch-children, with a view to situating my own arguments within this field. Later, I will explore the concept of the child as intermediary of witchcraft accusation, rather than a primary actor in witchcraft deeds. Children were believed to be caught involuntarily into the world of witchcraft, their naivety exploited by witches who seduced them with a gift of food. This will lead us to the next section. By exploring old and new trends in the scholarship on childhood, I will explain how this idea of the child as 'naive' and 'unconscious', to use the words of the *Kinois*, came from a Western idea of childhood promulgated by missionaries and humanitarian organisations in Kinshasa.

Although the effects of witchcraft in Kinshasa were mainly visible through the increasing number of street-children, it is worth noting that also adults were accused of witchcraft. I shall then offer an overview of witchcraft accusations among members of the same family, analysing accusations which depicted both children and elders of the family as witches. In particular, I aim at showing the intergenerational tensions which affected families and exo-households in Kinshasa and which resulted in witchcraft accusations through a series of example from my fieldwork.

Whereas in the past, accusations of witchcraft were often cast out against family members, in Kinshasa today also strangers can be accused of witchcraft. Often, these strangers took the shape of women who worked in the market, believed to having bewitched some children so that the latter could harm their relatives on behalf of the witch. In this next section then, I explain the tensions underlying the new independence of women in society, which resulted in witchcraft accusations indirectly against them.

Although children were considered innocent and in need of care, in the streets children were able to exploiting the channels of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for their own *débrouille* activities, which often worked out of legality. Thus, NGOs became victims of the astuteness and resourcefulness of the witch-children in coping with adverse situations. Children who were the first victims of the *mobulu* within family circles, were able to turn such *mobulu* upside down, exploiting their liminal position to create new coping mechanisms and living strategies.

I conclude the chapter with an analysis of the link between witchcraft and intimacy, and how an understanding of witchcraft mechanisms can help us understand the link between material and invisible *mobulu* on one hand, and structural and everyday *mobulu* on the other.

### **Witch-children: Intermediaries of Witchcraft**

The phenomenon of the witch-children was so overwhelming throughout the city, that many works have been dedicated to it, both in the academia and in the field of the arts: documentaries, songs, paintings and theatrical operas were all centred on the ‘witch-children’ (*bana-bandoki*) of Kinshasa. In the academia, De Boeck (2005a; 2009; De Boeck & Plissart 2004) devoted several of his works to the phenomenon. De Boeck traced the phenomenon of the witch-children to some key factors. The first is the “crisis of the gift” which has deeply affected relationship and the whole fabric of society in Kinshasa. Because of the hardship of everyday life, giving has lost its bounding properties. In a context in which people struggle to earn a living, giving is no longer considered a spontaneous activity, but rather a calculated and dangerous act which embroils the recipient in a circle of debt and witchcraft. Due to their innocence and malleability, it is believed that children are not able to abide by the new ‘law’ prohibiting the acceptance of gifts. Accordingly, they are the first targets to be accused of witchcraft.

This phenomenon has been largely influenced by Pentecostal and healing churches, which stress how “one should earn a living and work ‘by the sweat of *his* brow’” (De Boeck 2005a:206). The mechanisms of exchange and reciprocity, which have always underpinned social relationships, have been substituted with an individualistic mentality, according to which everybody should gain wealth by his own work. A consequence of this change has been that youth often refuse to share their wealth within the family. Traditional solidarities are thus substituted with an individualistic logic. Moreover, predicating the bible passage of Matthew 7:7, “ask and it will be given to you”, they are supporting the calculated act of giving (De Boeck 2005a), and it is exactly this element that is stressed in witchcraft accusations. In fact, it is worth remembering that witchcraft is passed through a gift of food. People believe witches trap their victims in a debt obligation by giving them something to eat and asking their relatives in exchange for it.

The second main cause for the rise of accusations of witchcraft is the erosion of familial solidarity and tensions within the familial circle. De Boeck (2005a, De Boeck & Plissart 2004) explains that the urban milieu has witnessed changes in the landscape of the family and lineage, which put children in a very liminal condition within the family. Children born from ‘short-circuit’ marriages or polygamous relationships were often “‘displaced’ within the physical and mental maps that constituted the landscape of kinship in the city” (De Boeck 2009: 136). Yet, at the same time, he highlights that children and young people have been playing an increasing central role in the urban landscape of Kinshasa (De Boeck 2000b, 2005a). Especially in the economic field, De Boeck says, children and young people have demonstrated their ability to navigate the informal sector and profiting from it, imposing themselves as the main bread-winner in many households.

De Boeck (*Ibid*) makes the example of the ‘children of Lunda’ (*Bana Lunda* in Lingala), men and women who migrated to the diamond-rich region of Lunda Norte in Angola in order to try their luck as informal diamond-dealers. Many of them came back to Kinshasa with a capital which surpassed greatly that of their parents, creating tensions between generations which resulted in witchcraft accusations. While the elders would accuse the youngsters because of their dangerousness, their power to bypass rules and enrich themselves in the face of the economic hardship, children, once they were accused of witchcraft, “used their status of ‘witch’ to settle with some members of their families or, more generally, to evade familial control and create their own ‘freedom’” (De Boeck 2000b: 50, my translation). To put it with De Boeck (2009), children “[were] not only vulnerable and passive victims, *subjected* to, or ‘made and broken’, by the contexts in which they live, but they [were] also active *subjects*, ‘makers and breakers’, of that reality” (p. 140). Young people found in Kinshasa – particularly on its streets – a place to “create spaces of independence for themselves” (De Boeck 2005a:204). De Boeck (*Ibid*) thus suggests that witchcraft accusations against children arose from tensions between the elders and such children who evaded hierarchical rules and created alternative forms of sociality and authority.

During my fieldwork, I had the chance to analyse in depth the phenomenon of witchcraft accusations. I agree with De Boeck (2000b, 2004, 2005a) when he argues that witchcraft accusations arose from tensions between family members of different generations. According to my data, many young people accused the elders of trying to punish their arrogance through witchcraft, while elders accused the youngsters of trying

to usurp their power by killing them in the world of witchcraft. Other times, accusations of *kindoki* took place between the two extended families of a young couple who married through shortened union. These unions often create tensions and debts, which often resulted in witchcraft accusations. Thus, if death or misfortune took place in the man's family, they would accuse some members of the woman's family of trying to kill them through witchcraft; and vice versa, misfortunes and death in the woman's family was often traced back to witchcraft deeds by members of the man's family.

However, I find myself disagreeing with De Boeck in some aspects of witchcraft accusations. De Boeck depicts accusations of witchcraft as a bilateral process between children and their elders. De Boeck (2009: 141) described children and youngsters as "increasingly defy the authority of parents, elders, preachers and politicians", as makers of new phenomena and new power hierarchies within society. However, many of the children accused of witchcraft I saw on the streets and in the churches in fact were as young as three years old, while the majority were between four and twelve years old. I think we need to re-read the phenomenon of the witch-children taking into consideration the young age of these children. When children as young as three or four are accused of witchcraft, they are put into a position of danger rather than empowerment, and in the majority of cases, are forced to leave their homes in order to escape abuse, rather than to create spaces of independence spontaneously. Many of the street children I had the chance to meet cried while remembering their relatives and parents, and they admitted that if they could they would want to go back with their families. However, the situation at home was unbearable for them, and they were left to find other ways to make do in the streets of Kinshasa.

I argue that children, rather than being the main actors of witchcraft accusations against the elders, were the reluctant intermediaries of the witchcraft of their young parents against their elders, or between members of their mothers' and their fathers' families. Children who found themselves in between families and in between households, were considered to be the intermediaries of witchcraft accusations, delivering death through witchcraft from one family member to another. So for example, grandparents might accuse their grandchildren of trying to kill them on behalf of their children and their partners, while young men and women accused their children of trying to kill them on behalf of their parents or parents-in-law. *Kindoki* accusations were very fluid, and they could involve potentially any member of the family with whom the victim had some issue. However, almost always they implicated members of



different generations, or members of different exo-families. Thus for example, children who, after their parents' divorce, lived with their father and the step-mother were often accused of taking with them the witchcraft of their mother's family. Thus the step-mother would accuse the child of trying to kill her on behalf of the child's mother, who was jealous of the new partner of her ex-husband.

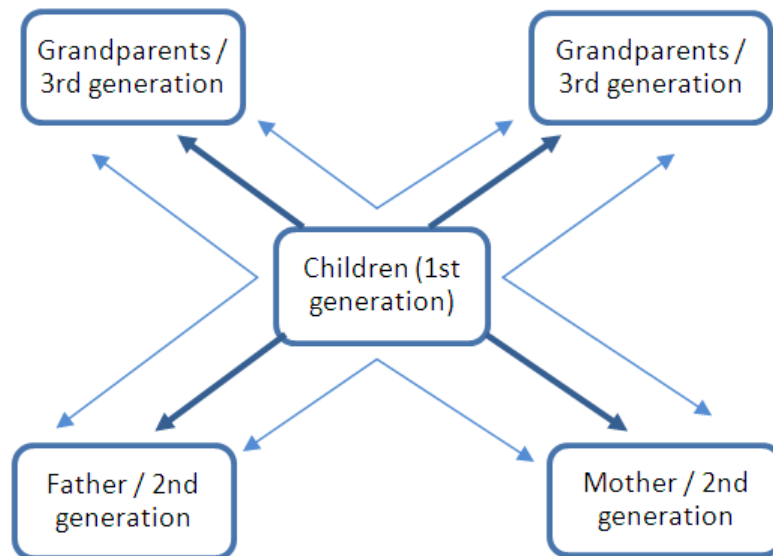


FIGURE 17: Children as intermediaries of witchcraft accusations between generations and between exo-households.

Witchcraft accusations, rather than being a bilateral process between young people (1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> generation) against their elders (3<sup>rd</sup> generation) as illustrated by De Boeck, was a process between three distinct sets of actors. Children found themselves at the intersection of familial tensions, which materialised in accusations of *kindoki* against them.

The role of children as intermediaries, rather than direct casters of witchcraft accusations, demands a repositioning of the witch-children within the anthropology of childhood. I argue that we need to analyse how the *Kinois*' idea of the child as liminal and at the mercy of the will of adults was influenced by a Western notion of the child as innocent and in danger, promulgated by Christian teachings and Western education in Kinshasa. Discriminated and abused children were believed to be easily recruited in the world of witchcraft. According to the words of many *Kinois*, adult witches found it more difficult to recruit other adults, whilst they could easily convince children to

sacrifice relatives to witches covens. Also in this case, the *mobulu* of witchcraft accusations against children was influenced by mechanisms at the structural level of the state, by globalisation and western cultural constructions.

At the same time, the *Kinois* acknowledged that children were dangerous because of their liminal position within the family and their supposed vulnerability. Following economic hardship and the lack of employment, women, who were considered as the carers of children *par excellence*, were obliged to exit the space of the house and take the streets. As a result, children were often left home alone, without anything to eat and often mistreated by other members of the household. This is why the *Kinois* believed it difficult for children to refuse the deal of the witch, who offered children wellness, wealth and power in the world of witchcraft. Thus, although children were initially bewitched against their will, they were believed to be lured to stay into the world of witchcraft. According to the *Kinois*, very few had the moral awareness to go against the evil of witches and quit *kindoki*. The more victims children were believed to kill in the world of witchcraft, the more wealth they accumulated, in contrast with their precarious living conditions within their households. By accusing mistreated children of witchcraft, adults expressed their guilt for not managing to live up expectations of caregivers and providers.

In the next section, I will analyse the latest trends in the anthropology of childhood, in order to situate the phenomenon of the witch-children within the literature. This will provide the reader with the tools necessary to understand why children as young as three were accused of witchcraft, and why they were depicted as naive and ‘unconscious’.

### **Vulnerable yet Dangerous: Contextualising Witch-Children in Childhood Studies**

Parents and carers in Kinshasa considered children to be dependents, morally unaware, naive and, as such, at risk. Children were often depicted as ‘unconscious’ (*inconsciente* in French) persons that still had to develop their consciousness and their own morality. Adults in Kinshasa located children as being at an age of passiveness and unconsciousness, as opposed to adults, who embodied the notion of free will and consciousness. In other words, most adults described children as “something in the process of becoming rather than being” (James 1993).

The vision of childhood as an age of incompleteness, of a stage of life in preparation for adulthood is a Eurocentric one. It emanates from a Western and middle-class idea of childhood, according to which the social transformation from child to adult follows directly from physical growth. The child, as a universalised social category, was depicted as a White, middle class boy who was developmentally immature, and needed to be dependent and have his life directed until he was ready to take charge (Thomas 2000). The child was considered as the passive recipient of the education promulgated by the family and the school, defined as the appropriate agents for the socialisation of children. To put it with De Boeck and Honwana (2005: 3), this idea of the child has “been universalised in such a way that youngsters who do not follow this path are considered either to be at risk or to pose a risk to society”. Similarly, Boyden (1990: 190) writes that: “The fear was that childhood innocence if not properly directed and trained at home and in school could give way to riotous and immoral behaviour”.

The notion of children as passive and in need of protection has been superseded in the last two decades by studies on childhood which depict children as *per se* social actors who “are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the society in which they live” (Jenks 2009: 94). Today, childhood is defined as a social and cultural construction (Ariés 1962; James, Jenks & Prout 1998; Jenks 1996), and children must be considered “worthy of studying in their own right, and not just in respect to their social construction by adults” (James & Prout 1990: 4). To put it with James and Prout:

The immaturity of children is a biological fact of life but the ways in which this immaturity is understood and made meaningful is a fact of culture (see La Fontaine, 1979). It is these ‘facts of culture’ which may vary and which can be said to make of childhood a social institution (1990: 7).

As childhood is a social construction, then it can be constructed, de-constructed and re-constructed, in order to keep pace with social changes.

Anthropological studies of childhood in the last decade have focused the attention on the role of children as powerful actors in different social context, as breakers of impositions and makers of society (De Boeck & Honwana 2005), rather than mere recipients of the care and education of adults. Children have demonstrated their ability to turn adverse situations in their favour, especially in places in which they

were normally considered to be “out of place”, such as the street (De Boeck 2005a; Hecht 1998; Ennew 1994) or at war, in the case of child-soldiers (see Honwana 2005; Richards 1996; Jourdan 2004, 2010).

Writing about the social context of Kinshasa, De Boeck (2000b) affirms that:

In the social context of Subsaharan Africa [...] children who benefit from the protection offered in the West by the parents, the school and the state, are rare. In the African urban context, the local socio-cultural perception of childhood differs radically from the ‘cultural politics of childhood’ practiced in the West (p.45, my translation from French).

However, I believe that in Kinshasa, the notion of the child has been deeply influenced by the model promulgated by Western actors, like the colonial government, the missionaries and, in the last decades, international and non-governmental organisations. I find myself agreeing with Boyden (1990) who explains how the notion of the World Child has been lately exported to the Third World by policy makers and humanitarian agencies alike. Honwana (2005) as well highlights how international humanitarian law has depicted children as “passive recipients of experience who need to be segregated from the harsh realities of the adult world, and to be protected from social danger” (p. 34). Children must be kept away from the world of the street, where they can be in danger – or become a potential threat to society. Boyden (1990: 193) argues that although the idea of the street as dangerous was born in northern Europe, “it is now generally accepted well beyond the frontiers of Europe that street life is morally polluting for the young. And in most countries convention holds that street children are both the most deprived and the most depraved members of society”. This certainty arose hand in hand with another stereotype exported from industrialised countries to the global South, which is the perception of children as young, innocent victims (*Ibid*). Children who find themselves outside of school education, and not cared for by their parents, are considered both in danger and dangerous.

I argue that the concept of the child in the *Kinois*’ imaginary has been influenced by the notion of the child brought by Western education and Christian teachings. Since colonial time, the missionaries have promulgated an idea of the nuclear family composed by a working father, and a mother who takes care of the education of their children (see Hunt 1990, 1991). The child was thus to be reared and educated by the parents. This picture looks very unrealistic in contemporary Kinshasa,

where children are raised up in exo-households in which their parents rarely figure. However, despite that, this Western image of the child has taken root strongly in the social context of Kinshasa. In the eyes of the *Kinois*, going to school and being carefully brought up has become synonym with good child. This was also influenced by many humanitarian organisations, which highlighted the positive character of scholastic education for children – as opposed to early marriage and different forms of exploitation. According to the *Kinois* I interviewed, being able to send their children to school, thus depriving the family of a valuable source of labor, was considered a means of social prestige. Furthermore, as explained in chapter 6, formal education was considered the key to access western commodities through the salaried market. Children who went to school embodied the hope of a better life for their families. Educated children were a source of pride and were taken in more consideration than their siblings and peers who did not go to school.

On the contrary, spending too much time on the street was perceived by many *Kinois* I interviewed as dangerous and shameful for children. In Kinshasa, children who roamed in the streets rather than going to school were a disgrace in the eyes of their parents. Moreover, because of their young age and lack of education, these children were believed to be easily lured into witchcraft dealings. This made children who roamed in the streets a potential source of danger for their families. On this subject, a woman whom I interviewed at a market, pointing at children sleeping in some corner on the street, exclaimed: “If you came to Kinshasa to look for witchcraft, then you’ve found it. Look at all those children, they are all witches! They spend all their days on the street, how could they not be?”

In the Congolese imaginary, the two stereotypes – of the deviant child and of the innocent child victim – came to coexist. This fusion has taken root among the population also thanks to the hundreds of Pentecostal churches which dot Kinshasa. Indeed, Pentecostal pastors have extrapolated and re-contextualised some Christian teachings in their churches. Children were described as not only being in need of protection from the hazards of everyday life and the dangers of the street, as affirmed by the missionaries; but in the animist context of Pentecostal churches, they also needed protection from the misdeeds of witches, who tried to some family members by bewitching their children. During public ceremonies in church, pastors obliged children as young as three to confess who bewitched them through a gift of food, and to admit their nocturnal flights and their banquets with human meat. In Pentecostal churches,

children became the symbol of the moral degradation of the city, their innocence turned into a diabolic weapon which could destroy entire families. Children were both victims and perpetrators of *mobulu* through witchcraft.

In their conversations with me, pastors as well as other adults defined children as ‘unconscious’, or else ‘subconscious’. This shows the influence of Western concepts in the imaginary of the *Kinois*. These terms, which were circulated during social science courses in universities and high schools, have been appropriated by the population and have taken root deeply in the vocabulary and the imaginary of the *Kinois*. At the same time they have been appropriated by many pastors, who claimed to better explain *kindoki* through the modern and appealing language of modernity, as I am about to explain.

The unconscious nature of children was stressed by the words of many *Kinois* whom I interviewed. In the next example, a pastor of the Pentecostal church Siloam Miracle explained to me why children had an incomplete nature. According to him:

The [bewitched] child will be simply submitted to the orders of that one who gave him witchcraft, “go and do this”...So that he can always hold [the victim of witchcraft] back. But the child does not know that he’s doing something wrong. It is the age of unconsciousness.

Not only were children believed to be unaware of what is good and what is evil, but they were also seen as weak and passive to the will of adults. This emerged also during a conversation between pastor Serge Manuana of the church Spiritual Combat, my friend Joseph and myself:

Silvia: Why are children bewitched rather than adults?

Joseph: Children are very weak. They don't know how to control themselves. You see? You can attract a child by saying “Come, I'll buy a *bégnée* [cake] for you”, and the child takes it. Children's spirits are much weaker than adults. The spirit of adults is too strong in respect to children. That's why the witches choose children to give them *kindoki*. And now those children start to grow up with that spirit. And he's not a child anymore. He grows up with it but it started during childhood. If you see an adult with witchcraft it started when he was a child.

P. Serge: Why do they give witchcraft to small children? Because little children don't know anything. Because their memory is weakened. When someone asks them “give your dad”, they give

him, without discussion. Because they don't know... This is why, because a little child doesn't refuse. Whatever you ask...

Silvia: But also adults, right?

P. Serge: No, the adults... When you ask him [an adult], he starts to reason... 'If I kill my father, no it's no good. If I kill my mother... neither. I will give them paternal aunt [*tata mwasi*]. But a child, when you ask him, he's going to do it straight away because he doesn't refuse. And that witchcraft, at that age, it can finish your whole family, [all the members] all together!

The words of Joseph and pastor Serge present children as victims of the will of adult-witches, who recruited them into witchcraft by offering something to eat. It was common knowledge in Kinshasa that children were the channel through which *kindoki* could pass to hit one's family because of their naivety and weakness, as another pastor in Selembao told me:

A witch wants to operate covertly. He wants to act without anyone knowing it. But then, people discovered that old people do too much witchcraft. To hide themselves, [old people] started to use a group of unconscious individuals, like children, whom one can manipulate easily, and they hide behind children to act. Children are like their masks. If an old man does [witchcraft], people know that it was him, so he hides himself behind a child. He acts in the name of the child, but it is the child that acts. It is like in the world of business: rather than signing himself, he makes someone else sign for him. Often, behind a child there's an old person. Because children are unconscious, they are still young, and they still don't know the evil side of witchcraft, so he can accept easily and you can start using him.

Once again, children were described as intermediaries, conduits in the witchcraft of older people. Children's passiveness and naivety were highlighted also by Frédéric Tshibuabua, a staff member of a non-governmental organisation in Kinshasa which takes care of street-children. Frédéric mentioned how children were bewitched with the aim of harming their parents and relatives. Intimacy and affection were potentially dangerous in Kinshasa, as the child was able to harm parents because of the intimate link between them<sup>125</sup>. Once again, the most dreadful danger came from those who were closest to you:

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<sup>125</sup> On witchcraft, intimacy and trust see Geschiere (2013).

Children's witchcraft... The child is often used. I am a witch. You've got children. I want to have you in the world of witchcraft but I cannot succeed, so I am going to use your children. I'll give your child witchcraft to harm you. You see? It is not your child who's a witch. It is me, and I am passing through your child to possess you. Because he's your blood and he can easily have you. A child doesn't have initiative inside witchcraft, what is he going to do...? The child is passive, he's going to do what you tell him to do.

Although the *Kinois* interviewed above described children as passive victims of the lust of older witches, they also acknowledged that children were dangerous killers. Only they could kill their victims through witchcraft. Thus, although the *Kinois* denied any agency to children, unwittingly they acknowledged their role as active agents of witchcraft deeds.

Witches who lured children into witchcraft were believed to do so by offering them luxury items and commodities which they could never attain in everyday life. In particular, children in the world of witchcraft were believed to marry and have a numerous offspring, while enjoying a life of comfort. These two factors (marriage and wealth) were the prerogative for young people to enter the world of adulthood, as explained in chapter 4. By joining the world of witchcraft, children were believed to reach a social power and wealth which was denied to most young people in society. In the eyes of the *Kinois*, children have found in witchcraft a better world to live in, in which they could reach social power which otherwise they would never be able to enjoy. This was often repeated during interviews, as the following extracts reveal.

One day, while I was interviewing a family in the neighbourhood of Bandalungwa, the father of a witch-child explained to me:

The witches tell the child that they are going to give him nice cars, expensive telephones... He can also live in Buckingham Palace! At night they take the plane, you know what their plane is, don't you? The peanut shells, and they travel around, naked, and they can arrive in Europe or America... How can someone refuse?

This was confirmed by Shadrak Mankondo, a twelve-year old child that I met in the Centre of Spiritual Healing of Ma Campagne. Shadrak confessed to have eaten his mother and maternal aunt, and that he tried to kill his father's sister in exchange for an airplane:



One evening, before maman Juditte [the neighbour who bewitched him] and I went out to work on our plane, she told me that if I wanted to become a general I had to sacrifice yet another member. I was not sure because I had already eaten my mum and also my aunt, but she told me of a palace in Europe full of gold where we could live together with our children. Maman Juditte is my wife in the world of the night<sup>126</sup>. That night we went to eat my little cousin. The day after, when my aunt woke up, she started to tell around that she dreamt of me chocking her with my hands. This is when she took me to church. Now I want to leave witchcraft and become a pastor.

These representations of the world of witches as a world full of luxurious modern commodities and of “perverted and predatory consumption” (Shaw 1997: 857) resembled the world of wealth and power of *la magie*. Both worlds worked as zero-sum universes, in which a few people obtained wealth at the cost of someone else. In fact, the more relatives the witch-children sacrificed, the more power they acquired. Like in *la magie*, human lives were exchanged for wealth and money. The only difference was that while masons and members of government did occult dealings to enrich themselves in everyday life, witches enriched themselves in the invisible world of witchcraft, while maintaining a deceptive passive profile in everyday life.

The world of witchcraft, as well as the world of *la magie*, reflected the desires of both children and adults in Kinshasa. Airplanes, gold and palaces were mirages for the poor who struggled to make do through *la débrouille*. It was a world of desire, uncanny riches, sex and *mobulu*. Through a discourse on witchcraft, people gave voice to their worst fears and highest aspirations.

The phenomenon of the witch-children was born out of people’s reactions to the *mobulu* of society and western ideas of childhood. Children were stigmatised for being naive, and had to undergo abuses by their families because they were considered a threat to their family members. Thus, the next section illustrates *kindoki* mechanisms within the intimate circle of the kin.

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<sup>126</sup> In the world of the night, witch-children were described as being married to ‘husbands of the night’ (*maris de nuit*) if they were girls, or ‘wives of the night’ (*femmes de nuit*) if they were boys. Together with their partners of the night, these children could give birth to a numerous offspring – up to hundreds of children.

## **Intergeneration Tensions: *Kindoki* within the Family**

In Kinshasa, relationships within the family and exo-households were extremely unstable and constantly shifting. Children were positioned in between exo-households and were thus considered the vehicle through which members of one family could bewitch members of the other. In order to understand the intergenerational matrix of *kindoki* accusations, and how these circulated within the family, I shall present a few case studies from my fieldwork.

I met Louise Lukatula, at the Centre of Applied Parapsychology and Psychosomatic Medicine of Ebale Mbonge<sup>127</sup> (*Centre de Parapsychologie Appliquée et de Médecine Psychosomatique de Ebale Mbonge*). The centre, which served both as psychological consulting room and a charismatic church, was renowned for exorcising witches and demons and for treating different diseases including venereal diseases and AIDS. Louise was a mother-of-two, in her forties who had visited the centre because she had a serious eye infection causing the right half of her face to become swollen and deformed. With a mixture of hope and helplessness, she explained to me that after a few unsuccessful attempts to cure her ailment at various private hospital clinics across *la cité*, Louise's husband, Jérémie Kabongo, advised her to seek the help of God. She then started to attend the Centre of Ebale Mbonge, where the senior specialist, who called himself 'priest of God' (*Nganga Nzambe*) identified Louise's father as the person to blame for her infection. Louise firmly believed that her father not only gave her the infection, but also bewitched her two sons, Pier and Christophe. Indeed Pier was affected by a skin disease, and despite consultations in several hospitals, he did not manage to recover. Moreover, Louise's uncle was also believed to be involved in the *kindoki* dealings. During a visit to Louise and Jérémie's house, he allegedly confessed that he had agreed with Louise's father to kill her. Because the disease had not killed Louise, however, the two witches proceeded to bewitch her children in order to get her. However, he immediately added that he wanted to redeem himself, and that this is why he had come to visit her.

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<sup>127</sup> The centre was named after Ebale Mbonge, a well-known Congolese prophet of the 1980s, and also referenced local perceptions of European science.

A few weeks later I visited Louise and Jérémie in their house in Malweka, a small neighbourhood surrounded by wild vegetation in the North-Western part of Kinshasa. I asked Jérémie about Pier's skin disease:

Silvia: Didn't the doctors prescribe him a cream, anything...?

Jérémie: No no, there are no microbes! And we discovered that it's true because the man [*papa*], my father-in-law, he ran away, he doesn't even dare to put an eye on his grandsons [*petit-fils*], because we talked to him [to the father-in law], we told him that "No, your nephew says that this disease comes from you". This is why he fled. That's it, and we are struggling like that, I also lost my job, it seems that Pier said that it's always the grandfather, because the man needs to see me suffering, [that I] sell everything and go back to my place, so that Louise goes back to her place [to her father's place] with the children, in that moment he will easily get Louise and the children back... [...]

Silvia: Why did the man [*papa*] choose to give [in sacrifice in the world of witchcraft] Louise and not someone else?

Jérémie: *Bon*, since we have known each other, Louise and I have not done the marriage according to custom. At the beginning... When he knew about our engagement, he refused. The man says that I haven't given anything to him yet. This is why he takes advantage [of the situation], as I haven't given anything yet, he can do whatever he wants! [...]

Silvia: And why do you think that Louise's father chose to bewitch your children to [kill] Louise? Couldn't he bewitch Louise directly?

Jérémie: Sure. I asked the children... Because Louise is his daughter, he can pass directly [to her]...but the children say no, because as Louise and the children are at my place, they are under my protection. So the man has decided that I should lose the job; that I had to stay home...

Jérémie's and Louise's children were very aware of what was going on in their households, and Pier, the one affected by the skin disease, did not hesitate to explain me what was going on:

Pier: What is happening is our grandfather's fault. He always comes to bother us [spiritually].

Silvia: Also during the day?

- Pier: Yes.
- Silvia: How does he do that?
- Pier: When he comes, he wants us to give him our mother.
- Silvia: And what do you reply?
- Pier: We always refuse, but he says that if we don't give him our mum, he will kill us. He is not alone, there are plenty of witches.
- Silvia: And what do they do?
- Pier: When they go out at night and they see that their fuel is over, they send mosquitoes to bite people so that they can put blood into their tank. Then they travel where they usually go and start eating.

Like in many other witchcraft stories, witches were believed to travel at night on their airplane in order to go and spiritually kill their victims during their sleep. The case of Louise and her family exhibits a common pattern with many other witchcraft stories: the youngsters of the family had refused to pay bridewealth, got married through a shortened marriage, and believed the elders of their families tried to punish them by bewitching their children.

The very elaborate and detailed explanations made by one of the children also show that children played an important role in witchcraft accusations: they were the ones who could reveal who had bewitched them, and they could add elements to witchcraft stories. This would seem to agree with De Boeck's (2005a, 2009, De Boeck & Plissart 2004,) assertion that *kindoki* created a productive space for children. Children and young people, according to De Boeck, used confessions as a stage through which asserting their power within the family and redirect tensions against their elders. However, it must be noted that children who confessed their witchcraft deeds in church in front of pastors did not do it spontaneously, but were rather obliged to do so by parents and pastors, who pushed them to confess. In front of witchcraft accusations against them, children had no choice but to construct elaborate stories through which they tried to drag themselves out of the circle of physical and psychological *mobulu* to which they were daily exposed. It was very easy for parents to influence children's stories of witchcraft: suspicions of witchcraft were discussed openly at home between adults, often in the presence of children. People would discuss suspects, and the reasons

why they would try to kill others through witchcraft. The same happened in church, in which witchcraft exorcisms were public, and entire families witnessed the confessions of redeemed witches and their ‘liberation procedures’. Children had a whole repertoire of stories to draw upon when constructing their own stories. Family members often took the richness in details of such stories as proof of their truthfulness.

Another example of intergenerational tension is represented in the next interview, in which Anne, the maternal grandmother of a child called Jojo, explains how her son-in-law tried to kill her by bewitching her nephew:

I took Jojo with me immediately after his birth and I didn’t witness any problem. However, after a few years, when I moved, our new neighbour told me that she saw something weird in Jojo. One day, I took Jojo and I asked him what was wrong. That time, after a long time, he admitted that he was bewitched. I asked him: “Who gave you witchcraft?” And the child replied that it was his father. So I asked him how that happened, and he explained to me that while his mom, who lives with her husband’s family, was washing the nappies, or while she was showering, she would give Jojo to her husband, who gave him witchcraft inside the *bouillie* [porridge]. Jojo’s mother and father got together thanks to a free union, and she went to live in her husband’s house as soon as she got pregnant.

So starting from there, the neighbour started to get mad, there was always something wrong in our *parcelle*, at night a lot of cats would meow... And Jojo started to create problems, to fight with other children and be impolite... So I took the decision to take him to church.

Jojo managed to escape from the adverse living conditions of the church, and became one of the thousands of street-children in the capital. Also in this witchcraft story, the child was used as an intermediary to try to kill a member of the other family through witchcraft. Only this time, it was a member of the older generation who accused a member of the younger generation.

Children born in shortened marriages for whom no bride wealth was paid were extremely liminal. Because they created a bridge between the mother’s and the father’s family, who often harboured resentment between each other, children were perceived as dangerous subjects who carried debts, jealousy and witchcraft. At the same time, they were children who were not firmly placed within any household or family. As such, they were in danger of witchcraft accusations.

Children’s liminality was even greater when their parents separated, or when one of them died. In fact, those parents who took the children to live with their new partners, often condemned them to a life of abuse by the stepmother or the stepfather,

who refused to raise them. New partners were often the first to cast witchcraft accusations against the children of their partners' previous relationships, as seen in the case of Grace, Julia Wembi's cousin (see chapter 6). Children were considered as embodying debts, tensions and jealousy, therefore new partners were afraid that the child's family would use him or her as an intermediary to cast witchcraft against them. This is why, often, the mother or the father would disperse the children to other relatives (the grandparents or some uncle or aunt) while they engaged in other relationships.

However, when the child was left with distant relatives, tensions arose because of economic hardship. Households in Kinshasa usually hosted a high number of children. As such, food, clothes and school fees were often the cause of tensions between household members, especially when the parents of the child were unable to contribute to the expenses. Children staying with distant relatives were often disadvantaged in comparison to the children of members of the household. They were often the ones who were left at the bottom, wearing old clothes, eating leftovers (if there were any), and without being sent to school. These children were often considered resentful for their liminal situation, and were considered more vulnerable to being recruited into witchcraft by members of the extended family.

One example was provided by Linda Nsimba, an eighteen-year old girl whom I interviewed during a visit to a Pentecostal church around the neighbourhood of D.G.C. in Ngaliema. After the death of the father, Linda was obliged by her mother to live with the uncle, so that she could start a new relationship. However, Linda's uncle was afraid that the child had been bewitched by some relatives. In church, Linda admitted that she was recruited into witchcraft by her paternal grandmother so that she could kill her mother:

It is my grandmother who comes and picks me up at night. She comes by bus and she takes me too far away, at the borders of the country. Also Arnold [her brother] comes out at night, but he does not know it. I know it. There is also Adonie, our little brother, who comes out at night, but he leaves at the village with the grandmother. It is our grandmother who gave him witchcraft through food. After giving us some peanuts she asked us to sacrifice someone. This happened shortly after the death of our father. After he died she bewitched us and she asked us to give her our mum. When we go out, she first picks up Adonie at the village, then she comes to pick us up and we go. There are also other two men but I don't know them. They are from the village too. When they come at night they ask me to sacrifice my mother but I refused. Our

grandmother always tells me: “If you sacrifice a person, then you will be at ease. But you don’t have to tell people. If you do so, if you reveal the secret, we will kill you”. Our mum is in another village now, but they have to pass through us if they want to kill her. But we have to say yes and I do not want to.

Linda was brought to church by her maternal uncle, who, while I was recording, listened to her confession with relief. The fact that Linda agreed to talk against her grandmother’s wishes in front of the pastor, was a sign of her willingness to forsake witchcraft. The church in this case gave Linda the possibility to solve the crisis and being reinserted in her uncle’s household free of *kindoki*.

In the next example, I illustrate the misadventures of Christine Ndaya, an eight-year-old girl who was obliged to leave her family and live on the street. After the death of her father, her paternal family accused her of having killed her father and other members of the family through witchcraft. Christine and her mother, who were living in the father’s household, were thus expelled and sent back to the maternal household. After a short time, Christine’s mother entered in a relationship with another man and became pregnant. Her mother then moved into the new partner’s household, while Christine was left with the rest of the mother’s family in their household. When I went to visit the household, Francin Lusamba, Christine’s maternal uncle, explained to me how he was obliged to expel Christine because she tried to kill members of the maternal family. Because Francin did not want to send Christine out on the street, he sent her to live with her mother and her new partner. However, once Christine had arrived in her new home, her mother’s husband’s family also accused her of witchcraft. Christine’s maternal uncle recalls:

Francin: Since when the child [Christine] had left our home, everything improved, money, wealth, and I understood that it was the child who was doing all of that [blocking]. I didn’t want to throw her on the street, but I told myself enough is enough. Because she didn’t want to leave her witchcraft, I sent her to stay with her mother.

Silvia: But how come, did not you leave in the same *parcelle*?

Francin: No... Before, her mother used to live in another *parcelle* not far from here in the neighbourhood [the *parcelle* of Christine’s biological father]. It is when they moved back here [after Christine’s father’s death] that problems started to arise. Then we sent the child to her mother, who was living with her new husband. [...]It is Christine who said “I ate the husband of my

mother, I ate my dad". It is Christine who ate him through witchcraft. I have told you that my father was also sick. [...] She blocked my wife, she wanted to eat also children who were still into the wombs of the mothers. But thanks to the prayer she was not able to do so. [...] At the beginning, Christine's mother would not believe me, she would ask: "Why are you kicking away my child like that?" But now she believes me, because Christine's two youngest brothers were contaminated by her witchcraft. It is Christine's mum who says that. Christine's mother has five children and she was born in 1981. We told her that if she wanted she could come and stay with us at her mother's household, but she always prefers to enter into new relationships, to be married... Christine one day told me that it is her who made her mother wander about like that.

Life expectancies in Kinshasa were very low and the death of one or of both parents often worsened the situation of these children. The tie that connected illegitimate children with the extended family had loosened up, and nobody was eager to take the child's side if accusations of witchcraft arose. This resulted in children being mistreated and obliged to quit their home to live in the streets.

During my brief stay in Kinshasa during 2007, I visited one of the many shelters for street children that dotted the city. The shelter was assigned to very young children, and the majority of them were between five and twelve years old. The staff of the shelter had carefully recorded the arrival of every new street-child together with a brief resume of their familial story and the reason of their stay in the street. Out of thirty-one street-children who lived and ate in the shelter, twenty had been accused of witchcraft by members of their families<sup>128</sup>. For two of these twenty children, the staff recorded no data on their parents. In six of the remaining cases the parents were both alive and separated (apart from one case in which the parents were said to be still together), and in twelve cases one or both of the parents were deceased. This means that the chances of being accused of witchcraft increased greatly with the death of one or both of the parents. Some of the dossiers of the children read:

CAROL NGOMA: Both parents dead. The father had a woman at home, Veronique, but Carol's mother lived somewhere else. After Carol's mother died, the father took him to Veronique's place [the new wife]. There, Carol's younger sister admitted being a witch and to have bewitched her two brothers. Veronique

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<sup>128</sup> Of the rest, five spontaneously took the street as the result of physical abuses by relatives; three as the result of negligence; and two children were travelling from the exterior to Kinshasa and lost sight of their relatives once arrived in the capital.



took them to church for exorcism while their father was absent. After a month, the father came back from Kitona [a military base in Bas-Congo]. The father died and Veronique kicked the children out on the street.

NTOTO MASINDA: Father unknown, mother dead. The child used to live out of Kinshasa until the arrival of the army [Kabila's forces in 1997], when his mother 'took' a soldier. The soldier declined all responsibilities over the mother and the child as soon as they arrived in Kinshasa. The [maternal] family took charge of the child. Ntoto went to stay with the maternal uncle while the mother went back to ... [a village]. His mother died. It was in the uncle's home that the child received witchcraft. Taken to church by the maternal aunt to be exorcised, the child fled the church and went to the street.

ERIC M'BUZE: Father dead, mother alive. The father died when the child was only four months old. The mother could not maintain herself and after some time she got married again. In her marriage the mother lost three children, killed by Eric. Eric himself said he is a witch, initiated by a woman in the neighbourhood who sold peanuts. After taking him to church for exorcism without success, the child fled from the pastor and came back to Kinshasa.

Although it was less common to find a child who admitted practising witchcraft when questioned by his or her relatives, this was not rare. Some of these children, after repeated psychological, physical and moral abuses, found it easier to comply with their relatives' accusations – often the only way to end their abusive behaviour. Other times, children used admissions of guilt as a way to position themselves within or outside the family. Let us not forget that children accused of witchcraft lived in extremely precarious conditions. As such, some children, like Eric above, found it better to detach themselves from a violent domestic environment, at the risk of undergoing often violent exorcisms. Other times, however, as in the case of Linda above, children confessed being witches in order to reaffirm their position in the family. "The grandfather asked me to sacrifice my mother, but I refused"; "The neighbour bewitched me and my brother. She asked us to kill our father but I refused, it is my brother who did it". Stories like these can be read as intricate strategies through which children turned accusations of witchcraft to their favour, swearing allegiance to their family, in an attempt to gain a safer position (from further witchcraft accusations) within its circle. However, not many children managed to turn their liminality in their favour. The majority were condemned to a life of violence and uncertainty within the family.

The *mobulu* at the familial and at the exo-household level has had a direct result on the invisible *mobulu* of witchcraft: children are accused of being witches because of intergenerational tensions within the family. In order to escape this difficult situation,

many children paradoxically have found shelter on the street. However, this has led to further accusations because in the streets adults could bewitch them more easily. In the next section I shall explain how the street and the market in particular, have become dangerous spaces of bewitchment for children, who are lured into witchcraft by adults, and particularly women. The fact that women at the market are often accused of bewitching children is another result of changes at the socio-economic level and the new role that the woman covers within the household. As we shall see, the *mobulu* of everyday life has had an impact on the mechanisms of transmission of witchcraft.

### **From Carers to Breadwinners: Women as Liminal, Women as Witches.**

In Kinshasa, *kindoki* was developing in unpredictable ways (see also De Boeck 2004, 2005a). Whereas until a few decades ago, *kindoki* was believed to be passed mainly within the close family circle, in 2011 also strangers could attack the fortress of the family and block people's lives and business out of jealousy. Many times thus, *kindoki* was believed to be passed to the child by someone outside of the family network. Sometimes this person was a neighbour, because of their physical proximity with their victims; but other times it was a complete stranger. Interestingly, these witches were almost always described as women. A recurrent rumour was that children were bewitched by a woman at the market or a woman on the street. The next example shows the case of a child who was bewitched by someone outside of the kin network, while he was on the street.

Nine-year old Claude Bashala, born out of an extramarital affair, was accused of witchcraft because both his mother and his father did not look after him properly. Claude's mother, who was busy finding a stable relationship, gave him in custody to her sister. However, Claude spent too much time on the street, as his maternal aunt told me:

The child, Claude, used to live here with his mum, my sister. Claude's mother and father weren't married. The father was already married and the mother was his concubine. I think this is one of the reasons that led to Claude's witchcraft. If the child had been born within the marriage and had received a good education, I don't think he would have been trapped in witchcraft. But in this case, the child used to spend the whole day alone, until the night. He was hungry and it's normal that he asked somebody for something to eat, a friend or a woman let's say. And then he got witchcraft. It is logical that it was like that,

because I know his mum very well. She was always away from home, selling goods on the streets until very late. It is the mother who is responsible for the education and the well-being of the child, but in this case the mother didn't take her responsibility.

According to many *Kinois*, witch-children were the embodiment of the economic collapse of the city and of the emergence of new power relations within the family. Women had become, for many families of *la cité*, the main source of income through *la débrouille*. They were liminal subjects who shifted between the domestic environment and the outside; the untamed word of the street. However, their new independence and social power produced suspicions of *kindoki*. In fact, some women working in the market were believed to give children food and recruit them into witchcraft. As such, women were believed to bewitch children and set them off to kill victims for them, in order to gain power and success in the world of witchcraft – as much as wealthy people were rumoured to enter Masonic sects in order to get rich. And vice versa, when misfortunes stroke someone, people accused their children of blocking them in order to make someone else rich. The zero-sum universes of everyday life and witchcraft were constantly dialoguing in Kinshasa: deeds in the former were often explained through deeds in the latter, and vice versa.

Many people traced the phenomenon of the witch-children to the fact that children were not properly educated or cared for by their mothers or female carers. This gave children the opportunity to evade the control of the family, and to venture on the street, where it was easier to be bewitched – usually by women. Women in Congo and in this case in Kinshasa were traditionally more tied to the home and raising a family. As the next examples explain, they were the ones in charge not only of the household, but also of raising their children. However, following the economic impasse and the need to make do through *la débrouille*, many women had to leave the space of the house and take the street. Women, together with young men, were the main actors of *la débrouille*, and spent the entire day at the market, selling the products of their wooden stalls. Once again, this resulted in tensions against them, as they are perceived as subverting their traditional role of carers of the family to pursue their economic and social independence. Thus, according to zero-sum mechanisms, the ambition of women in *la débrouille* was counterbalanced by the bewitchment of their children. This is evident in the next interview, in which Marie, a mother of two, explains how her neighbour bewitched her children while she was working at the market:

Witchcraft came by the neighbour, so that she could arrive to me through my children. One morning, when I went out from home, the neighbour gave my children some bread and some tea. Marie thought that it was only some bread and tea but spiritually it was blood and a piece of human meat. That night, the neighbour came to pick up Marie for them to do their 'night job'. [...] One day I went out and left the children alone. That day as well, the neighbour exhorted them to give me away. But Jacques said: 'Please, don't take my mum, if you want someone from our family please take me! If mum dies, we will suffer!' Marie, on the other hand, had already agreed, given that she was in communion with the witch-neighbour. But the boy didn't want to, and offered himself instead of me.

Jacques died in a traffic accident in 2008. In the eyes of his mother, through his death he sacrificed his life instead of giving away that of Marie.

The words of Marie denote tensions between an ideal of staying at home and taking care of children, and the constraints of everyday life that obliged her to leave her children alone to find some income. Indeed, rumours of children bewitched on the streets revealed a certain irony: on the one hand, children were bewitched because their mothers, rather than taking care of them at home, were working at the market; on the other hand, children who wandered about the streets looking for something to eat, were lured into witchcraft by women at the market. This shows a strong tension towards the figure of the woman in society.

This tension was also highlighted by some elderly informants whom I interviewed during a visit in a hospice (*maison de vieillards*) in Kintambo in 2007. Sitting among a group of seven elders, I introduced my curiosity towards the phenomenon of the witch-children. An old woman among the elders then told me:

Let's think about a woman that leaves home early in the morning to go to the market. [...] Sometimes she comes back home late in the night. In the meantime, the children are alone all day long, hungry, without anything to eat. The woman thinks first of all about herself. She doesn't care about her children's education. [...] She goes to the market and takes her tea. She eats and comes back late in the night. She doesn't even know whether the children went to school, what they have eaten... So it's her irresponsibility. On the other hand, children are no longer monitored and have to look for something to eat by themselves. The mother almost tries to get away from her children because she doesn't want to be bound by them.

Children were believed to be left on the street to fend for themselves and parents, most of the time women, were described as not taking responsibility for them. Children's wellbeing and education depended on their carers: from this point of view,

accusations against children were indirectly also accusations against those adults who were unable to take care of them. In the eyes of the children's carers, children who begged for food on the street personified their failures: the failure of men to keep pace with modern times and get a salaried job, the failure of women to maintain a household, the failure to marry according to custom and create a family and so on. When guardians accused a child of being into the world of witchcraft, they were unintentionally admitting their own faults and inability to provide an education and stable livelihood. As such they projected their sense of guilt against the child. At the same time, parents and carers perceived the witchcraft of children against themselves as a sort of punishment for not being able to take care of them. Children who were mistreated and abused at home, were believed to be more easily lured into witchcraft mechanisms.

Although I have argued that children who are accused of witchcraft are subjected to the will and abuses of their families, they have been able to turn this adverse situation *a posteriori*, when they take the street following accusations of witchcraft. In the next section I will briefly outline how children were able to build their lives by taking advantage of the channels of non-governmental organisations and missionaries' shelters for street-children. As such, children have demonstrated to be able to play with the same western stereotype of the child, which was at the base of their accusations of witchcraft. Children have been able to transform their role from passive subject to active agents.

### **Street-Children: Victims and Exploiters of Humanitarian Agencies**

The number of street-children in Kinshasa has bloated considerably in recent years. Statistics have it that street-children vary between 20,000 and 50,000 (De Boeck 2009), the majority of whom have been accused of being witches. This phenomenon has gone hand in hand with the rise of dozens of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international organisations which deals with street-children in disparate ways: organisations give them shelter, pay for their school fees, put children into apprenticeship programmes, and supply them with food and basic health care. Children are assigned to different shelters according to their age and sex. In this way, it is easier to monitor the children's activities, as they all follow the same courses or classes. Shelters can host any number from ten to more than sixty members: the most crowded are those who host young children who have just been introduced to the shelter by their

friends from the street. Children spend the first years in these shelters, while the staff tries to get in touch with their families in order to reunite them. More often than not, however, unfortunately families do not want to take responsibility for their children: many of them have been accused of witchcraft, and families are afraid that the child has not been successfully exorcised. This could result in more family members dying or being struck by misfortune as a result of the children's witchcraft. If families did not want to re-admit their children home, the NGO would take care of the child and his or her education personally.

In a context like Kinshasa, in which the majority of families eat once a day – and in some cases once every two, NGOs shelters have demonstrated to be a great backup plan for many children. During my fieldwork, children would spend the day in the street, looking for food leftovers and quick cash through *la débrouille*, and would go back to the shelters every time they needed to take a bath, a meal, or some health care. Certain NGOs would organise night patrols accompanied by a nurse in order to carry out medical examinations on groups of street-children who were unable to reach the shelters due to distance, or who were able to fend for themselves on the streets. NGOs try to prevent children staying out at night, when they could become victims of sexual abuses and beatings by civilians and the police. However, many of them, especially the girls, have found prostitution to be a money-making activity, and prefer to sleep outside the shelters.

The street has become for these children a space of freedom, where they can access western commodities, food and sex (see also De Boeck 2005a; De Boeck & Plissart 2004). Moreover, it has also become a space of profit: children worked for women at the market, who would pay them back either with some small cash or with something to eat from their stalls<sup>129</sup>; some worked as prostitutes, while others engaged in theft and criminal activities. Once their working day was over, they could save their small change in some NGO shelters which worked as a bank, in order to keep their money out of the reach of other street-children.

NGOs shelters have enabled children with certain freedoms, while providing them with care and attention when they require it. For many street-children who spent their days between the street and the NGO shelters, the shelters became a 'time-out

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<sup>129</sup> This shows a clear parallelism with the bewitchment of children, as explained above in the chapter.

space' in which they recharged their batteries and re-organised before taking to the street again. Shelters became spaces for the street-children to gather, to peddle the goods they were able to find in the street, to plan activities and to share the booty of their petty-thieveries<sup>130</sup>. Moreover, some children would organise criminal activities, and also carry some thieveries within the centres themselves. During my first day in one of these shelters, I remember the words of one member of staff, who advised me to secure my mobile phone with a thread to my trousers, if I did not want to have it stolen during my first day. Children would try to steal anything they found in the shelters in order to resell it in the streets: mobile phones, money, notebooks and pens with the logo of the organisation. Thus, time within the centre was for many of them a battle for resources not only against the other children, but also against the staff members.

Giovannoni et al. (2004: 100) have pointed out that: "In a society where people are forced to multiply their chances of opportunity (to find food, work, psychological sustenance), the NGO is just one more card to play". Children have been able to make the most out of NGOs, playing with the stereotyped version of the child as innocent and in danger promulgated by the state and western institutions, and building a whole lifestyle out of it. Although finding themselves in the street is initially traumatic for the children, soon they manage to enjoy the benefits of NGO shelters, like safety and education, leading a life much better than that at home, made of maltreatment and abuses.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have explained in detail the world of witchcraft and the invisible *mobulu* of Kinshasa. I have shed light on a few important mechanisms of witchcraft accusations, which need to be highlighted in order to better understand the phenomenon as it is understood in Kinshasa. I have demonstrated that children found themselves at the intersection of intergenerational tensions within the family. However, rather than being the main actors of witchcraft, children were considered to be bewitched by adult witches in order to carry out the spiritual killings as intermediaries, and vice versa; children found themselves in between witchcraft accusations, and were believed to be

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<sup>130</sup> Like the *kuluna* gangs of young men, who distributed the booty according to a pyramidal scheme, so the street-children would earn their rewards according to their role in the hierarchy in the stable, and also according to age.

the only means through which witchcraft could pass. Thus, although children became involved in witchcraft accusations involuntarily, they were believed to be very dangerous actors. At the same time, children were believed to be chosen as intermediaries because of their naivety and innocence – a result of the western notion of childhood promulgated by humanitarian agencies, missionaries and non-governmental organisations. This resulted in an important number of children being obliged to live in the street in order to escape the abuses of their families. There, they were able to take advantage of the same humanitarian agencies and missionary-based organisations which had indirectly led to witchcraft accusations against them.

An in-depth analysis of the mechanisms of witchcraft accusations is necessary if we are to understand why children in particular are accused of witchcraft in Kinshasa. The cultural impositions of the missionaries and the western education and lifestyle promoted by the colonial government, had a strong impact into the imaginary of the *Kinois*, reconfiguring their concept of childhood and also of witchcraft. Thus, accusations of witchcraft against children can be read as a result of the interplay between concepts coming from the West, and the *mobulu* created at the familial level by intergenerational tensions.

Geschiere, in his book on “Witchcraft, Intimacy and Trust” (2013) noted that “the nexus between witchcraft and intimacy may be studied as an unstable relation that constantly produces new avatars” (ch. 1, section 5, para. 8). In particular, he highlights the fact that also in Cameroon where he did fieldwork, there were new forms of witchcraft, which seemed to be effective against anybody, kin or no kin (*Ibid*). In Kinshasa as well, witchcraft has overcome the boundaries of the family. Today, witchcraft can be passed between strangers. Often, it is believed to be passed from a woman who works at the market, as if to remind to mothers what is expected of them in the household. However, it is important to highlight once again that although strangers can pass witchcraft, it is always someone from within the family who has the power to kill through it. This is why older witches bewitched children, who became intermediaries against their family members. Intimacy is always necessary for witchcraft to be effective.

As witchcraft, intimacy and kinship were closely interrelated, discourses about witchcraft in Kinshasa were discourses about the family, about who was in and who was out. Boundaries between family members and non-family members had become extremely tenuous, making it difficult to understand who was who in relation to



someone else. Children born out of shortened marriages contributed to connect families and households which otherwise would have nothing to share, as often partners split up soon after the birth of the child. From this point of view, accusations of witchcraft contributed to create or reinforce familial ties, and to distinguish kin from non-kin.

This chapter has contributed to our understanding of the relationship between material violence and invisible violence, and structural violence and everyday violence. Accusations of *kindoki* result not only from tensions within the familial circle, but also from the aspirations of the *Kinois* and the obscure mechanisms of wealth. It was only by getting in contact with the world of witchcraft (either through *kindoki* or *la magie*) that people could become rich. Thus, members of the government and of the military were believed to become rich by using *kindoki* through the channels of *la magie* or *franc-maçonnerie*, while witches used the channels of *kindoki* to enrich themselves in the mystical world of witchcraft. They would sacrifice family members in order to get mansions, money and luxury items, which they would enjoy among themselves in the world of the night. In the eyes of the *Kinois* I interviewed, witch-children who enjoyed a life of luxury in the second world of witchcraft, have been able to turn the *mobulu* casted by their relatives against them on itself, in order to create an alternative, successful mystical life by re-channelling the *mobulu* they were subjected to against their relatives through spiritual killings.

While witch-children were believed to live well in the world of witchcraft, they were actually chased away from home and abandoned to live in the streets. However, despite the hardship and the psycho-physical maltreatment that come along with living in the streets of Kinshasa, street-children have been able to take advantage of the humanitarian agencies, living out of those same actors who circulated the image of the child as innocent and at risk. Children accused of witchcraft, like the *kulunas*, were able to turn the *mobulu* of structural violence on its head, and used its channels to survive and build a different life in the streets.

## - CHAPTER EIGHT -

### CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have analysed the multiple facets of violence in Kinshasa which I have envisaged through the complex nuances of *mobulu*, the Lingala translation for ‘violence’. Indeed, *mobulu* is not simply translatable as ‘violence’ but rather stands as a complex concept composed of intersecting relations which were shaped by the interplay between different forms of violence: structural violence, the violence of everyday life, but also the invisible violence of witchcraft. I have demonstrated how *mobulu* was also utilised to define the economic hardship of Kinshasa whereby people constantly complained that “today making money has become difficult” (*mikolo oyo mbongo eza mobulu*), or that “the commerce is insecure” (*commerce eza mobulu*). *Mobulu* was also used to describe the political situation of the country, torn by armed conflicts and all the type of violence which comes with them – violence against women, pillages, and so on. During my interviews I heard the expressions “violence is in the East” (*mobulu eza na este*), or “disorder is with the country” (*mobulu eza na mboka*) several times. The security forces, rather than defending the population, were the first to perpetrate crimes against them: “Be careful of soldiers, they are dangerous” (*keba na basoda, baza mobulu*), people would warn me in Kinshasa. The same was said for *kulunas*, street gang members who fought against each other and pillaged boutiques and market stalls during raids.

Other times, violence was less spectacular, and was hidden entangled within the practices of everyday life. Children who spent too much time on the street, playing and fighting with their friends rather than staying home with their families, were believed to acquire the ‘education of the street’ (*éducation ya balabala*), which was in complete antithesis with the ‘education of the house’ (*éducation ya ndako*). As a result, children were believed to become impolite, stubborn and aggressive: “That child is troublesome” (*mwana oyo aza mobulu*) relatives would complain to me, and would consider the child almost like a betrayer, someone who preferred the street to their care at home. Children who spent too much time in the streets, were more readily accused of witchcraft. Being defined as *mobulu* was a clear sign of the suspicion of the family against one child. At the same time, women as well could be considered *mobulu*, when they took up too many relationships at the same time: “That woman is troublesome” (*mwasi oyo aza mobulu*), people would say. Women who entered in relationships with

several men were considered troublesome because of the *mobulu* they created between the men and their extended families. Moreover, further *mobulu* would fall upon the children born out of these unstable unions, who found themselves in very liminal positions within their families.

In order to understand the complexity and totality of the concept *mobulu*, in this thesis I have analysed its manifestations in every social field of Kinshasa. In particular, my aim was to understand how the violence of the state, with its impositions, the corruption of its machinery, and its poor services, reflected itself upon the everyday life of the *Kinois*, their lifestyles and their daily choices. However, following Galtung's (1990) thought, we can say that the state was not the only structure to impose certain rules and mores to the population. The military have also highly influenced the coping strategies of many *Kinois*. My neighbours had to abide by an informal curfew and code of conduct, in order not to attract the attention of the men in uniform patrolling the street. Pentecostal churches were also very powerful institutions within everyday life: in Maman Yemo, two brothers stopped taking care of their old blind mother because the pastor at their church told them that she was a witch – a witch who owned the *parcelle* where the pastor was about to build his new church. Not everybody could cope successfully with the structural violence which engulfed everyday life: young people were the ones who could better shift from passive subjects of violence, discrimination and marginalisation, to active creators of social niches from which to slowly rebuild their lives.

At the same time, the *mobulu* of everyday life was very much influenced by the rumours and gossips of witchcraft. Witchcraft accusations were taken extremely seriously in Kinshasa, with people being executed or exorcised in very violent ways as a result of the rumours. Witchcraft accusations were often cast over people from one's own family circle, which contributed to an increase in the sense of insecurity within the family and the community in general. However, also in this case, people accused of witchcraft, especially children who were chased away from the family, were able to take advantage of the terrible situation in which they found themselves.

Many young *Kinois* were able to appropriate the violence of the state and other actors, and use it to their own advantage, creating original coping strategies and social phenomena. I argue that not only were people making the most out of violence, but also violence was such a fruitful business for many, that they did not hesitate to engage in what others would define as *mobulu* in order to cope with everyday hardship. This is a

strong argument which I have illustrated through various examples in this thesis. My aim was to explain why different social actors considered *mobulu* a positive factor in their everyday lives. In considering *la débrouille* as an example, several people I interviewed made fun of those who did not cheat in order to make a profit. Cheating, and earning money at the expense of others, was considered essential to survive in *la cité*. Everyday life was a cycle of cheating, as several people got cheated and in turn cheated others in order to make do. Moreover, making money out of the incompetence of state jurisdiction and the faults of the public system was actually celebrated - something to recall with amused pride, like the general who distributed the operating costs for the office maintenance to his subordinates.

Similarly, but in a different social field, some unemployed young men would look at the military and its violent methods as model of masculinity. While the majority of the *Kinois* I interviewed frowned upon pillaging and engaging in violent fights, some young people trained themselves in the gym in order to be able to bear the blows during fights. Building up their bodies and being known for their physical force and their misdeeds was a cherished means of prestige for many young men of *la cité*.

Several men and women whom I interviewed spoke with regret about the tensions which affected their families (*mobulu na ndako*), especially with the older generations. And yet, looking for some independence and entering into several relationships at the same time – even if that meant bypassing customary rules – was considered as the only means to sustain the hardship of everyday life. Thus many women looked for partners who could host them in their households, while men benefitted from the networking generated through several love relationships, in order to fend for themselves. *La débrouille* in Kinshasa was sustained and governed by kinship and clientelistic networks. Thus, mobility in kinship ties and relationships also meant more possibilities for success in the volatile economic context of Kinshasa.

As the majority of the people in *la cité* could not cope with the hardship of everyday life, unexplained riches were all traced back to witchcraft dealings. This also explains the increasingly insistent rumours of people entering the circles of *la magie*, as these sects offered their members socio-economic support through the brotherhood and comradeship of freemasonry. The members of these sects engaged in *la débrouille* at a different – magic – level. The same was said of children, who were believed to *se débrouiller* in the world of witchcraft, where they could have wealth and success. Although for many children this meant being chased away from home, they were able

to make the most out of life in the street, where they engaged in scams, robberies and any sort of illegal activity to fend for themselves. Thus, if on the one hand they were victims of *mobulu*, on the other they found in *la débrouille* – and more *mobulu* – a way to survive. *Mobulu*, *la débrouille* and witchcraft were intrinsically linked in Kinshasa's everyday life. Engaging in activities labelled as '*mobulu*' by most of the population, was considered by many young social actors a vehicle of positive change and success.

*Mobulu* in Kinshasa is a multifaceted phenomenon, which can be fully grasped only by taking into consideration all these elements and their interplay. Before going through all the manifestations of *mobulu* analysed in the thesis, let us briefly revisit the theoretical contexts of violence within which this thesis is situated.

### **Contextualising *Mobulu*, Contextualising Violence**

Anthropological studies of violence are quite young, as until recently, "violence was not considered a proper subject for the discipline" (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004: 6). Anthropologists were focused on the working of social rules, rather than how violence challenged and usurped the social order. Thus, violence was a kind of 'anti'-topic of research, something which people did not acknowledge in their studies and which actually impeded them. Whitehead (2007), in "Violence and the Cultural Order", suggests that anthropological studies of violence gained impetus by studying the clashes between global politico-economic forces and the lives of people living at the margins of global networks. As such, studies of violence in Africa followed colonialism and the inequalities of power that followed. While only few, in the different societies of colonial Africa, were able to make the most out of globalisation, the rest was left as passive spectators or, rather, subjected to the wave of new impositions which the West brought.

Riches (1986) in his "The Anthropology of Violence", a symposium of eleven papers on violence in different contexts, described violence as "an act of physical hurt deemed legitimate by the performer and illegitimate by (some) witnesses" (1986: 8). Riches' approach to violence as an act of physical hurt lends itself very well to broad comparison on a functionalist level. As violence is a form of social action, which takes place between concrete actors, and produces concrete results, it becomes clearly accessible to comparative analysis. However Leach (1986) in his review of Riches' book (1986), highlights the limitation of his approach. He writes (*Ibid*: para 1):

The English of the present day take it for granted that violence is a ‘bad thing’, a characteristic of law-breakers and terrorists: policemen and soldiers who may appear to be acting in much the same way are seldom described as violent. But at other times in our history and in other countries at the present day violent action has been differently assessed.

Following Leach’s argument, I argue that violence is something that cannot be easily translated from one context to another. Violence takes different forms and is confronted in ways which differ according to the social context. Although Riches (1986), with his collection of essays on violence, has the merit of bringing violence to the forefront of anthropological studies, the scholarship would have benefitted from a broader analysis of the phenomenon, in order to catch all the nuances of violence and the meanings it holds for the local population of every social context. At the same time, I argue that violence does not connote only physical attacks, but rather it represents a broader spectrum of incidents which may not necessarily manifest themselves through blatant physical violence.

Often, the violence described in the anthropological scholarship of recent decades is the violence of the powerful against the weak. This was the approach of ‘structural violence’ introduced by Paul Farmer, who aimed at studying how the state, through its institutions, created a “social machinery of oppression” (2004: 307). His analysis of violence focused on the perpetrators of violence, showing how the state created inequalities, suffering, subjugation and death among those at the bottom of the pyramid. Populations affected by war, genocides, epidemic and extreme poverty were all described as passive subjects in front of the power of their government and its political-economic choices. In a passage, Farmer (2004: 100) writes that: “[I]t is necessary, at some point, to acknowledge what the poor have been saying all along: that their rights cannot be protected while the present economic and social structures foist injustice and exploitation upon the vast majority of our people under the guise of law”. Farmer’s aim is to explore how the structural violence of the state is translated into everyday life in distress, disease and other forms of violence which are not as overtly brutal as armed violence. He asks the reader: “By what mechanisms, precisely, do social forces ranging from poverty to racism become *embodied* as individual experience?” (*Ibid*: 30, emphasis in original).

Farmer’s analytic model of suffering (2004) inspired more works on violence in society, as recent studies have demonstrated (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004).

Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004; also in Farmer 2004) have repeatedly highlighted the importance of Farmer's attempt to build an anthropology of 'structural violence'. However, they find such concept too elusive, as they note: "Violence is a slippery concept" (2004: 1). In their works they highlight the need to elaborate, complicate and diversify violence, in order to see global forces and power inequalities that propel intimate suffering. In particular, they urge a need to: "[D]isentangle the causes, meanings, experiences, and consequences of structural violence and show how it operates in real lives – including how victims become victimisers and how that hides local understandings of structural power relations" (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois in Farmer 2004: 318). Thus, while the scholarship on structural violence has the merit to highlight the extreme conditions of hardship and injustice to which the poor of different regions of the world are subjected to, it will benefit greatly from an in-depth analysis of the relationship between state violence and local, everyday violence.

Up until the last decade, anthropological studies which explored violence in everyday life, have focused mainly on people's resistance to such violence in different social contexts. For example James Scott's "Weapons of the Weak" (1985) explores the everyday struggle of the rich and poor in modern Malaysia against the new modern harvest techniques imposed by the state. Scott drew attention to:

[E]veryday forms of peasant resistance – the prosaic but constant struggle between the peasantry and those who seek to extract labour, food, taxes, rents, and interest from them. [...] Here I have in mind the *ordinary* weapons or relatively powerless groups: footdragging, dissimulation, false-compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth. [...] They require little or no co-ordination or planning; they often represent a form of individual self-help; and they typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms (p. 6, emphasis in original).

The author goes on to explain how these passive non-compliances, subtle sabotages, evasions and deceptions were a necessary tactic to delay the implementation of the new agricultural techniques imposed by the state. Scott's definition of resistance highlighted the struggles of the powerless against the socio-economic changes at work in rural Asia.

However, Ortner (1995) accused much of the literature on resistance, including Scott's, of "thin description" and "ethnographic refusal", highlighting that authors often focused only on the politics of resistance, that is, the relationship between the

dominants and their subordinates (p. 176). For Ortner (1995: 177), what was missing from the analysis was the resisters’:

[O]wn politics – not just between chiefs and commoners or landlords and peasants but within all the local categories of friction and tension: men and women, parents and children, seniors and juniors; inheritance conflicts among brothers; struggles of succession and war of conquest between chiefs; struggles for primacy between religious sects; and so on.

Moreover, she adds that this cultural thinning also fails to give justice to the subjectivity – the intensions, desires, fears, projects – of the subordinates (*Ibid*: 190).

My approach in this thesis differs enormously from resistance studies, inasmuch as it depicts the continued renegotiation of what power is and where it lies. Is power within the state and its impositions, or is it within the social phenomena which young people have created in multiple social fields in their everyday life? Although part of my thesis highlights the *mobulu* of the state, I also explained how the abuses of the state have given rise to new spaces such as the *mobulu* of the street, *la débrouille* and the rise of the *kulunas* in response to the lack of jobs. This is not resistance to a lack of opportunities, but the production of a distinctly new opportunity for the creation of personal livelihood.

Likewise with *kindoki*, which itself could be viewed as a form of structural violence – albeit a mystical one – as an imagined force which materialised through liminal actors, who have emerged in the spaces left open by the absence of a strong state. People tried to combat economic insecurity by seeking to get rich and accumulate power through the channels of *kindoki* and *magie*. In this sense, everyday life exists in between forms of *mobulu* whereby individuals seek to get by through appropriating 'violence' against another before it can be enacted upon them. Moreover, making do is a form of 'violence' itself, as one person's success would most likely mean another's failing, some survive and some do not. From this point of view, my thesis seeks to contribute to the scholarly understanding of violence by analysing how people have embodied the structural violence of the state in their everyday practices, and how this embodiment has contributed to develop social phenomena which allow them to live according to their own rules and moralities.

Often, new phenomena at the everyday level seemed to replicate elements of the *mobulu* of the state. Many people resorted to images of state violence to empower



themselves. For example, in chapter 1, I have showed how my friend Joseph Mutambu initially went along with the rumours that he was a general, in order to instil respect among the neighbours, and to discourage people from robbing our *parcelle*, as military officers usually carried weapons with them. In chapter 5, I have showed how thieves also mimicked the military, by dressing in military uniforms to instil fear among the people they robbed. Seen as the only source of power, soldiers became a model of masculinity and success for many young men. The *kuluna* gangs of *la cité* adopted the military as their imagined state, reproducing the actions of government and soldiers who enriched themselves illicitly. Like the military in the east of the country, they used violence to compete for resources to which they would not otherwise have access. By pillaging, *kulunas* gained wealth and redistributed it along hierarchies which recalled those of the military.

The violence of the state and of the military was considered to be a necessary means of attaining success. Argenti (2007), in his book on youth and violence in the Cameroon Grassfields, also highlights how people who combated gangs and thieves used the same methods used by the police and gendarmerie, which were seen as “dangerous, corrupt, and inept”. Thus:

[T]he antigang members reversed the moral order of coercive power, using it, unlike the state, for morally sanctioned – if often tragic – ends. Yet the crosscutting similarities between the antigang members and the gendarmes they emulated in their quest for alterity preclude any easy Manichaeism opposing one to the other. (*Ibid*: 182).

Argenti illustrates that rather than appropriating and reproducing the same military power, antigangs “transformed an external danger into a new, alteric way of being that sanctioned youth as a political force in the Grassfields” (*Ibid*). In the same way, some men in Kinshasa found in the figure of the soldiers and in the violence of pillages a way to transform their status from mere youngsters to *batu pomba*, strong men who were respected and treated like adults because of their physical force. From this point of view, *mobulu* is a transformative power.

Inspired by Argenti (1998, 2007), Farmer (1996, 2004, 2005), Scheper-Hughes (1992; Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004) and Bourgois (2003, 2009; Bourgois & Schonberg 2007) I have put an accent on how the population of Kinshasa, through the colonial encounter, post-modern Zaireanization and through present state failings, have

shaped alternative spaces for creating meaningful lives in the intersection between local and global, where *mobulu* is negotiated and appropriated through various different guises. For example, the movements of street gangs and the *sapeurs* of the pre- and post Independence have shown to do more than resist to the colonial power. In their movements, they were able to appropriate the structural violence of the state – unemployment, the post-war economic crisis, social and racial discrimination – in order to create new phenomena which denounced the economic and moral order of Kinshasa, while shaping new counter-cultures from below. The *kulunas*, in the same way, were born from the inequalities and economic hardship, and from the will of young men to find another way to overstep their elders and access social maturity and prestige. These young men have found in violence a means to attain adulthood and to emancipate themselves from the grip of the elders. Moreover, they were able to use mechanisms of the state and adjust them to the context of the street in which they operated: in their stables, *kulunas* shared the booty in the same pyramidal scheme used by public officers – as in the example of the General, who distributed the money for the office maintenance among his co-workers and kept most of it for fuel and ‘home maintenance’ (chapter 3). Illegal, everyday coping strategies seem to be strongly interrelated with the mechanisms of the state and it is difficult to discern between what is deemed legal and illegal in society, as the chapter on *la débrouille* explained.

The few episodes above allow us to understand that violence is not an obviously observable phenomenon without any consequences, nor is it a static notion. The *mobulu* of Kinshasa is multifaceted, contradictory, destructive yet constructive at the same time. *Mobulu* gives birth to more *mobulu*, but it also creates new social phenomena. *Mobulu* is not only an “act of physical hurt” – borrowing Riches’ (1986: 8) definition: it was the economic insecurity which gripped the city, the social insecurity created by armed thieves at night; it was the violence and tensions within the familial household, the incapacity to marry and become economically independent; it was the pillaging of street gangs and the robberies of fake soldiers at night; and it was the accusations of witchcraft which split apart so many families in Kinshasa. *Mobulu* was everywhere, in society, in the street, in the household, and among the closest relatives – as the example of Joseph Mutambu’s theft by his cousin demonstrated (chapter 6).

Anthropological studies of violence so far have omitted an important phenomenon from their scholarship. Violence is not only a material, or mundane phenomenon. Much of the violence that happens in some contexts was born in the

spiritual field. With my thesis, I contribute to explore that side of violence which has been so far underrepresented or ignored. In the next section, I shall remind the reader of the close relationship between material and invisible violence, and how we cannot understand the multiplicity of *mobulu* in Kinshasa without considering both sides of the coin.

### ***Kindoki and la Magie as Catalysts of Mobulu***

In his collection of essays on violence, Riches (1986) alludes to the fact that discourses on violence often fail to do justice to mystical violence. He writes:

[M]uch physical hurt is invisibly enacted. Thus witchcraft and sorcery, their reality as unquestioned as in the reality of visible physical hurt, must be included as instances of violence, even though their performance has to be inferred from their eventual result: the misfortune, injury or death of the recipient (*Ibid*: 8).

In Kinshasa, witches and their dealings were violent not because of what they materially did. In fact they operated in an invisible world, whose rules and mechanisms were imaginable only through gossip and rumours. Their power laid in the consequences of their deeds: in the death of a relative, the bankrupt of a business, the disease of someone. Mystical violence, or imagined violence, can often be more terrorising and powerful than physical violence. On this subject, Strathern, Stewart and Whitehead (2006: 6-7) write:

People's thoughts about the world often run far beyond its obvious empirical manifestations, and [...] the frameworks that are built out of peoples' thought become as important as, or even more important than, their everyday empirical observations.

This is why Riches (1986) and also Strathern et al. (2006) argue for the inclusion of witchcraft in the anthropology of violence. I believe that witchcraft accusations mirror the context of a given society, its desires, fears and also frustrations. As such, witchcraft needs to be examined in tandem with its material context in order to be fully grasped. This section is devoted to understanding how an ethnography of witchcraft rumours and accusations is vital if we are to give a full picture of *mobulu* in

society. Witchcraft and other forms of everyday *mobulu* are so intertwined that it is impossible to analyse them separately.

People in Kinshasa would say: “Violence is in that family, because of *kindoki*” (*Mobulu eza na famille oyo, ya kindoki*). *Kindoki* is an omnipotent concept in Kinshasa: it is always there, whether people like it or not. Witchcraft is always considered the reason behind deaths, accidents, diseases, sudden riches, sudden misfortunes, and unexplained events. Even those people, like my friend Joseph, who insisted not to believe in witchcraft, were inevitably drawn into this world of suspects, rumours, gossiping and fear. I remember that although he considered himself a devoted Christian, also because of his past with the missionaries, Joseph would do the sign of the holy cross on my forehead every time he knew I had to visit the families of some witch-children. In the same way, he prohibited me to visit any Masonic lodge, where people were rumoured to practice *la magie*. *Kindoki* and its nuances were always present, also for those who refused to believe in them.

An important characteristic of *kindoki* is that it operates within the family. Although the ‘witches who bewitched’ might be from outside the familial circle, as demonstrated in chapter 7, the ‘witches who killed’ needed to be very close to the victim in order to strike. As *kindoki* could only be effective when it was carried out from one family member to another, it contributed to define and engage familial relations. As explained in chapters 6 and 7, children in between exo-households often connected families who did not want to have anything in common: families of young people who married unofficially through shortened marriages and then separated, or did not marry at all, rarely wanted to be associated with one another. The debts and tensions these created were causes of conflict within the families, which often resulted in accusations of *kindoki*. In this case, those children born from shortened unions, which found themselves in a very liminal position, within the exo-households and in between families, were accused to be the emissaries of *kindoki* deeds. Interestingly, also in this case, it was a debt which engulfed children into witchcraft deeds, a debt which had to be repaid through the sacrifice of a human life to the master witch. *Kindoki* accusations against the children and their instigators signalled that they were (often reluctantly) still considered part of the wider family. Witchcraft accusations in this sense highlighted boundaries between inside and outside. The ‘violence of the house’ (*mobulu na ndako*) was cause and in turn effect of the *mobulu* of witchcraft accusations, which contributed to increase tensions within the house.

*Kindoki* was strictly linked to the *mobulu* of economic hardship, as the example of the debt has illustrated. Family members accused children to try to kill them through witchcraft in order to avenge a debt between families – a debt which the other family's members were trying to have repaid by taking the lives of the debtors through witchcraft. However, the relationship between *kindoki* and the economic sector did not stop here. Witchcraft accusations often interested those families in which efforts to survive through *la débrouille* did not correspond with the results and wealth accumulated. Thus, economic failures, unfavourable economic conditions, poverty, unemployment and accidents, all fuelled rumours and gossip on *kindoki*. From this point of view, *la débrouille* and *kindoki* were deeply interrelated notions of social life. On one hand, *la débrouille* was a more practical means of survival: with its illegal commercial transactions, scam and cheating, *la débrouille* was seen like a space of opportunity which, however, was very difficult to master. For the majority of the *Kinois*, *la débrouille* did not allow for enrichment, and it was a mere survival mechanism. Thus, recent economic developments (or lack thereof) have transformed social life in Kinshasa and brought people into a fierce and often violent fight for survival. For example street gangs have found in the violence of pillage a way to upgrade their lives, and to secure a passage to adulthood not waiting for the state, in the same way that thieves and fake soldiers have found in criminality and robberies a profitable activity. On the other hand, *kindoki* offered an imagined difference between those who succeeded and those who didn't, those who died and those who lived explaining this difference through an intangible force. If people did not succeed in the informal economy or in social life, it was because of the deeds of witches, who blocked other people's development in order to enrich themselves in the world of witchcraft. Like the physical forms of violence, *kindoki* was believed to provide both a space of danger but also one of opportunity.

Accusations of *kindoki* often turned into psychological and physical abuses. In Kinshasa, this had devastating effects upon children, who had to leave their homes and find rescue in the streets of the city. In chapter 7, I have demonstrated how accusations of witchcraft against children are the result of the imposition of a Western notion of the child, which depicts children as in need of care and in danger of abuse. This Western idea went hand in hand with the local notion of witchcraft as passed through food: children started to be perceived as naive subjects who could be easily given bread and thus taken into the world of witchcraft. At the same time, because of the *mobulu* of the

house, children were put in very liminal situation between families and exo-households, making them the favourite emissaries of witchcraft from one family to the other. Structural violence in this case worked together with the *mobulu* of the house in the creation of the phenomenon of the witch-children.

Although many *Kinois* I interviewed described children as the victims of witchcraft accusations, it is worth noting that they were at the same time very aware of the dangerousness of these children, who could exterminate entire families in order to become rich in the world of witchcraft. Witchcraft accusations gave children an agency which turned against them and was to their detriment. Nonetheless, children accused of witchcraft were able to gain some kind of autonomy and agency once they found themselves in the street. In there, they were able to take advantage of the channels of NGOs – which have contributed to promulgate this idea of the child as naive – using them as needed. Often, street-children would use NGOs shelters as meeting points, trading posts or headquarters, where they could reunite and decide how to carry out their activities in the streets – from irregular jobs, to prostitution, to organised crime. Other times, it was the NGO shelters that became the targets of children's thieveries: children would steal mobile phones from the staff members, notebooks, pens, and whatever they found in the shelters, in order to resell them on the street. Although accusations of *kindoki* victimised children and cast them out of their families, they also created new avenues of survival for thousands of street-children in the capital, who took advantage of the NGOs that had victimised them in the first place. *La débrouille* became the favourite space for children to build their life in the face of the structural violence and the *mobulu* of the family.

Both *kindoki* and *la débrouille* were interpreted by the *Kinois* like a zero-sum universe in which one person's loss was another's gain. In *la débrouille*, often people tried to enrich themselves by cheating others: like in the case of Joseph's own cousin, who robbed him in order to try his luck in the diamond commerce in the east of the country; or like Baudouin, the driver who made money by selling us the zombie-car. In the same zero-sum way, in the world of witchcraft witches were believed to eat victims in order to enjoy a life of luxury. Someone's life had to be sacrificed for someone else's wealth. Thus it seems that *kindoki* is a concept of equal cause and effect, where life is envisaged within a system of balance. However this could not account for the larger discrepancies of inequality - initially between the colonisers and the colonised and latterly between the poor and the new rich of Kinshasa. Thus, alternate explanations for

wealth accumulation have emerged in the form of *la magie*. *La magie*, a concept born in recent times in light of contemporary transformations in Kinshasa, became a new avenue for wealth making. In Kinshasa, the search to 'make do' is contrasted with a desire to 'get rich': *la magie* appears to have emerged in the intricate space in between the two as a means of negotiation for individuals to survive but also to thrive.

Kinshasa is a metropolis in which global notions of wealth, musical taste, fashion and lifestyle have mingled with local, customary rituals and habits, creating original phenomena in every field of society. The cosmopolitan character of the city has also contributed to transform the aspirations and desires of the *Kinois*, who have turned their eyes to West. However, the politico-economic choices of the state have influenced the way in which the *Kinois* can access the multiple forms of wealth and commodities in Kinshasa. The majority of people are left out of market economy, struggling to getting by and to find their daily bread.

In this difficult economic context, young people were the ones who were able to navigate with more flexibility between the state imposition and the opportunities and styles of the market economy, the new communication and transport system, as well as new technological devices. The phenomena analysed in this thesis show the ability of many young *Kinois* to bypass the impositions and deprivation of structural violence, and to transform elements of structural violence in order to create new social phenomena. The *sapeurs*, the *bills*, and the *kulunas* drew from elements of Western dressing code, Western movies and movie heroes and generated movements with which young men were able to contest structural violence while empowering themselves in society. In the same way, those couples who married through shortened unions were able to bypass the payment of the bridewealth, which had become an obstacle because of the volatility of wealth. *La débrouille* and discourses of *la magie* and *kindoki* all provided new ways to take advantage of the wealth which circulated in Kinshasa but which was forbidden to most of the *Kinois*.

This thesis suggests that to grasp the full meaning of *mobulu* in Kinshasa, one has to combine state violence with everyday violence, and physical violence with mystical violence. A focus on state violence risks minimising the agency of people in their local contexts, their ability to make front to obstacles by transforming them into springboard for the creation of original phenomena. Although the state and its violence have played a huge role in shaping people's lives, social phenomena such as the rise of *kuluna* youth gangs, *la débrouille*, witchcraft rumours and accusations, and household

structures acquire a new meaning when explored from the bottom. Everyday life provides a privileged point of view to understand violence from the point of view of those who appropriate it and re-elaborate it on a daily basis. People on their local everyday life are able to transform the violence of the state, often in unpredictable – and invisible – ways.

The *mobulu* of Kinshasa, rather than being a mere negative notion, is a constructive and potentially transformative tool, which the *Kinois* engage with on a daily basis and use to create new phenomena able to challenge the structural violence of the state. It would be simplistic to classify *mobulu* as purely as ‘violence’. *Mobulu* is a productive social space which shapes relations between individuals, between people and a place, between citizens and a state, between the world of witchcraft and the world of the day. *Mobulu* is a framework which draws together all aspects of the *Kinois* social world. *Mobulu* is the lens through which the *Kinois* visualise the world.



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