

# Class and Ethnicity in the Struggle for Power—The Failure of Democratization in the Congo-Brazzaville<sup>1</sup>

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**Résumé:** En Afrique, les grandes questions à l'ordre du jour sont celles des droits et des libertés, de la guerre, de la violence et de l'insécurité au sein de la société. A partir de mes recherches au Congo, j'aimerais dire que la société est de plus en plus fragmentée et désorganisée. Dans le document, j'ai essayé de montrer que l'ethnicité est utilisée tant par les hommes politiques que par les gens pour rivaliser et se disputer le pouvoir; les jeunes sont devenus plus individualistes, se sentant abandonnés et trahis par leurs dirigeants politiques; ainsi il se sont organisés en milices pour s'impliquer dans la lutte pour la distribution des ressources. En outre, ces milices et la prolifération du banditisme apparaissent comme étant un défi à l'endroit de ceux qui gouvernent. Dans une telle situation de frustration sans perspectives heureuses, les populations se retrouvent dans une insécurité totale. L'imaginaire, avec ses propres modes d'interprétation ou de mobilisation culturelle/ethnique, semble être le seul moyen de lecture de la réalité. La lecture de la réalité selon l'ordre symbolique s'appuie sur le pouvoir des hommes politiques et leur capacité de se servir de la dynamique de l'imaginaire à leurs fins propres.

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1. My participation at the Governance Institute organized by CODESRIA in the summer of 1997 meant a great deal for the development of my understanding of conflicts, ethnicity and democracy in Africa. It was very useful to submit my research proposal to colleagues from almost all over Africa and I am very grateful to my fellow social scientists and friends in 1997's Institute (who for six very intense weeks became my extended family). I would also like to thank CODESRIA for inviting non-African scholars. It was a tremendous challenge to me. The Institute was successfully led by Jean-Marc Ela who amazed us all with his fantastic ability of synthesizing every lecture and making every lecturer to fit in a well outlined pedagogical structure and within the theme. I am deeply indebted to you all. For my research in Congo I have received funding from SIDA/Sarec Sweden as well as from the Nordic Africa Institute.

The Congo<sup>2</sup> has been trying to instal democracy since 1991 (Diouf 1998)<sup>3</sup>. A conflict within the political class, after the end of the Cold War, led to a weakening of the state which, in turn, made it possible to promote demands for a national conference. The present situation, however, can, best be seen as a struggle for kingship among political leaders. The political hierarchy has been broken down by the democratization process, without being replaced by some other form of political integration, a problem that is desperately serious, and to which there are no effective solutions at the moment (Ekholm Friedman and Sundberg 1996:8).

The Congo's natural resources have always been the object of a power struggle rather than the basis for development and improvement of living conditions for its people. The 'democratic system' has led to an intensified ethnic struggle within the political class. The majority-minority game does not fit the African system. The minority feels, and is indeed, excluded. So far, the only way of avoiding a destructive power-struggle has been to invite the so-called 'opposition' to share power, i.e. inclusion, which, in fact, represents a return to the one party system with its power-sharing among a number of ethnic groups, or rather political clans. The emerging picture shows an ongoing disintegration of polity and society. The disintegrative tendencies take the form of feudalization in the sense that various feudal lords use their own groups and militias to gain access to the throne. This kind of disintegration has recently accelerated. The state no longer constitutes a supreme authority with a monopoly over the use of

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2. In this text Congo refers to what is called Congo-Brazzaville today since the former Zaire decided to change its name to Congo, or the Democratic Republic of Congo.
  3. For an extensive discussion on the African political liberalizations or transitions see the work of Mamadou Diouf (1998). He discusses whether we should see the transitions as a result of internal or external factors.

force. Instead a number of feudal lords/warlords<sup>4</sup> claim an equal right to supremacy and to their own territories. In the present conflict ex-President Sassou N'Gusso demanded that President Lissouba himself should sign the peace treaty, which the latter refused to do, arguing that Sassou was not his equal and that the Prime Minister, at a lower level in the hierarchy, would be the right person to do it. In today's Congo each feudal lord has his own militia to protect his territory. One of them even administers his own port and the collection of customs dues in Brazzaville.

The state is conceived as something that can be possessed. The political leader of the 'opposition', Bernard Kolelas<sup>5</sup> of the (MCCDI), is thought of by his group as the real heir to political power. He is the saviour, the Messiah or Moses. He is a Lari, as was the first president, Fulbert Youlou, who 'inherited' his power from the French. The elected president, Lissouba, was, according to many Laris, a usurper without any legitimate right to power.

Today the members of the political class all call themselves democrats<sup>6</sup>, thus legitimizing their struggle for political power. The cleavage between the politicians and the people is, however, extreme. The political class 'liberated itself' (Ekholm) a long time ago from the people. The problematic political situation in Central Africa is hidden behind the soundbite 'free and fair elections', as if these by themselves would bring about democratization. Western parliamentary democracy

4. The use of the word *warlords* implies their power to or even will to destroy, which at least today (1997) seems to be one of the most important features of the present conflict.
5. Bernard Kolelas has his ethnic base in Pool — see map in the appendix. He is from Kinkala and has been one of the most fervent critics of the former socialist single party regime. He is now mayor of Brazzaville.
6. Meaning that they all say they want the democratization process to continue and that ex-President Sassou Nguesso's greatest critique of Lissouba was that he did not prepare the presidential elections well enough.

developed in a situation where ideology and not ethnicity constituted the basis of political parties.

It has recently been suggested (e.g. by Yusuf Hassan, UNHCR in Southern Africa) that there may be other models for democratization which could be developed and applied in Africa. A similar view is apparent in the writings of Partha Chatterjee. When talking about modernity, he says that '(t)he forms of modernity will have to vary between different countries depending upon specific circumstances and social practices' (Chatterjee 1997:8).

In an article in *The Economist* the problem of democracy and what models to use was posed as follows:

Is there a way for Africans to bind their different peoples together within a government to avert the sort of grievances that drive secessionist demands? There can probably be no universal model, least of all one imposed by outsiders. But for the first time Africans are experimenting with home-grown ways of arranging multi-ethnic states... Some are trying federalism. Others, such as South Africa, are entrenching power-sharing as a way of tying minorities and giving them a stake in future stability. The western concept of loyal opposition has little resonance in much of Africa; for the vanquished, especially a minority tribe, the price of defeat can be high indeed. South Africa's version of power-sharing was the child of its troubled history. But the principle of inclusion, and the hazards of politics in which the winner takes all, are things that Africans ignore at their peril (*The Economist*, September 10th-16th, 1994).

Thus, inclusion seems like a new strategy for Africa. But this is, in fact, a traditional strategy, the African palaver and the traditional mode of consensus-seeking. This model may, however, appear more democratic than it really is. It is always power holders who make this model work. Orality plays an important role. Oral authority is an aspect of the chief's general authority, meaning that consensus never deviates significantly from his own view. The issue was taken up when interviewing André

Milongo<sup>7</sup>. My question was whether the traditional consensus model could be used today. 'What you mean', he says, 'is la palabre africaine',

la façon par laquelle nos anciens avaient l'habitude de résoudre les contradictions, les conflits, bien, on n'a pas intégré ça, parce que ce n'est pas moderne ça, qu'est-ce que ça veut dire le consensus, finalement pour revenir au monopartisme... au monopartisme qui n'a pas fonctionné.

Thus, Milongo identifies consensus with the one party system and power-sharing. 'The principle of inclusion' is nothing else than the old African system of power-sharing. What might make it look different is the change from 'monopartisme' to 'multipartisme'. The transition from power-sharing among politicians who belonged to a single party to power-sharing among the same old men who now belong to different parties is not much of a change.

It is the feeling of being caught in a zero-sum game, where the winner takes all, that is the most serious problem of Congolese 'democracy'. An atmosphere of total disappointment and despair prevails when one's own candidate has lost. This also provides an opening for negotiations and unions between previously bitter enemies, which seem astonishing to the outside observer. These unions are, however, readily broken in order to open negotiations with other parties that suddenly seem to offer more.

Ethnicity may be explosive when it is politicized. Ethnic war and ethnic cleansing took place in 1993, in a situation where different ethnic groups had intermarried and where their children consequently were 'mixed' (Ekholm Friedman and Sundberg 1995). This differed from the situation in the 1940s and 50s, when the boundaries between the various ethnic groups were both socially and territorially relatively clear, as a result of control by the elders (c.f. Ekholm Friedman 1994a). As their control has lost its grip, during the last 3-4 decades, the young have both

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7. President of the Parliament at the time and Prime Minister during the transition to democracy in 1991-1992.

intermarried and spread throughout province and country. All are present in Brazzaville. The blurred boundaries between the groups involved in the conflict did not, however, prevent them from killing each other. On both sides they used various methods for identifying the Other, although they sometimes made mistakes and killed their own. What seems to be an important factor both in 1993 and 1997 is, what Donald Horowitz has called the 'fear of extinction' (Horowitz 1985).

During the ethnic war in 1993-94, two ethno-political blocs emerged in Brazzaville, each of them with its own militia. One was La Mouvance présidentielle, under Pascal Lissouba, based ethnically in Niboulek, i.e. the three provinces to the west of the Pool, the Niari, the Bouenza and the Lékoumou. The other was l'Opposition, under Bernard Kolelas, based ethnically among the Lari in the Pool. Included in the latter bloc were also the Vili of the Kouilou Province. The former President Sassou-Nguesso and his PCT provided additional support<sup>8</sup>. The northerners were at that time marginalized because of the small proportion of the total population which they represented (see map in appendix I)).

Militias have been part of the political picture from a few years after independence, but the democratization process, or rather the multi party system, seems to open up 'the market' for militias. Every political leader of any importance needs his bodyguards (Quantin 1997). The

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8. In May 1994, the country was divided into different zones controlled by ethnic groups or blocs. Ethnic cleansing had occurred, creating zones with homogenous populations who feared entering each other's territory. Baongo Makelekele and Kinsoundi, which the Lari themselves identified as Lari territory, have been cleansed of their Niboulek inhabitants. People had been killed or ousted and their homes plundered and sometimes completely destroyed. Many Niboulek who had bought land and built houses in that area, had been driven away, their homes destroyed and their belongings stolen and sold in the streets. What has happened in the latest conflict is that some of the Niboulek living in the northern areas of Brazzaville have fled Sassou territory and some of them have actually sought refuge in Baongo and Makelekele.

militias are not only formed by the political leaders but are also an initiative coming from below, because the young are aware of how they can explore the situation. The following story is revealing on several accounts. This young man talks about the situation in 1992 just around the time of the first democratic elections since independence.

I was boy chauffeur on a bus [he left because buses were fired at]. I am illiterate. I left Brazzaville and worked for a while in Ngoma Tse Tse with charcoal. When I heard about recruitment to the Ninjas I came back to Brazzaville. There were two different groups. I did not become a real Ninja but an *éclaireur*. My job was to point out where there were Niboulek houses and families. The real Ninjas stayed with the president of the Opposition and they constituted *une équipe d'intervention*. We, the 'informers' (*les indicateurs*) worked in the area and did our job before the real Ninjas intervened. Then we plundered and destroyed the houses together, and we beat them up [his category had to hand over the loot to the higher-ranking Ninjas]. I used to live in Kinsoundi with my uncle so I knew the area very well, who lived where and where they came from.

We were recruited, and after that we waited for some time. In the mornings we went footing (jogging). One day they told us to be prepared. That was after the elections, when they announced the results, they said:

*on a triché* (that there had been fraud in connection with the elections). And they told us we had to be prepared for war against Niboulek. I did not want to fight at the beginning but then I heard that Lari had been driven out of Loubomo (Dolisie), Sibiti and Bouensa. Then I felt angry [*la colère!*] (Words in parantheses, my remarks)

After the war in 1993-94 the young men were very frustrated, ashamed and felt they had been used by *les leaders politiques*. The frightening aspect of the situation is that modern arms were handed out to 'young bandits'. The guns provide these young men with power and food (Ekholm Friedman and Sundberg 1995).

By the beginning of 1997, banditry had increased although it was difficult to distinguish 'ordinary' banditry from the violence caused by the military and police. Many of the young men in the various militias

(Bazenguissa-Ganga 1996; Sundberg 1995; Ekholm Friedman and Sundberg 1995) had been recruited into the ordinary army, as part of the peace treaty of 1994. But not all of them. In February (1997) there were TV reports, and rumours, in what is commonly called 'Radio Trottoir', about trains being stopped at Loudima in the Niari by young people, all Nibolek<sup>9</sup>, who had been recruited for the presidential militia. Whether they were trained at Aubeville<sup>10</sup> or not is not totally clear<sup>11</sup>. They claim to have been given promises that they would be recruited by the army. Since they were not so recruited, they decided to force their way in. They called themselves cocoyes which, according to my informants, means a group of very strong soldiers, some kind of special force<sup>12</sup>. They had three demands:

- to be recruited into regular army,
- to have the rank of sergeants, and
- to have their chief changed.

The reason why they wanted their chief changed was that he had 'eaten' their money. After the chef-d'état major had 'spoken', the chief was changed and the trains were subsequently allowed to proceed. The event was discussed on TV and was interpreted as part of the power struggle and the game of politics.

Two other examples of the different kinds of banditry, that was increasingly typical at the beginning of 1997, and which show how dangerous the situation had become, are the following.

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9. See the map in the appendix.

10. Aubeville is a village in the region of Bouenza where Lissouba's militia was trained by Israeli mercenaries. Rémy Bazenguissa-Ganga call them *La réserve ministérielle*, but they are generally known as *Aubevillois*.

11. Or whether they had been recruited for something called the *Action de rénovation rurale*, which was a kind of military training where one had the possibility of getting recruited to the ordinary army after passing a test.

12. Cocoye seems to have an Israeli connotation; it may be based on a Hebrew word.



The first story is about a group of bandits, who, in January, tried to stage a hold-up in Poto-Poto (see map of Brazzaville). A girl happened to see them and cried out. She was shot. The police came, shot some of the bandits and when they captured the last one, tried to 'make him speak', i.e. to tell them where their arms came from and who was in command. Eventually he was killed.

The other incident concerns the thieves in Massina, a neighbourhood of Mfilou (see map of Brazzaville) who had been terrorizing the local population. Many families had been victims of their assaults. Finally they were caught. As they were Ninjas, the people of the neighbourhood called for other Ninjas to kill them.

In January-February 1997, the situation seems to be worsening. The politicians and the military had not been able to retrieve the weapons that had been handed out so freely before the conflict of 1993-94.

### **The Politicians and the Lack of Economic Development**

The cleavage between the politicians and the people is enormous. The political class has, as mentioned above, separated itself completely from the people. After the National Conference (in 1991) the people were only mobilized in order to vote and then along ethnic lines. Later, young men were recruited into the militias. Class is still of crucial importance in the Congo even if it is hidden for the moment by ethnicity. The relationship between these two aspects of social reality should be studied more thoroughly by social scientists. The Congolese case shows that ethnicity, in spite of the country's pronounced class conflict, can be activated at any time. A condition for the control of ethnic conflict is an effective state with real powers (Hobsbawm 1997:55). It is interesting to note that ethnicity and the clan system do not quite correspond, although clan politics are used as a strategy in

order to compete for political power (Ekholm Friedman and Sundberg 1996).

The ethnic problem is closely connected to the lack of economic development. There are very few jobs outside the civil service, and even those with jobs have not been regularly paid during the last couple of years. In 1996 President Lissouba managed to pay civil servant's salaries for the whole year, which people attributed to the prospect of presidential elections in 1997. But the salaries had been cut by 30 per cent in 1995 and there had also been a devaluation by 50 per cent of the CFA franc, which meant that the people had suffered a great loss of earnings. As the situation has worsened during 1997, with the war and the chaos this has created, and as prices have tripled, people have become even more dependent on their ethnic networks and patron-client relationships than before 1990. There is no welfare state to turn to in times of need. People are left with their family as the only source of security.

Owing to pressure from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Congo has opted for the separation of the economy from politics, in order to promote economic development. During the one-party regime, the economic performance of the state enterprises was extremely poor and they never functioned as a source of income for the state but, rather as a fountain of wealth for the upper echelons employed (Atipo 1985, Ekholm Friedman 1990, 1994). There was much talk about the privatization of electricity and water supply, which understandably enough never even got started. The former Minister of Energy tried to give a different picture in one of the issues of *Jeune Afrique*: everything functions as normal, though money goes through the banks in Pointe Noire instead (*Jeune Afrique* 1997).

Owing to increasing poverty during the last decade, the clan system has disintegrated, and those who today engage in ethnic conflict are more individualized than even before (Ekholm Friedman 1994).

Neither family nor clan have sufficient means to use for their strategies. The young have to look for other *bienfaiteurs*. They are used by the politicians while at the same time promoting their own interests. There is an intense struggle over resources and it seems to groups 'outside' the ruling group as if only members of that group get promoted and find jobs. Already in October 1992 it was claimed that 'la plupart des directeurs généraux et directeurs de service' appointed in mid-October belonged to UPADS (the President's party) and were from Niboulekin (*Jeune Afrique*, 19-25 October 1992, no.1663). This was also a obvious feature of the war in 1993-94. As pointed out by Hobsbawm, 'il s'agit de lutter contre les autres groupes qui sont en concurrence pour le partage des ressources de l'Etat commun à tous' (Hobsbawm 1997:53).

It is important to 'specify what the groups are fighting over... and why ethnic lines of conflict are important' (Horowitz 1985:15). It may be, as Patrick Quantin puts it, that the 'ethnic variable' does not exist except *a posteriori*, but 'comme discours de rationalisation des mythes, mais occulte bien plus qu'elle ne dévoile les pratiques politiques et leurs enjeux' (Quantin 1994:170).

### Young Men

A common feature in conflicts all over the world seems to be that young men are the most easily recruited and enrolled in armies and militias. They are often very young, i.e. between 13 and 20 (Horowitz 1985). What happens in the Congo is definitely a youth problem which can be related to the economic failure. What happened in Loudima is an example of this problem. If President Lissouba had won the elections, they would have had no chance to be recruited.

Why have the politicians been so reluctant to retrieve arms? One answer is that they need their militias. Each politician seems to have his

guard or militia<sup>13</sup>. The politicians use young, poor men for their needs in their struggle for power, and they have handed out the arms themselves. The politicians' own sons have been sent abroad, mostly to Europe. The young men have absolutely no possibility of earning their living. It is hardly strange that the young men turn to banditry with guns in their hands. It seems as if they are sometimes pushed into action in order to destabilize the situation. In an interview one of my informants says:

They can only recruit young men living under miserable conditions and who don't think. They usually get 300 Fr a day. The boys are told that they will get military training in Israel or in the US, and that they will return as officers. This is very tempting as we admire and envy the military. Even their parents are told so in order to get their consent. Sometimes the parents are fanatics who conceive of their political chief as God, and they want their sons to join the Ninjas. But the boys are not sent to Israel, they just get a gun and a short instruction in its use. After that, they have to obey orders. When the chief of the band (they operate in smaller units) wants an attack to be carried through, he gives his orders. And you must obey because he is the one who feeds you. You cannot refuse. You are fed by him and housed by him, for a boy like him that is enough.

They are easily seduced by a little money, and a roof over their heads. Another militia man says:

But in the end the politicians are ungrateful, those men who supported us, they pay us ape money, I would even say that we can be compared to saucepans. Saucepans good for cooking, but when it is time to serve one says: The saucepans are dirty, they will make the table dirty so then you throw them away some place. That's how we have been thanked, we, the young Congolese...

The young men recruited are mostly without prospects. They are school drop-outs and have no job. If you do not have a job, it means that you do

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13. There are not only the Ninjas, Cobras, Zulus and Aubevillois, there are also *les réquins, les vautours, les lampioles*. Rémy Bazenguissa-Ganga (1996) shows that it is not the politicians who start recruiting their guards, but rather the young men who start organizing their defence. This works both ways. Today the politicians do not dare not to have their militias in order to protect themselves from the others.

not have the possibility of becoming independent of your family. You are, of course, never totally independent in Congolese society. But it is very important for young men to prove their manhood, as the following story shows:

A young man living in his father's house with his wife (they had been married traditionally but not in church or according to the civil law) finally got a job as a computer-specialist. Before he told his father that he had actually got a job, he waited until he got his first salary. He then bought his father a costume and when giving it to his father he showed that he was now an adult and had got a job to support his family.

Without money young men cannot marry or even have a girl-friend. They are nothing. They spend their days in the company of their peers, smoking marihuana,<sup>14</sup> drinking beer and using 'Roche' (a very strong sedative). At night they walk around the neighbourhood, *le quartier*, look for some place to go, often une *veillée* or wake, where they start to harass people. They dance and they urinate and defecate in front of everybody, a provocatively obscene act. They want to fight somebody, and as they have been or are Ninjas, people are afraid to defy them, because at any moment they may bring out a gun and shoot<sup>15</sup>

But not all of them are dropouts without education or future possibilities. Among them are also young men studying at the university<sup>16</sup>. One of my informants is preparing his DEA (MPhil) in economics, who joined the Zulus to 'defend his rights'. Another joined

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14. According to the 'Internal Affairs Ministry' in Congo, 33 per cent of the Congolese uses drugs (*L'Autre Afrique*, no. 3, 4-10 juin 1997).

15. Joao Honwana giving a lecture at the CODESRIA Governance Institute 1997 described the Mozambican case where presented the idea of being a man with a gun in your hands and the power that a young man feels. The lecture was entitled: 'Resolution of Conflicts: Situation and Research Trends'.

16. The university as well as the schools have not been working properly the last five years owing to political instability and war. The teachers and professors have been on strike as well as the students. As there was a cut in salaries, people are not motivated to go and work, nor salaries have been paid regularly.

the Ninjas because he believed he would be better off and that the politicians would keep their promises. He felt very disappointed and disillusioned in 1995.

Perhaps we shall see new political structures emerge as a result of this process of disintegration. These young men were earlier completely excluded socially and politically. Now they have become a political force and a very dangerous one, difficult if not impossible to control. Some of the gangs operate more or less on their own in both city and countryside (Ekholm Friedman and Sundberg 1996). Thus, the politicians manipulate the youth but the youth is liberating itself and uses the politicians for its own interest.

### **The Security of People**

*Il y en a qui s'arme le jour, il y en a qui s'arme la nuit*  
(Jean-Marc Ela).

The Congolese state in January 1997 was close to anarchy and had no real possibility of defending the rights of the citizens or of protecting them against robberies and other kinds of banditry. Two of the examples described above shows how robbery and 'ordinary' crime are treated. The police systematically use torture when taking in presumed thieves. The OCDH have proof<sup>17</sup> of crimes committed by the police and were trying to rouse public opinion on this issue. They were not, however, completely understood by the people, who were tired of criminals. When asked about the behaviour of the police, my informants were quite clear about the danger of police killing people without trial and what effects this might have in the long run. I was told that the criminals are sometimes used in settling old disputes between politicians.

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17. I was given copies of the photographs of one case. The man had been burnt with the use of an iron and finally he was shot.

What has been seen in many African countries lately is that politicians orchestrate some crimes in order to blame one another. The polity becomes a space for violence and crime (Ela, J.M. 1997). In Congo there are reports of both Lissouba's and Sassou's militias ravaging and looting abandoned houses. The material destruction has been enormous.

It seems as if the security of people is 'threatened from the top', as Jean-Marc Ela states (1997). He goes so far as to say that 'we (Africans) are ruled by criminals'. Furthermore the leaders are prepared to go very far in order to keep or to gain power. In the mid-80's some children disappeared in Brazzaville. According to rumours they were taken to Sassou Nguesso who consumed their hearts. It was also said that he used literally to bathe in blood.

In today's Congo a sect, called CIFMC<sup>18</sup>, attracts many of the haut fonctionnaires, and every Sunday at the Avenue des armées, cars in great numbers, four-wheeled drives and Mercedes etc., are parked. The woods in front of the parliament are full of people praying for power and the possibility of staying in power.

As Jean-Marc Ela points out, the imaginary must be taken into account. He uses the concept *l'économie du jour et l'économie de la nuit* (the economy of the day and the economy of the night). 'L'état lui-même bascule vers l'occulte, le souterrain. Il s'y passe beaucoup de choses qui mettent en cause la sécurité des vies humaines'. In order to understand the situation, we must distinguish between the visible and the invisible. Ali El Kenz stresses the importance of the imaginary of a conflict. The imaginary is important in the interpretation of reality. When reality no longer produces signs of hope, the imaginary takes

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18. CIFMC: Communauté des femmes, messagères de Christ. Apparently this started in Canada as a movement among women to come together and pray for issues important to women. It was a kind of ecumenical movement, but in Zaïre it has become a church or sect. It is no longer just for women.

over. Nationalism was earlier related to reality and hopes for the future. By using the metaphors of Prometheus and Hermes, he tries to demonstrate how technological development and rational disenchanted modernity struggle with the cultural spiritual dimension in society. The world of Hermes allows people to fill their lives with meaning (El Kenz 1997a and b).

The interpretation and reinterpretation of the situation in the Congo takes place every moment. One example of this is what happened in 1992-93. There was a march organized from Bacongo, in which Bernard Kolelas took part. When they reached the French Cultural Centre, a disturbance occurred. The military started to shoot and some people were killed. But the real problem was, according to the interpretation, that the President never 'spoke'. As a father he should talk in order to calm the situation. He should have explained what had happened and he should of course have condemned the shootings. But he chose to remain silent. He was not even in Brazzaville at the time, which has also been the subject of various interpretations and reinterpretations.

### **Power and Its Expression Through the Leader**

*Le pouvoir c'est un tontine, à chacun son tour*

(Jean-Marc Ela).

During the government of President Sassou Nguesso, a modern advertisement campaign was launched. Huge posters were erected throughout the city with pictures of the President in a field of vegetables. He was holding some tomatoes or eggplants in his hands. The idea was to encourage the country to be self-sufficient before the year 2000. But the interpretation among the people was that Sassou said to his people: Now I have taken my part and here is your share (i.e. the four or five tomatoes in his hands). This shows a great sense of humour among the Congolese, but what is more interesting is the kind of



resistance from below towards a corrupt leadership. This phenomenon is described and analyzed by Achille Mbembe in his very provoking article, 'Sexe, bouffe et obscénité politique' (*Terroirs*, no. 002-janvier 1995). He shows how intimately connected the expression of leadership is to material expressions of looking good (i.e. not too thin) and having a good love-life.

In the Congo, there is a deep resistance to the tendency of the political class, no matter what government, to 'partager les avantages matériel que procure le pouvoir' (Mandzougou 1995). This 'leakage' of money counteracts the necessary action of trying to reduce the cost of the public sector. Mandzougou, who has been *payeur général* in Congo, says what has not been said before, at least no so openly,

...le problème fondamental du Congo réside dans la nature irresponsable de sa classe politique qui, aujourd'hui comme hier, oublie le sens du devoir dans la gestion de la chose publique une fois parvenue au pouvoir. Elle est inapte à toute action qui exige sacrifice et abnégation de soi et manque par conséquence de crédibilité dans son discours et ses mots d'ordre (Mandzougou 1995).

In interviews in May 1994 it seemed as if members and supporters of the UPADS, the political party in power, were the real democrats. They expressed the idea that as they had won the election they were now in power, and if the opposition was not satisfied with the situation, they could make a better campaign for the next election to be able to win the next time and then get their share of the cake. This is what one is fighting for, power and the possibility to 'eat' ( Mbembe 1993, 1995, and Hobsbawm 1997).

As I said earlier, Bernard Kolelas, the opposition leader, is thought of as Messiah or Moses, the saviour of the country. He is also, to some, the descendent of Matswa<sup>19</sup> and as such is again the Messiah who has

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19. André Grenard Matswa was a political leader who refused to pay taxes to the French colonialist regime and who organized the protest called 'les trois francs'.

come back to save his people. It is said that he also uses the traditional chief's blessing, or father's blessing, which means that people crawl under his legs when he touches them with a traditional whip, a buffalo tail. During the war in 1993-94, the nkisi nkondi<sup>20</sup> taken from the museum or from ORSTOM were used as protectors of Bacongo and the Kolelas territory.

At the beginning of 1996, a strike was organized by the workers at the state-owned electric company. In the heat of the conflict, some of the workers cut the electric wires including those leading to the President's palace. This made President Lissouba so angry that he put those workers in jail. The news was transmitted to the International Workers Union and to national unions around the world. The Swedish Workers Union (LO) was informed at a time when the Congolese ambassador to Sweden was guiding a Swedish delegation. The event caused some problems in relations with the Swedish government. The President's action could be interpreted as an attempt to intimidate the workers as they expressed their opinion in the new democratic context. Lissouba himself was however, very surprised at the strong reaction coming from different countries. 'I am the chief, they cannot do what they want to the President'<sup>21</sup> was his reaction. The law is conceived as an expression of the President's power, and under him of lesser power-holders. This is a traditional feature. It is noted in earlier ethnographic-historical material about kingdoms in Central Africa that the authority of the king was fourfold; economic, political, religious and

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He died in prison in France and quite soon people started to 'pray to him' and some said that he would come back as Messiah. He was a Lari from Kinkala.

20. Fetish used for protection. The ones taken from the museum are from the nineteenth century and they were put up at the entrance to the territory occupied by Kolelas, where the Ninjas were in control.
21. These are not his exact words, his reaction was given to me by sources close to the Congolese consul in Sweden.

judicial (Ekholm Friedman 1972, 1984), which to some extent explains the general acceptance of the behaviour of former rulers.

During the Sassou regime, there was no separation between the private and public economy. The traditional strategy was to use resources to expand the size of one's own group and to establish and maintain alliances with other groups. This traditional authority is challenged today and attempts have been made to separate the judicial system from the political system and to disconnect the economic sphere from the political.

Traditionally, a political system was established by military means and the king was, above all, a conqueror (Ekholm Friedman and Sundberg 1996:5). In June 1997 Sassou Nguesso was militarily well-equipped, owing to the wealth he had acquired while ruling the Congo. It is not known whether France contributed financially to his military force, but the French have at least sold weapons both to him and to the regular army. It is clear that Sassou could not have won through ordinary elections, but had to conquer the kingdom.

### **Recent Development in the Congo**

On June 1997, President Lissouba decided to start taking back arms from the different militias, starting with the Cobras, the militia of former President Sassou Nguesso. The agreement about the collection of arms and the demilitarization of the militias was already signed in December 1995 but nothing had been done. On 28 May 1997, the Council of Ministers decided that all activities of and even the existence of militias were henceforth forbidden (*L'Autre Afrique*, 1997, no. 3 du 4 au 10 juin). The question is of course what made Lissouba take the decision at that moment. The temperature of the debate regarding the presidential elections had been increasing since April. Sassou Nguesso had also started campaigning in the north by provoking Yhombi in his home town Owando. Apparently Sassou wanted to be received in the

traditional manner, which meant being carried in a *tipoy* into the town. Everything was arranged. He had sent his security to organize a bodyguard during his visit. It happened that somebody loyal to Yhombi was recruited and at one moment he felt threatened and pulled out a gun. But Sassou's bodyguard was faster and the young man was shot. Yhombi sent his own son to calm things down, but the son was also killed. As Yhombi organizes the President's campaign, this was a provocation for both sides. Ali El Kenz talks about the symbols in a conflict and that the degree of violence has no reference to the level of violence of the first crime. When the Congolese Armed Forces (Forces armées congolaises—FAC) surrounded Sassou Nguesso's headquarters in Mpila, Sassou ordered his militia to fight back. The FAC was taken by surprise by the resistance of the Cobras and their military force. They were totally unprepared for the military strength of Sassou's 'army'. Sassou had seemingly been preparing his defence for a long time. His weapons were new whereas those of FAC were older and their men not so well-trained.

What may not be evident to everybody was the reason why the negotiations in Libreville did not seem to work. It was said in the news from Radio France International, RFI, that Lissouba had accused Omar Bongo of being partial. Omar Bongo happens to be married to Sassou Nguesso's daughter and it is obvious to every Congolese that this will make him partial. It is also interesting to note that Laurent Désirée Kabila wants to get on the stage of international negotiation. Is he trying to rehabilitate himself in the eyes of the world? It can be noted with the same interest that France is not too keen about the prospect of a success for Kabila.

What is the resemblance between the war of 1993-94 and today's (1997) war? Today's conflict is more clear in the sense that it is a war between two warlords, two politicians who have been enemies for a long time and who are so alienated from the people that they are quite

prepared to sacrifice them. In 1993-94 the ethnic element was much more important and ordinary people took part in the killings and looting. So far ordinary people have tried to keep out of trouble and have left Brazzaville in their hundreds of thousands. There are stories about northern families hiding people from Niboulek and helping them to get out of Sassou Nguesso territory. In Pointe-Noire the situation has so far been kept under control. People from the north living there had not yet been threatened in August. But as the situation seemed to worsen, it could be only a matter of time before the whole country would be at war. On 27 August 1997, RFI reported that Lissouba had started bombing Mpila at 5.30 in the morning of the same day as the negotiations in Libreville were supposed to be reopened. There were rumours about Sassou Nguesso taking over the north, but also other news saying that it was a question of attempted mutinies and that the army was still loyal to the government.

Significantly Sassou Nguesso did not call Lissouba President but Monsieur Lissouba, when interviewed by RFI. He does not recognize the legitimacy of Lissouba's power. 31, August 1997 was the end of Lissouba's mandate. Lissouba was militarily defeated on the 15 October 1997, with the help of Angolan troupes.

## **France and Its Relation to the Congo**

The role of France cannot be underestimated in the recent conflict. France has always kept a very close relationship to its former colonies and has signed defence treaties as well as providing technical assistance for military training. It is obvious that France tries to gain influence in Central Africa in order to be more influential in world politics. This is confirmed in a recent research report where Inger Österdahl argues:

Les liens étroits entre la France et l'Afrique francophone sub-saharienne dans le domaine militaire a autant servi les intérêts de la France que ceux des pays africains. Les liens militaires à leur tour se sont manifestés dans les accords de défense et d'assistance militaire technique et dans maintes interventions armées entreprises

par la France dans ces pays depuis les indépendances. La France a pu garder d'une manière assez étonnante un empire quasi-colonial en Afrique sans que le reste du monde ne s'en aperçoive sans qu'il ne s'en inquiète. L'Afrique a servi les intérêts de la France en lui permettant de rester une grande puissance sur la scène internationale (1997:86).

However, the official policy seems to be to withdraw from the African scene. In the media there has recently been much talk about an end of the French era (*L'Autre Afrique*, 1997, no. 25, 12 au 18 novembre). The paradox between discourse and policy on the one side and the importance of profit and control over resources on the other. France has managed to get control, through ELF Congo, over the two new oil-fields off the Congolese coast and will certainly do a lot in order to keep them. President Lissouba actually asked the French military present in Brazzaville, because of the problematic situation in Congo-Zaïre, to stay on, but the French declined. 'Les congolais ont rompu l'accord de défense avec la France il y a une vingtaine d'années', was the answer of Jacques Chirac gave (*Le Point*, 1997, no.1297, 26 juillet). This was understood as the French giving 'carte blanche' to Sassou Nguesso. Officially France refused to choose between its 'two friends'. *Le Point* continues, however, its critique of the French attitude:

Cynisme d'un Etat qui attend que le meilleur gagne, puisqu'il entretient des relations avec les deux belligérants dans ce pays où les rivalités politiques ont de fortes odeurs de pétrole?

The present image of France is darker than it used to be. The young 'southerners' are very frustrated, to say the least, by this policy, and when France refused to help Lissouba, some of the Zulus were so outraged by this that the French living in Brazzaville, who wanted to leave the country, had a hard time managing to get out. The Zulus stopped cars going to the airport in order to check the nationality of their occupants. If they were French, they were killed. A group of Swedes, who had been stopped, saw all four people in another car shot. The Swedes had to prove that they were not French.

It seems that when Sassou is back in power, we will be able to get international approval if he manages to impose control over the anarchistic situation and to re-establish the order needed by external commercial interests. By alliances with companies like ELF, he managed to finance his war against the militias in Congo. These ideas have been suggested by Patrick Quantin:

..., ces gouvernants s'attirent les bonnes grâces des bailleurs de fonds et des ONG donnant l'impression de lutter contre l'instabilité en même temps qu'ils se débarrassent de leurs concurrents locaux (Quantin 1997:2-3).

The influence of external forces cannot be neglected in the recent conflict. The former President Lissouba has filed a complaint against ELF for its part in Nguesso's successful takeover of power.

## Conclusion

*Il faut déghettoiser le discours africain* (Jean-Marc Ela).

Many social scientists in Africa fervently criticize the present regimes all over Africa and the behaviour of what have been called the kleptocratic/vampire states. The causes of the present situation are more often sought from within, even if reference is still made to colonialism and imperialism. The old Dependency School is no longer a sufficient theory. This new debate gives more room for a new and creative search for solutions. Africa is, of course, not damned, despite being faced with multiple problems, even though Achille Mbembe has introduced the thought of a Return to Darkness (Robert Kaplan 1996). The important questions of today concern the problems of

- rights and liberty,
- war and violence, and
- security within society.

It is very important for scholars to join forces in order to try to understand today's conflictuality. We are faced with similar problems around the world. Some scientists have stressed the specificity of Africa

and therefore also argued for special solutions. I would like to argue, on the basis of my research in the Congo and as an Africanist coming from the North, that in times of economic decline, society becomes more and more fragmented and dehomogenized.

In this paper I have tried to show how ethnicity is used by both politicians and people to compete and fight for power. In the Congo, the young men, who have become more individualized, feel 'abandoned', i.e. deceived, by their political leaders. At the same time, they have organized themselves in militias to fight over the distribution of resources. Ethnic identity has become a very powerful tool. When ethnic groups turn against each other, the outcome is often lethal.

Society is disintegrating. Families no longer have the means to carry out their economic or social strategies and therefore groups other than the family or the clan become more and more important. Sometimes it is a group formed on the basis of ethnic belonging, such as the militias, where young men hope for integration into the regular army, or operate on their own. Sometimes other groups such as sects or secret associations play the role of social networks.

I have also tried to show that the organization of militias and the proliferation of banditry can be seen as a challenge to those in power. The frustration of poor, young men with no opportunities becomes dangerous, especially since the politicians have handed out weapons so freely. Meanwhile the people are left with no security whatsoever. In such a situation, the imaginary, with its own ways of creating meaning, or a cultural/ethnic mobilisation seem to be the only way to interpret reality. The state has lost its legitimacy and can no longer protect its citizens. The interpretation of reality according to the symbolic order underlines the power of the politicians and their ability to use the dynamics of the imaginary for their own purposes.



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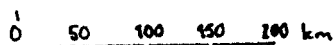
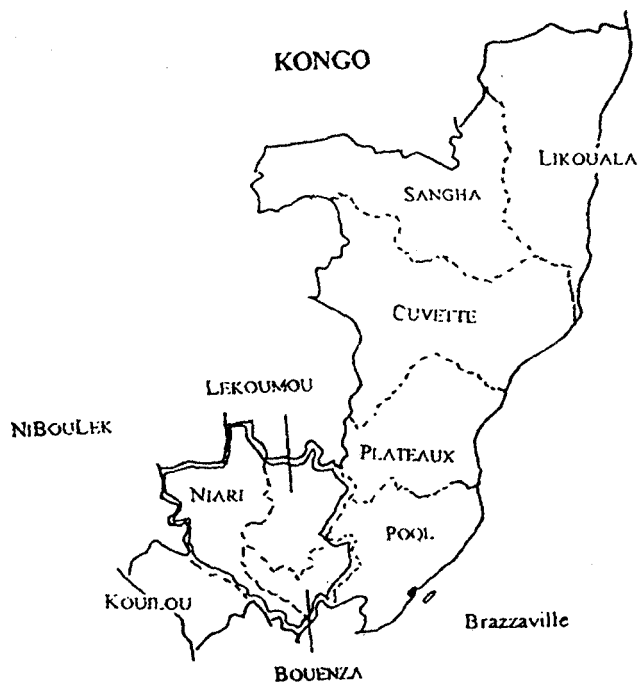
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## **Interviews**

The president of the National Assembly, M André Milongo, high judges and economists in Congo (who must remain anonymous for well known reasons) 'ordinary' people, commoners, in the different areas of the capital, interviews with some people at the countryside.

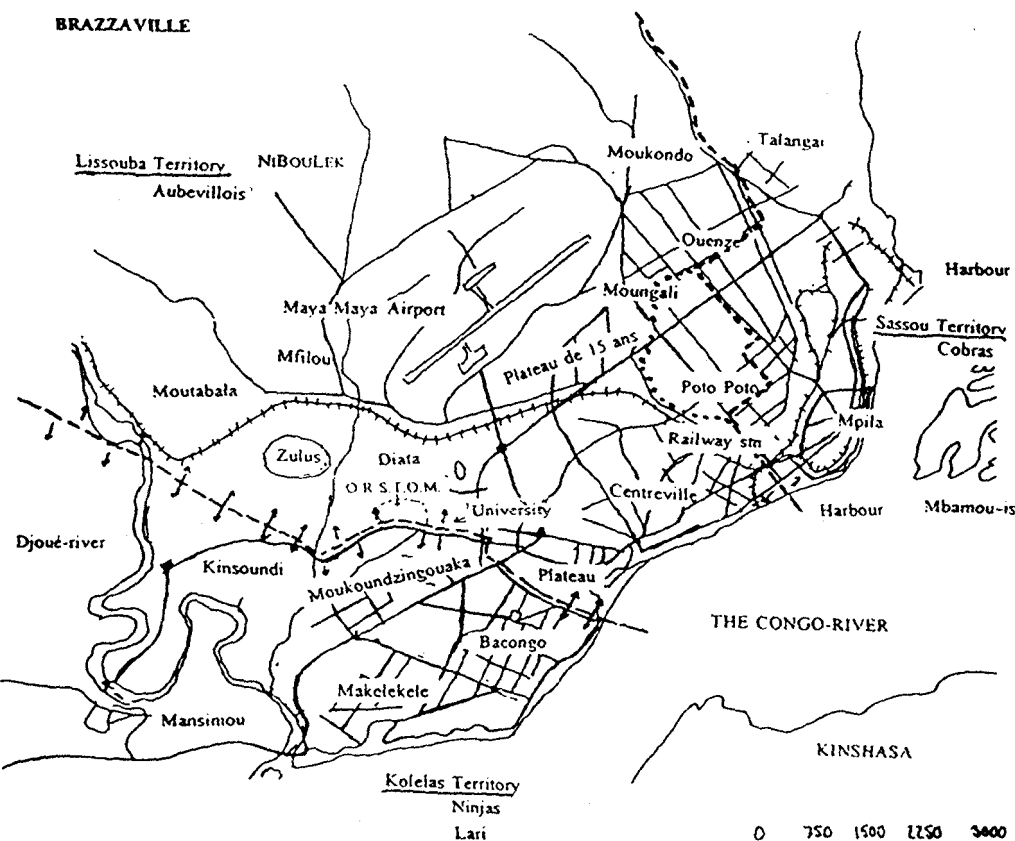
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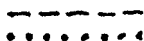


Scale 1:10 miles.

**BRAZZAVILLE**



Frontiers between different milinas in the city



0 750 1500 2250 3000 m  
Scale 1: 75 000