



Mayi-Mayi: Young Rebels in Kivu, DRC

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Abstract

Mayi-Mayi militias have played a central role in the Congo war. Mostly active in North and South Kivu, these rural militias are not a unified movement. Nevertheless, they share a nationalist ideology and a number of war rituals centered on the belief that the *mayi*, a specially treated water, can protect warriors from bullets. In this article, I have traced the history of these beliefs and ritual practices that are rooted in the pre-colonial and colonial periods. Far from being a symptom of regression or new-barbarism, I have tried to show that the recourse to war rituals, as well as the nationalistic discourse, were effective in compensating the lack of weapons and military organization, and in mobilizing youth in a context of state collapse. Nevertheless, most of *Mayi-Mayi* commanders have proved to be opportunists and many young people have become involved in a spiral of violence that needs to be broken.

Résumé

Les miliciens *Mayi-Mayi* ont joué un rôle central dans la guerre au Congo. Plus actifs au nord et au sud de Kivu, ces miliciens de la campagne ne forment pas un mouvement unifié. Néanmoins, ils partagent la même idéologie nationaliste en plus d'un bon nombre de rites basés sur la conviction que le *mayi*, une eau spécialement traitée, peut les protéger contre les balles de pistolet. Dans cet article, je trace l'histoire de ces croyances et pratiques rituelles qui trouvent leur origine dans les périodes précoloniales et coloniales. J'ai essayé de montrer que le recours aux rites guerriers et aux discours nationalistes, loin d'être un symptôme de régression ou une nouvelle forme de barbarisme, s'est montré efficace pour compenser le manque d'armes et d'organisation militaire, mais aussi pour mobiliser la jeunesse dans le contexte d'un état qui s'écroule. Malheureusement, la plupart des commandants *Mayi-Mayi* se sont montrés très opportunistes, et beaucoup de jeunes se sont retrouvés dans une spirale de violence qui doit être arrêtée.

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Introduction

Mayi-Mayi is one of the armed movements involved in the war that ravaged North and South Kivu in the eastern regions of the Democratic Republic of Congo during the last decade. In Congolese Kiswahili, Mayi-Mayi means 'water-water' which refers to the most important ritual performed by the movement. This ritual consists of sprinkling young soldiers with 'magic water', the *mayi*, which is believed to protect warriors from bullets.

There are at least two reasons for this armed movement: on the first hand, Mayi-Mayi controlled most of the rural regions in Kivu; on the second hand, tens of thousands of young people and children enrolled in this movement. In East Congo, enrolment in rural militias is a response to a complete lack of alternatives such as social and economic integration and security. A strong point in the Mayi-Mayi phenomenon is the role of war rituals and symbolism: the *mayi* is prepared by *docteurs*, who are mostly children, and the combatants have to respect many rules if they want the water to be effective. These symbols and practices, widely documented also in other African contexts, compensate for the scarcity of modern weapons. At the same time, the ritual discourse constitutes an effective strategy of mobilisation, which favours the enrolment of young recruits attracted by the possibility of affirming themselves and gaining access to new sources of power.

In this article, I will focus on Mayi-Mayi's political history, its symbolism and role in mobilising the youth in periods of crisis. Starting with Kivu social history, I will consider what induced many youngsters to enrol in the movement. Then I will focus on Mayi-Mayi political discourse, its war rituals and practices which shaped the new identity that emerges from the war. Finally, I will consider some consequences of the war in Congo where violence seems to recompense the ones that use it.

Mayi-Mayi: A 'Warrior Tradition'

Between October 1996 and May 1997, Mayi-Mayi appeared in the AFDL war which put an end to Mobutu's regime. The movement is still active in the rural zones of North and South Kivu. The term Mayi-Mayi actually refers to a cluster of groups scarcely co-ordinated among themselves, and often driven by internal conflicts. At the same time, there are some common characteristics which allowed the construction of a general view of the entire phenomenon. First of all, Mayi-Mayi factions constantly resort to war rituals, centred on the belief in the power of *mayi* to protect the combatants from bullets. Second, the movement articulates a set of common grievances, based on nationalist ideals, in order to oppose Ugandan and Rwandan

military intervention in Kivu. This mix of ‘secret power’ and nationalism seems to be very attractive to young people in East Congo.

All around the world, when we speak about combatants we refer to young people. Most Mayi-Mayi fighters are very young, often children. From a symbolic point of view, however, the Mayi-Mayi phenomenon is not ‘young’. During periods of crisis in Africa, the use of magic water has proved to be an effective tool for organising the new generations into militias and to induce them to fight. Historically, meaningful links can be made between the present Mayi-Mayi rebellion and the resistance and rebel movements, which characterised East Africa in colonial and post-colonial times. From this point of view, the Mayi-Mayi phenomenon speaks to a symbolic continuity with the beliefs and rites related to the invulnerability of warriors widely diffused in many African contexts. The use of ‘magic water’ to heal people and to fight enemies is well documented in the history of the continent. The anthropologist John Middleton, in an article published in 1963 analysed the Yakan cult among the Lugbara, a population living between Uganda and Congo. The cult, which was centred upon the drinking of a magic water, appeared among the Lugbara at the end of the 19th century but it was already being practised by some neighbouring populations, such as the Dinka and the Mundu that used the magic water to fight against Arabs and the Azande empire. The cult spread among the Lugbara in a period of serious crisis: deadly diseases, such as meningitis, famine and the Mahdi revolt in Sudan contributed to the atmosphere of deep uncertainty. At the beginning of the 20th century, when the Lugbara region was under Belgian influence, the men who had obtained the water from the neighbouring populations were able to increase their status and were often named chiefs.¹ Later on, after 1913, the region became part of Uganda and the cult was promoted again by a prophet named Rembe who, together with his assistants, started to organise groups of young combatants, following a European military model, armed with dummy rifles. In 1919, the police intervened to prevent a big meeting of Yakan adepts and several people were killed. Since then, Yakan has survived only as a healing cult.

Certainly, one of the better known cases of the use of magic water for rebel purposes is the case of Maji-Maji (water-water) rebellion which spread in Tanzania between 1905 and 1907.² At the beginning of the century, the German colonial administration had tried to involve the country in the global market, an act that had exacerbated the domination. Vast areas had been transformed into plantations and the old social order had been completely warped. The Maji-Maji rebellion began between the Matumbi, a population settled in the regions west of Kilwa, where German colonisers had introduced cotton plantations and the local population had been compelled to 28 days of forced labour per year.

The initial leader of the rebellion was Kinjikitile Ngwale, a man who lived in a village called Ngarambe. In 1904, Kinjikitile was possessed by Hongo, a spirit linked to the god Bokero, which was venerated in the southern regions of Tanzania. Under the influence of Hongo, Kinjikitile built a big hut where he communicated with ancestors. He began to sprinkle his young fighters with the *maji*, a water prepared with special herbs that was supposed to liquify German bullets. Combatants had to respect many conditions in order to be protected by the *maji*, first of all sexual abstinence. Kinjikitile predicted the union of all Africans and announced that ancestors would return to support the rebellion. A lot of pilgrims started to visit his hut and take the *maji*, becoming invulnerable to bullets. A new cult was born that responded both to the lack of unity between different tribes and to the military gap due to the absence of guns: many youngsters joined the ranks of the rebellion led by the novel prophet of African liberation.

Unfortunately, Kinjikitile was quickly arrested and hanged. Nevertheless, despite the sudden death of the prophet, many clans had already seized the *maji* that was prepared by an apposite figure called *hongo*, who was supposed to know its secret formula. But, the Germans reinforced their colonial army with recruits from Somalia and Guinea and they were able to contain the rebellion. Rebel villages were burnt as well as cultivated land. Hunger started to threaten the country and the belief in the power of *maji* waned rapidly as well as the unity between the different tribes. In 1907, the rebellion came to an end. According to the German authorities, about 26,000 rebels had been killed and more than 50,000 civilians had died because of hunger.

One of the most important aspects of the Maji-Maji rebellion was certainly its inter-tribal character, due to the diffusion of the *maji* cult among different ethnic groups. Besides, the rebels fought against both the external and internal enemy, namely, the Germans and the witches. In fact, after the rebellion, many witchcraft eradication movements emerged in Tanzania inspired by Maji-Maji symbolism. As Terence Ranger (1990:55) has argued, 'after the defeat of Maji-Maji, the cluster of symbols and claims to spiritual power which Kinjikitile had made use of was drawn upon by a succession of prophetic figures who were concerned with the internal purification of African societies, and who led what have been called 'witchcraft eradication movements'. Probably these movements spread out mainly after the Second World War when European colonisers prohibited the killing of witches. Either way, the Maji-Maji symbolism had been tested and it had proved its effectiveness in mobilising youth against invaders. Warriors, once sprinkled with water, fought bravely, scaring the enemy: the *maji* ritual was bound to resurge in future rebellions when it would be necessary to mobilise young people.

Another well documented case of the use of magic water in East Africa is the Simba rebellion (lions in Kiswahili) which broke out in the Congo in 1964, four years after independence. On that occasion, the ritual of the *maji* resurged again.

In December 1963 Pierre Mulele, who had been trained for a short time in China, came back to Kwilu, his birthplace, west of Kinshasa, and began a rebellion that aimed at a 'second independence' of the Congo. Some rudiments of guerrilla warfare and two revolvers were the initial means of the adventurous *maquis* of Lumumba's heirs. At the same time, a National Council for Liberation was created in Brazzaville by many nationalist leaders and Gbenye and Soumialot were charged with organising the rebellion in the Eastern regions. The Mulelist rebellion started in January 1964 and initially benefited from popular consensus and support. The reaction of the national army was pitiless: villages were burnt and cultivated land destroyed in an attempt to contain the war. But when the Mulele rebellion seemed to be nearly suppressed, Soumialot opened a new front in Kivu.

Simba was composed of young people, mostly between 12 and 20 years old. According to Benoit Verhaegen (1990, p. 94), it was an age group that 'the failed independence had particularly penalised, depriving them of school and work. They have nothing to lose in the insurrectional adventure and they constituted the Simba forefront'. The initial factors of Simba's success were ethnic homogeneity between the leaders of the rebellion, terror and magic protection (*ibidem*, pp. 94-96). The most important rebel leaders were Bakusu, Baluba and Batetela. Their leadership contributed to the initial cohesion of the movement. Furthermore, Simba made systematic use of terror: state agents, national officers, presumed traitors and simple thieves were tortured and executed in public. Finally, magic practices had a fundamental role: young Simba were first baptised with water and *dawa* (medications in Kiswahili) were given in order to protect them from bullets. Combatants had to observe several taboos such as sexual abstinence, prohibition from stealing, washing themselves, retreating in battle. They also had to follow a lot of food restrictions. The analogies with magic practices of Tanzanian Maji-Maji are evident. Bob Kabamba and Olivier Lanotte (1999:128, note 102) argued that the ritual of *maji* was brought to Congo by Soumialot's Tanzanian advisors who induced him to adopt this practice also for the Kivu rebellion. Even if the historical and political contexts were different, the war rituals were the same: their effectiveness in mobilising young people had already been proven. But the *maji* was not enough for Simba, faced with the reorganisation of the national army. In November 1964, two military operations were launched, supported by mercenary troops. Belgian parachutists conquered Kisangani and that was the end of the rebellion.

Origin and Evolution of the Mayi-Mayi Movement

East Congo began to crumble at the beginning of the 1990s, long before the AFDL rebellion. The first militias active in Kivu were named Kasindien and Bangilima and they were mainly composed of Simba veterans (cfr. Vlassenroot 2001-2, p. 124). The origins of these militias are uncertain. Vlassenroot argues that they had probably been created by Mobutu in order to support the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA), a rebel movement active in the Rwenzori massif and hostile to the Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni. In the same years in Masisi, a region north of Goma, traditional chiefs of the indigenous population, particularly Hunde, began to mobilise young people against Banyarwanda (people from Rwanda), the Rwandan speaking community, a mix of Hutu and Tutsi, living in East Congo³. The tensions between Banyarwanda and 'autochthonous populations' increased and soon degenerated into a bloody conflict: at the core of the rivalry there was (and still is) a strong competition over land and an ongoing conflict over nationality which confers the right to participate in political life.

In March 1993, many Banyarwanda civilians were massacred by 'autochthonous militias' composed mostly of Hunde, but also including Nyanga and Tembo elements at the market of Ntoto, a village in the Walikale region (North Kivu). The Banyarwanda reaction was inevitable and the conflict quickly got worse. For their part, indigenous chiefs addressed some Kasindien commanders that came to Masisi to train new militias. These commanders were considered *docteurs*, men who were supposed to preserve the secret formula for *mayi* that would protect Hunde recruits from bullets (Mbindule Mitono 2000).

That same year (i.e. 1993), the new militias started to call themselves Mayi-Mayi, perhaps in an attempt at unification of all the military factions in the indigenous tribes. With the arrival in Kivu of more than a million Hutu refugees from Rwanda in April 1994, the region was definitely destabilised. Despite the Mayi-Mayi declaring themselves a nationalist movement fighting for Congo's integrity, they allied with Interahamwe, the militia responsible for the genocide in Rwanda. The new alliance started to pillage villages and to persecute the Tutsi population in Kivu.

In 1996 the campaign of the Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo/Zaire (AFDL) began. The goal of this armed movement, led by Laurent Désiré Kabila and supported by Rwanda and Uganda, was to put an end to Mobutu's regime. Most of the Mayi-Mayi groups allied with Kabila; nevertheless some factions refused to join the campaign which was considered a Tutsi manoeuvre to conquer Kivu.

Mobutu's army was defeated in April 1997 and Kabila took over power; but the new government quickly lost consensus in Kivu. In Beni and Butembo (North Kivu), Mayi-Mayi groups started to attack AFDL soldiers, responsible for atrocities against the population, and in South Kivu general Padiri organised his own Mayi-Mayi group in the region of Bunyakiri (cf. Morvan 2004:104-119). The alliance between Kabila and Rwanda quickly deteriorated. Kabila accused Kigali of pillaging the country and expelled all Rwandans from Democratic Republic of Congo. Soon after, another rebellion started in Kivu: a new armed movement, the Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie (RCD), appeared on the scene, supported again by Kigali which aimed to reassert its influence over the Congo. With the second war, which started in August 1998, alliances changed again and Mayi-Mayi opposed the RCD rebellion which was considered a Tutsi attempt to regain Kivu. In this phase of the war, Mayi-Mayi allied with the Kinshasa government which gave them military support. Since 1998, the Mayi-Mayi have controlled Kivu's rural zones while the RCD has settled in urban centres.

After the peace agreement signed in Sun City and the creation of a provisional government, in April 2003, some Mayi-Mayi commanders joined the new national army, which was supposed to be composed of all rebel forces. Till now, a few factions have still not been brought under control.

Youth Marginality and Violence in East Congo

It is important to focus on some aspects of Kivu's social history that are pertinent to this analysis. As many scholars have argued, in Africa there is a strong correlation between the social and economic marginalisation of young people and war. In East Congo, as well as in other war-torn areas, young combatants often emerge as new and leading actors. The progressive social and economic marginalisation of younger generations is the result of complex historical dynamics, such as the erosion of the traditional system of land distribution and the collapse of the state and its institutions, beginning with the school system. These dynamics have dramatically increased the propensity of young people to enrol in the militias. In East Congo, the recourse to violence has become one of the rare opportunities for social mobility as it is one of the rare alternatives to social marginalisation.

In Kivu, a large percentage of young people are predisposed to enrolling in militias. According to Frank Van Acker and Koen Vlassenroot (2000:3), this phenomenon is to some extent connected to a process of social fragmentation tied to land distribution. In pre-colonial times the Bami, the traditional chiefs, were responsible for the distribution of land which was considered a collective property. In exchange for land, the families had to

pay a yearly tribute in kind – a chicken or a goat – depending on the size of land they received. During colonisation, the Belgians set up a system of land registration, thereby introducing private ownership. The colonial administration did not suppress the traditional system but most of the vacant lands, which traditionally constituted a reserve for the communities, were declared state property and then transformed into plantations.

The turning point was the promulgation in 1973 of the Bakajika law during Mobutu's regime. According to this law, all the Congolese soil and subsoil became state property and the traditional system was definitively suppressed. However, the new law was never fully enforced and the uncertainty over land rights brought chaos. According to Van Acker and Vlassenroot (2000:3), the Bakajika law 'allowed the economic control over land to shift from colonial family-held plantations to a new class of urban Congolese entrepreneurs and for it to be concentrated in their hands, save for a limited number of surviving company plantations'. The Mobutu regime was founded on clientelism: the state had been transformed into a predatory machine and the dictator redistributed part of his wealth to a restricted group of politicians and businessmen in exchange for their loyalty. Mobutu's clients seized big plots that in many cases remained uncultivated. In Masisi, where the soil is fertile and the demographic pressure is very high, many people were deprived of their land and some politicians belonging to the Banyarwanda community – such as Bisengimana Rwena, who at that time was the chief of staff of Mobutu – took possession of vast plots which were mainly transformed into cattle farms. The consequence of this process of land spoliation was a dramatic augmentation of social inequality.

These changes, due to the new laws, produced inter-generational effects. In fact, the new generations were the most penalised and soon a new lumpen class made up of young men with no land, emerged on the social scene. The labour surplus could not be absorbed by the Congolese economy, which lacked industry, and the ongoing augmentation of demographic pressure contributed to aggravate the situation. Young people started to move from their villages, looking for jobs in the Congolese informal economy as diamond dealers, gold-diggers, pedlars in urban centres, etc. These new occupations were precarious; besides, most job seekers remained unemployed. At the same time, the public school system completely collapsed leaving only private ones which survived but at a cost too high for most families. The result was that at the beginning of the 1990s, many young men were experiencing a condition of marginality and frustration, living in critical economic conditions. The public administration had completely lost its credibility and Mobutu's soldiers, who were no longer being paid, started to pillage civilians. In this context, the explosion of violence in Kivu represented for many youngsters

an opportunity: the enrolment in rural militias had become one of the rare ways to escape marginality and a chance to gain social mobility, as well as an occasion to take revenge against the Mobutu apparatus of violence.

The Urge to Enrol

As we have seen, in East Congo the new generations face serious constraints which drastically restrict their agency. Even if most of the combatants have joined an armed group voluntarily, we must underline that the choice to enrol is taken in a context of very limited opportunities. In addition, once the conflict has started, the escalation of violence often forces young people to enrol *en masse* given that in a situation of widespread insecurity, enrolment is sometimes the only alternative to death.

The political and propagandistic pressure towards enrolment is high: the military and political leaders often present their communities as victims of a broad conspiracy and on the point of being exterminated. A Mayi-Mayi commander, for example, showed me a document which, according to him, constituted the proof of the existence of a secret Tutsi plan which aimed to conquer Congo and to exterminate all Congolese people. The text was signed by the presidents of Uganda and Rwanda, Yoweri Museveni and Paul Kagame, and was made up of different points in which the two leaders declared their intentions: pillage Congo's resources, sterilise the women, kill all the young men, etc. Despite the fact that this document was clearly a fake, and even full of typographical errors, it summarised a widespread interpretation of the Congolese conflict which is considered a Tutsi attempt, supported by Western countries, to dominate Central Africa. According to this kind of propaganda, and I will come to this point again, the mobilisation of all forces within the community – young men but also women and children – is presented as the only means of survival.

Nevertheless, even though political pressure and propaganda are undoubtedly two important factors, the pursuit of material benefits certainly constitutes another big incentive for enrolment in Congo (actually it is very difficult to establish an order among these different factors). According to a survey carried out by UNICEF in Bukavu, 25 per cent of Kadogo⁴ (child-soldiers in Kiswahili) declared they had joined the AFDL of Kabila with the aim of obtaining some material benefits, 28 per cent of them declared that it was a matter of an absence of job opportunities, and 15 per cent wanted to take their revenge on the 'Forces Armées Zairoises', Mobutu's army. Only 7 per cent referred to patriotic motivations such as to put an end to Mobutu's dictatorship and free the country (cited in Van Acker & Vlassenroot 2001:107)

The fact that the search for material benefits often constitutes a major factor for enrolment explains why many combatants easily pass from an

armed group to another. Actually opportunism seems to be at the basis of many choices and behaviours. It is a widespread opportunism that, according to Bogumil Jewsiewicki, is connected to what he defines as 'mobutist habitus'. This habitus has been moulded by many years of the rapacious Mobutu dictatorship that has pushed people to behave on the basis of personal profit and on a symbolic violent definition of the other, as well as on a fear of becoming oneself a victim of this violence (Jewsiewicki 1998:632).

To broaden my analysis, I will now consider some passages from interviews made with several Mayi-Mayi combatants and ex-combatants. The first one is Kakule, an ex-combatant I met in 2003 when he was twenty-five years old; he had joined Mayi-Mayi in 1996 and he got out in 2000. At the time of our encounter, he was living in Lukanga, a village 30 km south of Butembo. Kakule was not married, he had no job and he passed most of his time drinking in the little pubs of the village where women prepare and serve local beer:

I joined Mayi-Mayi when I was eighteen years old. I had nothing to do in Lukanga and I had a debt of twenty-five dollars. I was in debt to Papi, a little dealer in the village, who had lent me some money to buy myself some clothes. Papi was harassing me, so I went to a friend in Vitshumbi [a village on lake Edouard] to escape my debt. I was not working in Vitshumbi. In that period the soldiers of Mobutu [FAZ] were fleeing Goma; Mayi-Mayi were ousting them. When Mayi-Mayi arrived in Kanyabayonga, the FAZ ran away towards Vitshumbi. I could not come back to Lukanga and in the village there was war. After a week Mayi-Mayi came face-to-face with the FAZ; people in the village were fleeing but I didn't know where to go so I stayed there. I saw Mayi-Mayi beating FAZ who retreated to Niakakoma. I stayed with them [Mayi-Mayi], and I asked to join the movement. (...) I left the movement because I didn't have any more goals; Kabila, our chief, was far away. When I came back to Lukanga I had some bodyguards and everybody was afraid of me. Nobody asked me for money anymore.

According to his explanation, Kakule enrolled by chance. He was fleeing from a debt and he did not know where to go. Becoming a Mayi-Mayi meant turning into a strong man, escorted by bodyguards. His status was completely reversed. From being a passive subject, persecuted by his creditor, he had become a soldier. The decision to enrol seemed to have had only an individualistic dimension: ideology, political aspirations were 'far away' as well as his chief, Kabila.

Another young Mayi-Mayi, called Kasereka, told me:

I'm from Kanyabayonga but I went to Goma to study at the Institut Supérieur. I joined Mayi-Mayi in 1993. I gave up schooling because I couldn't pay the fees any more. After that I decided to join Mayi-Mayi to liberate the country,

but if I had the means I would have continued studying. Mayi-Mayi were fighting against FAZ. I joined a group called Kifua-Fua. They were fighting naked because to release the country you have to fight naked, it is written in the Bible. We were fighting against Mobutu, but the FAZ beat us. The Kifua-Fua were in the regions of Ruchuru, Lubero, Masisi and also Walikale. After the defeat we retreated into the forest and I went back to Goma, but again I was without money. After that I joined this group [of La Fontaine]. (...). I don't know the causes of this war; I'm not a politician. In Congo there are 450 languages and every dialect wants its own president. Peace is difficult.

Kasereka was twenty-six years old when I met him. At the time, he was in the Mayi-Mayi commanded by La Fontaine, based in the villages of Muhanga and Bunyatenge, about 70 km west of Lubero. He was disillusioned, he had been fighting for a long time and he no longer wanted to talk about the causes of the war, which in his eyes had become something inexplicable. Actually, not only the war but even his life had become senseless and he could not find any reasons for the violence around him.

Sometimes, the choice to enrol is justified simply by the will to pillage and take profit from the situation of disorder. The passage from one armed faction to another is often motivated by the search for money, better food or even a nicer uniform. For example Kavira, a sixteen-year-old girl who had been fighting for three years, told me that she had preferred to enrol in the APC (the Armée Populaire Congolaise, another armed faction in North Kivu) simply because they had better uniforms than Mayi-Mayi. Besides she did not know where the latter had their military camp. When I met her, in March 2003, she had just fought in Mambasa (Ituri region) and she told me her experience:

I joined the APC because I wanted to eat without working; I wanted to go around in a car smoking chanvre [marijuana]. (...). I chose APC because I didn't know where Mayi-Mayi had their camp. I preferred APC because they had uniforms and were better armed. (...). I like war because I can take advantage of the situation and steal things. In Mambasa we took gold in MLC camp. (...). When I go into the houses of people who have run away I change my clothes, take oil and all the products. You have to be quick! If I go into the house and I am not strong enough to carry the television, then I destroy everything and I leave nothing to the enemy. In Mambasa we pillaged a lot. When the enemy flees, we enter the houses and we pillage. In Mambasa I took a mattress, a radio with eight batteries and some money. On the road I sold everything. In APC they give us nothing, so we try to survive by arresting people. They give us enough to eat, but if we want to get money we have to rob people.

Even if Kavira was only thirteen years old when she enrolled, her reasons for enrolling were not significantly different from her older comrades' (she was just a bit more explicit and perhaps naïve). Definitively, most of the combatants find it difficult to make sense of their experience, especially if they have spent many years fighting without the war producing any result. In the end, personal profit becomes the only reason to be a soldier. On the other hand, the leaders of all armed movements in Congo have used violence mainly in order to promote their personal interests and social ascent: on a smaller scale, combatants do nothing more than reproduce this attitude.

A variable that we have to consider carefully while speaking of African conflicts is the long duration of wars. In many regions, such as East Congo, war has lost its character of being an exception; it has become the norm pervading everyday life. It therefore becomes nearly impossible for combatants to formulate an ideological or political explanation of their status which could provide them with a justification for their actions. In this situation, violence seems to become self-validating: killings and destruction motivated by the simple desire for personal revenge, pillaging of villages carried out to satisfy the greed for goods, rape motivated by a momentary desire to possess a woman, and so on. This partially explains why pillage is so diffused and systematically practised: in a war where violence is used in many cases to satisfy the personal ambitions of a leader and his entourage, pillage becomes an indispensable instrument to control and motivate combatants. Actually, for many soldiers it is the only reason to fight.

Mayi-Mayi Rituals and Symbolism

We can consider Mayi-Mayi as an imagined community with seemingly common symbolic signposts (Abdullah 2005, p. 173). The symbolic dimension and ritual practices, as well as the political discourse I will consider later, mark out this community and define a specific 'Mayi-Mayi identity'. To focus on this point is not to portray Mayi-Mayi as an exotic phenomenon, a risk denounced by many anthropologists today (MacClancy 2002); on the contrary it is to recognise the importance of these aspects since, as Arsène Mwaka Bwenge (2003) has observed, «*ces modes de pensées mobilisent des masses et structurent des comportements qui font l'histoire aujourd'hui*». We could add that these masses are essentially made up of young people.

As we already know, the central belief is in the *mayi*, the magic water, a widespread and historically rooted belief. The *mayi* is prepared by *docteurs* (in South-Kivu they are named *nganga*). In most cases *docteurs* are children normally initiated by an older one. Water is put in plastic tanks kept in a *baraza*, a hut in the middle of the military camp accessible only by *docteurs*.

The water is treated in the *baraza* with special herbs mixed with organic substances. A very young *docteur* told me that to prepare the *mayi* he used parts of the human body such as the testicles which are reduced to ashes and mixed with the water. *Docteurs* also prepare medications called *dawa*, made from pulverised herbs, which are supposed to strengthen the power of *mayi*.

According to the fighters I met, Mayi-Mayi warriors are first scarified on the forehead, chest, arms and ankles. The *docteur* puts some *dawa* in the wounds and then he sprinkles them with water. After this ritual, the recruit becomes a Mayi-Mayi and a weapon is given to him (at the beginning of the 1990s Mayi-Mayi mainly used knives or machetes because of a lack of weapons).

When the Mayi-Mayi go to war, they are always followed by a *docteur* with a tank of water. He continuously sprinkles the warriors, repeating the mantra '*mayi-mayi*'. Combatants too have to scream '*mayi-mayi*' when they fight in order to invoke the power of the water.

Mayi-Mayi warriors must observe several rules. During my field research I discovered that they have to abstain from having sexual intercourse, stealing, looking at blood, washing with soap, eating *sombe* (manioc leaves), eating foods cooked with peel, and eating bones. Civilians cannot touch Mayi-Mayi and if they encounter one of them in the street they have to pass on his left. Finally, all objects a Mayi-Mayi touches that have previously been in contact with civilians must be strewn with soil.

When a Mayi-Mayi dies, his death is attributed to the infraction of one of these rules, and this partially explains their complexity (actually it is almost impossible to respect all the rules strictly). Many youngsters, especially children, are deceived and manipulated through these practices. Besides, most of the rules are not respected, especially the rule on sexual abstention: in fact rapes and kidnapping of women are systematically perpetrated by Mayi-Mayi.

Mayi-Mayi: An Identity between Tradition and Modernity

According to Ivan Vangu Ngimbi (1997:44), the youth crisis in Africa can be considered as a «*crise du placement social*», that is «*une crise des mécanismes d'intégration qui assureraient l'insertions des individus dans la société*». The last resource for many young people to find a space within the society is violence, which is why they are often considered as a threat and a danger. To become a Mayi-Mayi – or a Cobra, a Ninja, a Cosa Nostra and so on – is a way to escape anonymity and to take revenge against a society that relegates the new generations to the margins. Hence, in contemporary Africa,

violence furnishes and shapes new models of socialisation and social assertion. As Mamadou Diouf (2003:9-10) has argued, 'to kill, to experience violence and pleasure, to move along the obscure path of the night and migration, of witchcraft, of the urban and rural undergrounds – all these impulses produce new cultures, new sociabilities, and new meanings of pleasure, life and death'. In short, new cultures and new forms of identity emerge from the state of war. On this issue, Achille Mbembe (2002:267) has affirmed that 'the state of war in contemporary Africa should [in fact] be conceived as a general cultural experience that shapes identities, just as do the family, the school and other social institutions'.

Starting from the considerations above, we can affirm that the Mayi-Mayi fighter is a form of identity shaped by the state of war. As I argued before, the symbolism and ritual practices which characterised this identity are part of a symbolic corpus which is reactivated in time of crisis⁵. In East Congo, young people have experienced a double crisis: the traditional culture and the traditional forms of social organisation have lost their pertinence and they are no longer able to give sense to and organise reality. Besides, this 'empty space' has not been filled since the project of the modernisation of the country and the promises of the 'theology' of development have completely failed, producing only disillusion and frustration. The result is a deep uncertainty in which the recourse to violence is a means of breaking with the current situation and at the same time it offers alternative models of identification and socialisation.

The temporality of the subject can only be the immediate-present, due to the rupture with the past and to the absence or impossibility of any projection (into the future). About this issue Jewsiewicki (2002:593-598) has argued that 'the frame of the subject who lives in Africa is the *présent-maintenant*: cut out his or her past, the subject is removed from his or her own place (...). In Africa, where societies have been marked by the slave trade and by colonisation, indiscipline offers the subject its sole tactical recourse – a negative one, to boot. Indiscipline makes it possible to resist, to remove oneself from the actions of the Other'.

In addition, the reduction to a *présent-maintenant* seems to open the doors to the realm of fantasy and witchcraft – the second world – where everything is possible. The dialogues I had with Mayi-Mayi fighters were constantly marked by fantasy:

(...)Yes the dawa. Dawa was also a magic word. When you pronounced it you could disappear.

- You know I do not believe in these things...

It is like that! Among us the ones who did not have sexual intercourse with women had become so powerful that they could fly!

- And how did they do it?

You needed to have five plastic bags, the ones with blue and white strips, not the black ones. To fly you needed to attach two at the arms, two at the calves, and you sit on one. But you did not have to buy the little bags from women sellers. In the group, two were able to fly, they were young and they had not touched a woman yet. To communicate they used the leaves as Motorola but only the *docteur* had this power.⁶

The Mayi-Mayi fighter emerges as a form of identity which imposes itself as an alternative to the chaos and uncertainty generated by the crisis and the war; but this alternative seems to be moulded largely by fantasy. If we look closer at this process of identity construction/invention, we can notice its deep ambiguity: on the one hand Mayi-Mayi practices and symbolism refer to an 'African warrior tradition'; on the other hand the figure of the fighter is charged with modernity. In fact the young combatant, by means of pillage, is able to accede to those goods which can be considered as the fetishes of modernity: I refer to sun glasses, mobile phones, smart shoes and clothes, motor cars, motorcycles, etc. These objects are part of an 'economy of desired goods that are known, that may sometimes be seen, that one wants to enjoy, but to which one will never have material access'. In an economy of scarcity, the symbolic value of these objects increases and the only way to have access to them is through occult practices or violence: combatants are among the 'few elects' and through the ostentation of these goods they are able to renegotiate and increase their status.

Global trends are continually domesticated into local forms (Honwana & De Boeck 2005:1). According to Diouf (2003:2), 'the condition of young people in Africa, as well as their future, is heavily influenced by the interaction between global and local pressures: the fragmentation or dissolution of local culture and memory, on the one hand, and the influences of global culture, on the other. In the case of Mayi-Mayi, as well as most militias, a global war-mediated culture is reinterpreted at the local level (Bazenguissa-Ganga 1999:329-361). In the little cinemas in Butembo, according to a survey I did in 2003, the five most seen movies were, in order: Delta Force II, with Chuck Norris; My Father is a Hero, interpreted by Jet Lee; Rambo I and II of Sylvester Stallone, and Commando with Arnold Schwarzenegger. The cinemas were assiduously attended by combatants, both APC and Mayi-Mayi,⁷ who easily identify themselves with the actors and the plots of these movies⁸ and they embody the gestures and the poses seen on the screen by reproducing them in real life with the fetish par excellence: the Kalashnikov.

Nevertheless, Mayi-Mayi is an ambiguous movement: on the one hand it creates new localities through the domestication of global trends; on the other, it proposes a strong rupture with the present, closing down from the rest of the world through recourse to a tradition continuously being reinvented and adapted. It is a continual oscillation between openness and closure. Kakule La Fontaine, a Mayi-Mayi commander who was one of my interlocutors during my field research, told me:

The Mayi-Mayi do not have international support, they use African tradition. Congo is an ignorant country, annihilated by the white man. Witchcraft (*sorcellerie*) is a science: the leaves give power. Our ancestors were strong but the white man annihilated us with the church. The white men have science, in Africa there is witchcraft. Witchcraft is occult and it is persecuted by Western science, but witchcraft is the same thing as science, but witches do not reveal their secrets. Some doctors learn by practice, others during the dream.

The eternal dilemma between tradition and modernity emerges in Mayi-Mayi: although Mayi-Mayi now has a website⁹, in their discourse there emerges a refusal of modernity which passes through the exaltation and the re-invention of African tradition. Thus, witchcraft is sometimes interpreted as a practice of pre-colonial Africa, as an ancient and pure source of power. This process is quite contradictory since Mayi-Mayi, as well as many religious and armed movements in the history of Africa, participate with zeal in the struggle against witchcraft. For example, in Beni and Lubero territories (North Kivu), the Mayi-Mayi killed many people, accusing them of being a *muloyi* (Kinande language for a witch). From these practices emerge an ideology of social purification and revival – typical of many prophetic movements – that at the beginning of the 20th century had already inspired, as we have seen, the witchcraft eradication movements which followed the defeat of the Maji-Maji rebellion in Tanzania.

Once more, the fluidity and the ambiguity of witchcraft discourse is confirmed: on the one hand witchcraft is considered positive when it is interpreted as an ancestral practice, as a source of occult power which survived the colonial domination and post-colonial chaos and now can be used as a weapon to fight the white man who are ultimately responsible for the Congolese war. On the other hand, witchcraft can be used for bad and egoistic purposes: it is the ultimate cause of social crisis and to release the Congolese people, dominated by evil, and create a new order, it is inevitable to eradicate it.

The construction of a Mayi-Mayi identity presents relevant analogies with the strategies of some religious communities which are omnipresent in Congo. For example, Filip de Boeck (1998:21-57) has analysed the community of

Bundu dia Congo which is a healing community based on the idea of rupture with the colonial past and the post-colonial present. To this rupture, the community opposes the cult of the authenticity of the ancestors, practised by its members who live isolated from the rest of the society. Following De Boeck, who has studied the Kikwit (Bandundu) section of the church, ‘the community of Bundu dia Congo is closely knit. Most members live together in a large village-like compound, referred to as a *Mbanza Congo*, the city of ‘kongo’, in which daily life is organised around the figure of a living prophet, present in their midst’ (*ibidem*, p. 33). The description is similar to a Mayi-Mayi military camp, most of which are isolated in faraway rural and forest areas. In the case of Mayi-Mayi, the isolation is even corporal: as we have seen, the combatant cannot be touched by a civilian and objects cannot be exchanged directly between a civilian and a fighter.¹⁰

An interesting point is that the community of Bundu da Congo has transformed Lumumba into an ideal ancestor, actually a model of ancestor. This process of deification of Lumumba is observable among Mayi-Mayi too. A widespread belief is that that the *dawa* are made with the powder of the bones of Lumumba, whose spirit lives in the bottom of a lake where the *docteur* goes to collect the ingredients to prepare the magical protections. Even in this case, Lumumba seems to have been transformed into an ancestor – the chief of the ancestors – and his body has become a source of power as well as the evocation of his name: ‘*mayi a Lumumba*’ (the water of Lumumba) is one of the Mayi-Mayi war cries. Congolese society, disoriented when confronted with an epochal crisis, which is also a crisis of the memory, is trying to reinvent its roots: Lumumba has been transformed into both ancestor and redeemer,¹¹ an indispensable source of power to rebuild a moral community.

The Political Discourse

The Mayi-Mayi political discourse can be defined as nationalistic mixed with a strong anti-Tutsi feeling. The analysis of this discourse sheds light on the ‘techniques of self-representation’ which lead to a shared interpretation of the conflict in East Congo. This issue is deeply related to youngsters’ involvement in the war since, as Rachele Brett and Irma Specht (2004:36) argued, ‘in societies where the military (whether government or armed group) provides status and role model as well as the means of livelihood, and for whom identity (religious, ethnic and peer group) is bound up in the understanding of the conflict, there need to be strong counter-factors if young people are not to become involved’.

In 2000, the commander Mudhou, who was one of the Mayi-Mayi leaders in Beni territory, during a speech to his combatants, proclaimed ‘We are here

to rescue the Congolese from the hegemony of a few people, from dictatorship and Western imperialism with the goal of establishing a democratic government with no classes'.¹² This statement is quite representative of Mayi-Mayi political discourse. Generally, Mayi-Mayi present themselves as a popular auto-defence force fighting against Ugandan and Rwandan armies which, according to local interpretation, were able to invade and pillage Congo, thanks to Western support. Many commentators have underlined the vagueness of these arguments. For example, Bob Kabamba and Olivier Lanotte (1999:129) argued :

En réalité, tous ces groupes *mayi mayi* n'ont pas de réel projet politique; leur seule revendication politique est le départ des Tutsi. Autrement dit: *le Congo aux Congolais*. Cette revendication suffit pour susciter l'engouement populaire de tout le Kivu. Les *mayi mayi* symbolisent ainsi l'idéal anti-tutsi dans l'est du Congo.

[In reality, all these *mayi mayi* groups are not really political projects; their only one political demand is the departure of the Tutsi. In other words: 'Congo to the Congolese'. This demand is enough for arousing the popular desire of all Kivu. *Mayi mayi* therefore symbolizes the ideal anti-Tutsi in the east of Congo].

This statement is perhaps too severe: despite Mayi-Mayi having always been defined as 'negative forces', even by the UN, the weakness of the political project is not a peculiar feature of this movement; on the contrary it is a characteristic shared by all the factions fighting in East Congo where the political discourse seems to be just a matter of propaganda.

Mayi-Mayi political discourse, although confused, is not irrelevant. It is influenced by Marxism and nationalistic ideology rooted in the 1960s and the figure of Patrice Lumumba who, as I will show, has been opportunistically emphasised. Some Mayi-Mayi factions have sometimes divulged their political ideas through manifestos and leaflets. During my research, I collected some of these manifestos which can be useful to our analysis. For example, the document, reported below, was written and distributed in May 2001 by a Mayi-Mayi faction, called Resistance Nationale Lumumbiste. This group was active in the territory of Beni and was commanded by a chief called Lolwako. In the leaflet, the Mayi-Mayi explained the reasons that had pushed them to kidnap 26 workers of the Daraforet, a Thai company which was exploiting the forest near Beni. The Mayi-Mayi, following the UN report on the illegal exploitation of Congolese natural resources, accused the Daraforet of pillaging the country (cfr. United Nations 2001). The capture of the workers aimed to focus the attention of the international community on the war in Congo and particularly on the fact that some multinationals were making important profits thanks to the protection accorded by Congolese rebel groups and foreign

armies. The document makes public the political goals of this Mayi-Mayi faction. Later on, the workers were released after a negotiation run by Patrice Lumumba's son, François Lumumba, who had been asked to mediate by the Mayi-Mayi commander Lolwako.

From the reading of this document it is possible to define some features of Mayi-Mayi political discourse. The major subject, which is always emphasised, is the resistance to Rwandan, Ugandan and Burundian invasions. These states, according to Mayi-Mayi, are supported by Western imperialist countries, above all the USA, and once in Congo they created some puppet rebel movements, such as the Mouvement de Liberation du Congo led by Jean-Pierre Bemba, to preserve their interests. This interpretation of the war, which is very popular in East Congo, can be summarised in the following points: first of all, the war is caused by Western countries, especially the USA, and aimed to pillage Congolese natural resources; second, Rwanda and Uganda, and their pro-Tutsi governments, are considered the armed allies for this operation; third, the international community, since it does not oppose this situation, is an accomplice of the aggressors.

Such an interpretation is not unrealistic but it hides much more than it reveals. As we know, external intrusions, and not only from the USA, are a constant in Congolese history, but this statement cannot justify an interpretation of the Congolese conflict simply as an expression of Western neo-imperialism in alliance with Tutsis. This reductive interpretation, which denies the complexity of the Congolese conflict, is not ingenuous since the emphasis on the imperialistic matrix of the war made by Mayi-Mayi leaders, who refer to Marxist and nationalistic ideals, functions to justify their own actions. This rhetoric covers up the real objectives which move most of Mayi-Mayi leaders to war: personal ambition for power, money, profit, etc. From this point of view, the Mayi-Mayi are another lost opportunity for the Kivu rural population to improve their living conditions: most of the factions have turned into private militias and are paid by big dealers who needed protection for their gold and coltan traffic.

Nevertheless, the political rhetoric sustained by Mayi-Mayi finds a fertile ground in post-colonial Africa. According to Achille Mbembe (2002, p.239-273), Marxism and third-world ideology have led to a self-representation of Africans as victims of external prevarication. Even if this representation finds its justification in African history, it is often opportunistically exploited by political actors in search of legitimisation and consensus. From this point of view, the political discourse of Mayi-Mayi is quite paradigmatic: many commanders have realised their own ambitions while hiding them behind the propaganda of self-defence and resistance to aggression. These arguments have been used to mobilise thousands of young people and children who

actually did fight for less 'noble' purposes, sometimes even opposite to the ones declared by their military chiefs.

Despite the lack of a political project, many young people kept on fighting, taking advantage of their military career which allowed them to pillage and abuse civilians. Nevertheless, many fighters felt betrayed by their commanders. A young man, who had been fighting with Mayi-Mayi, told me: 'Now I do not believe in anything, I do not think about the future. The Mayi-Mayi have become like the other soldiers and they are paid by the traders'. From these words emerges the regret for a failed rebellion and also the drama of a betrayed generation. As Ibrahim Abdullah (2005:184) has argued, 'grotesque appropriation of what constitutes a revolutionary project produces grotesque results'.

Conclusions

Without doubt, there cannot be peace unless African societies address the needs of young people, and this is particularly true in Congo (De Waal & Argenti 2002:155). The reconstruction of the Congolese state is an indispensable condition to confront some fundamental problems, such as the restoration of a legal system, the re-establishment of a school system, and the restart of a legal economy which could absorb young workers.

Nevertheless, the youth problem is not exclusively material but also moral. The Congolese peace project has followed a perverse schema: many political leaders and military commanders responsible for innumerable atrocities, have been 'rewarded' with honourable posts in the government of transition and the new national army. Many Mayi-Mayi commanders have been compensated for their war efforts and they are now senators, deputies or generals. Nowadays, some of these leaders will present themselves at the national elections, the ones who have funds will likely be elected while the ones who have little chance will try to hinder the electoral process. The point is that in Congo, violence has been shown to work and to recompense the ones that make use of it. What will be the consequences of this affirmation of violence on the new generations? Why should young people not resort to violence if it works? How will this affect the social habitus?

These questions delineate, from my point of view, some serious problems for the future. By now, most of the Mayi-Mayi groups have been demilitarised according to the DDR (Disarmament Demobilisation and Reintegration) plan which has been implemented in Congo. Mayi-Mayi popularity progressively decreased during the years of the war. If in 1996, during the AFDL campaign, they were considered invincible and fearless warriors, in recent years most of the people started to consider them as simple bandits. If the decrease in their popularity could create some problems for the reintegration of ex-fighters, who risk being stigmatised and pushed to rejoin militias, on the other hand a

demystification of the phenomenon could diminish its attractiveness. Nevertheless, if Congo political leaders are unable to seize the opportunity for peace, it is likely that young fighters screaming ‘*mayi-mayi*’ will run again in the Kivu hills.

Notes

1. The Lugbara men who wanted the water had to pay for it. An interesting fact is that the water circulated through a net created by secret societies such as the Nebeli (Middleton, 1963, cit., p. 84).
2. See inter alia, J. Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1979.
3. The migration from Rwanda to Congo is an ancient phenomenon which was encouraged by the Belgians who needed labour for mines and plantations in East Congo that at the time was under populated. In short, in some areas, such as Masisi, the Banyarwanda became the majority of the population and after independence some members of this community, such as Cyprien Rwakabuba and Barthélémy Bisengimana, turned out to be important exponents of the Mobutu regime.
4. In Kiswahili this term means ‘little’ and it is normally used when referring to child-soldiers. Most of the child-soldiers who joined Kabila were previously fighting with Mayi-Mayi.
5. Achille Mbembe (2002) has argued that the state of war represents a zone of indistinction, where the boundaries between chaos and order disappear. Furthermore, he affirms that ‘Through sacrifice, the African subject transforms his or her own subjectivity and produces something new—something that does not belong to the domain of a lost identity that must at all costs be found again, but rather something radically different, something open to change and whose theory and vocabulary remain to be invented’ (Ivi). I partially agree with Mbembe, since, as it is the case for Mayi-Mayi, this war-identities are not completely new but a re-proposal and re-interpretation of ‘tested’ models.
6. Interview held in Lukanga (2003) with Kakule, 25 years.
7. At that time Butembo was occupied by the Mayi-Mayi, commanded by Modhou and APC soldiers. The two movements had made an alliance that broke out some months later.
8. It is important to consider the plots of these movies. For example Paul Richards has analysed the significance of the plot of Rambo I in the experience of young combatants in Sierra Leone. See P. Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth and Resources in Sierra Leone*, James Currey, Oxford, 1996:57 and following pages.
9. Cfr. www.congo-mai-mai.net. This is the website of the group commandant Padiri, one of the most important Mayi-Mayi leaders who now has been integrated as general in the new national army.

10. I refer here to the beginning of the Mayi-Mayi movement when most of the fighters respected the rules. In the last years, as many people say, Mayi-Mayi have become 'brigands as all the others. They do not respect the rules anymore'. In fact, most of Mayi-Mayi militias have progressively taken part in the war economy, giving protection to some big mineral dealers.
11. In popular painting Lumumba is often represented as a Christ (Cfr. Jewsiewicki 1996:113-142).
12. This speech was pronounced on 25/12/2000 in the military camps of Luotu/Lubwe (cited Mbindule Mitono 2000:24).

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