

# Street children in Kinshasa

## Striking a balance between perpetrator and victim through agency

### 1. Introduction

The inhabitants of Kinshasa (*Kinois*) in general and the street children (*bashege*) in particular, exist in a kind of half-dead (or half-living) state (De Boeck, 2004, p. 133). The social, political, economic and cultural circumstances that characterise the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) manifest themselves in daily life in the form of permanent and structural exclusion, discrimination, humiliation and poverty (Scheper-Hughes, Bourgois, 2004, p. 1). All this is not to say that the *Kinois* and the *bashege* remain entirely passive in this regard, or that they make no attempt to assert control over their lives. In this article, we will argue that they transform themselves into active agents who exercise *agency* – that is, exert deliberate control over their lives (De Boeck, Plissart, 2005; Geenen, 2006; Geenen, 2009). We therefore opt for the term *human agency* instead of *coping* or *coping strategies* in this text.

Frequent references to Lazarus and Folkman (1984) can be found in the literature with respect to *coping*. These authors describe *coping strategies* as «a person's constantly changing cognitive and behaviour efforts to manage a stressful situation by responding either in a positive (i.e. active) or negative (i.e. avoidant) way». Kombarakaran (2004) also employs this concept in his study of street children in Bombay. From this perspective, street children are viewed first and foremost as victims who develop all manner of techniques in order to survive. In our view, the concept of *coping* also carries a far too normative connotation. Authors employ this notion with respect to so-called positive and negative – or well-adjusted and maladjusted – modes of *coping*. Kombarakaran (2004), for example, sees drug use on the part of street children as a maladjusted *coping strategy*.

Though authors, through their use of the concept of *coping*, do acknowledge the fact that street children exert control over their own lives to some degree, *agency* goes much further. *Agency* is much more active than *coping*. In this article, we will demonstrate that not only do *bashege*<sup>1</sup> in Kinshasa manage to

<sup>1</sup> The number of *bashege* dwelling the streets in Kinshasa is uncertain. Estimations vary

survive, but that they actively give shape to their lives. Conscious control is also exerted over the structural violence under which they suffer. This is not to deny that the *bashege* in Kinshasa are victimised in many ways, but instead to underscore the fact that they are simultaneously victims and remarkably active agents.

## 2. Methodological reflections

For the purpose of writing this article, Maarten Hendriks performed ethnographic fieldwork in Kinshasa for six months, from the beginning of October 2010 until the end of March 2012. Maarten had already carried out fieldwork within the context of his studies a year earlier in Kinshasa, which served to further immerse him in the target group. In the field, his work was monitored by Sylvain Shomba Kinyamba of UNIKIN (University of Kinshasa). Paul Ponsaers of Ghent University (Belgium) assisted him in processing his field notes.

For us the main value of the ethnographic method is, as Willis (1977, 3) states, its «sensitivity to meanings and values as well as an ability to represent and interpret symbolic articulations, practices and forms of cultural production». We tried to come to what Weber (1978) defined as the «*verstehende Methode*», or the profound understanding of actions and motivations of those studied (Ferrel *et al.*, 2008, p. 177).

During the period of fieldwork Maarten carried out countless conversations with *bashege* in the Pont-Gabi, Matonge and Gombe neighbourhoods, areas of Kinshasa in which many *bashege* live. The main place of research however was what the *bashege* refer to as Yamaka, situated across the famous «stade Martyr»: an impressive football stadium built by ex-president Mobutu. Yamaka is an abandoned market and the largest territory occupied by street children in Pont-Gabi. From a strategic research perspective, the advantage of Yamaka was that there were always numerous *bashege* present with whom Maarten could talk to. Many groups of *bashege* came to sleep, rest, eat, smoke weed and drink hard liquor in Yamaka.

To approach groups of *bashege*, Maarten was assisted by the former *shege*: Kape. He brought Maarten into contact with some *shege* gang leaders, who made it possible for Maarten to be around their gangs. Kape also served as an interpreter for conversations held in *Lingala*. At the end of each period of observation Maarten and Kape wrote down the events of the day in the form of field notes. After a while, when Maarten felt that he gained enough trust from the *bashege*, some of the conversations were recorded, transcribed and translated.

The presence of a «white» researcher amongst street children in Kinshasa came with some difficulties. The most important difficulty was the interaction between the researcher and the environment – police, passersby and residents.

according to the used definition of the concept of «street child». Some sources estimate their total amount to be 20,000 (Mulamba, 2008), while others speak of tens of thousands *bashege* in the capital of DRC (Tate, 2006). In 2005, UNICEF en REEJER – *Réseau des Educateurs des Enfants et Jeunes de la Rue* – in collaboration with the ministry of social affairs of the city Kinshasa estimated their number at 13,877 (Pambu, 2009).

The Kinois were often astonished to see a «white» person amongst a group of young «thugs». Sometimes they called the police. They proclaimed that in order to do research in Kinshasa at the «dangerous» *bashege* an authorisation from the city hall is needed. Obtaining such papers is rather laborious and expensive. A lot of so-called «motivation» (bribe money) for the civil servants in question is needed to get the job done. Nevertheless, this problem had to be solved. The mere presence of the researcher also raised various ethical issues, not least the fact that it exposed the *bashege* to the authorities even more so than usual. Maarten succeeded in circumventing this problem by getting a «ordre de mission» from the NGO ORPER<sup>2</sup>, which stated that the research was performed in the framework of the NGO.

Another major difficulty in the field was to break through the «street smartness» of the *bashege*. Street children are masters in adapting their behaviour and answers depending on who they are talking to (Scheper-Hughes, Hoffman, 1998). Certainly, when speaking with «white» researchers and NGO people they tend to hide behind their western image as a victim (Geenen, 2006). Breaking through this «street smart» defence of the *bashege* needed an important investment of time and was a constant working point.

### 3. The significance of the informal economy in Kinshasa

Gondola (1999, p. 30) states that an African city such as Kinshasa, with its economic and social chaos, impedes the growth of adolescents into adulthood. He supports this thesis by arguing that, on the one hand, adolescents are finding it increasingly difficult to get married – or to marry at all – due to financial reasons, and that they are otherwise professionally disadvantaged. Despite being overrepresented among the population, young people – and the Kinois in general – living in African cities are afforded almost no, or very little, access to the «formal» job market, despite the fact that they are forced to assume economic and social responsibilities at a very early age. In contrast to children/adolescents in the West, they rarely enjoy the luxury of passively taking refuge behind their parents, as they actively participate in both the social and economic arenas.

The aforementioned paradox, whereby young people are professionally marginalised on the one hand and yet are recruited directly into the economic system at a very early age on the other, must be understood within the context of the post-colonial situation in which African cities such as Kinshasa find themselves. Post-colonial subjects, both young and old, contend with an extremely difficult environment that offers them practically no opportunities and which often prevents them from constructing a fulfilling life, with the search for money constituting a daily problem. Children and adolescents are thus viewed as capital because of the contribution they provide to the family and as security for old age (De Boeck, Honwana, 2005).

Street children, or *bashege*, find themselves in the same post-colonial boat, one difference being that they are forced to fend for themselves to a much

<sup>2</sup> *Oeuvre de Reclassement et de Protection des Enfants de la Rue.*

greater degree than are live-at-home children, or *babelesi*<sup>3</sup>. Although the family is replaced by alternative organisational structures on the street, such as gangs and networks of friends, an oft-heard expression among the *bashege* is «moto na moto na ndenge na ye»<sup>4</sup>, or «every man for himself». This became evident one morning when carrying out fieldwork with the Tigo gang, which has its base on the bank of the Kalamu River. Ngembo was busy collecting the contributions from the other members of the gang so that he could stock up on the ingredients needed to prepare cat. He had already paid in 700 Congolese francs<sup>5</sup> (CDF) himself. Others donated CDF 500, and still others a little more than CDF 700. «It is essential», said Ngembo, «that everyone contributes». If you have less to contribute on one day then you give a little more the next. Unlike food, other things are shared freely depending on who has money to buy them, such as *tsweke*<sup>6</sup>, *agene*<sup>7</sup>, marijuana and cigarettes<sup>8</sup>.

Street children are proud of their independence. When speaking of the life of a *babelesi*, the word *niama* is quick to come up, which translates literally as animal. Modogo, who has been living on the street for more than 20 years, puts it this way:

«Tobengkaka babelesi baniama» – «We refer to young people who live at home as cattle. They are controlled by their parents<sup>9</sup>; they understand nothing about life. Everything is taken care of for them. But we are autonomous. We understand life. We must go out in search of money every day. We are free».

This independence from familial control also implies a financial independence. Even though the *babelesi* are frequently involved in the economy from a very early age as well, the *bashege* are solely responsible for supporting themselves day in and day out. As a result, street children grow to become veritable masters at searching for money: they know what the street has to offer them better than anyone else. A significant portion of the economic activities in which street children are engaged form part of the «informal economy» (Bilakila, 2004), though Kristien Geenen (2006) questions whether there is any formal economy to speak of in Kinshasa in the first place. Some of these activities are moreover not only informal, but also illegal, such as theft, extortion, prostitution, and dealing marijuana.

<sup>3</sup> *Babelesi* is slang that street children use to refer to youngsters that live at home.

<sup>4</sup> For instance: Merline, 12/01/2012; Modogo, 23/01/2012.

<sup>5</sup> During the period of fieldwork the exchange rate fluctuated around 900 Congolese francs for 1 American dollar.

<sup>6</sup> *Tsweke* is very inexpensive hard liquor that is sold on the street and imported from India.

<sup>7</sup> *Agene* is so-called Congolese whiskey.

<sup>8</sup> Field note, 12/10/11.

<sup>9</sup> Just like animals on the farm.

#### 4. The informal activities of the *bashege*

A strict distinction between legal and illegal activities is impossible in the reality of Kinshasa. *Bashege* engage in a large variety of economic activities. The *chargeurs*, who loudly announce the destination of a share taxi or taxi to passengers of public transportation, are one example (Bilakila, 2004, p. 43). If there are multiple share taxis heading in the same direction and not enough customers to fill them, the *chargeur* does his best to lure people to «his» share taxi. He does this at the behest of the driver, who pays him about CDF 100 for this service. As *chargeur*, he can also work with passengers who have no desire to fight their way to a seat by assuring them a place to sit in the midst of all the commotion, which also earns him some small change each time (Bilakila, 2004, p. 43).

Street girls generally work as prostitutes or *bordeuses* (Geenen, 2006, 2009; Tate, 2006; Kahola, Rubbers, 2008; Hendriks, Ponsaers, 2011). Even though both local and international NGOs have been waging a battle against child prostitution for years, and even though prostitution is forbidden by law in the DRC, it is a perfectly acceptable activity on the street. Geenen (2006, p. 15) states that «love and sexuality are at any rate subject to personal interpretation» in Kinshasa. Money likewise plays a key role in everyday «normal» relationships, with women throwing their charms and body into the fight in exchange for money and *sucrées* (soft drinks), with the result that it is especially difficult for a man with no money to experience any love at all.

Lacoste, a 17 year-old street girl, complained of a *bashege* who had fallen in love with her. This meant that she would have to stop working as a prostitute from that point onwards because he would be caring for her and her child. On that day, he gave her CDF 3,000. At nightfall, he spread out a *pagne* (a typical type of garment for women in Kinshasa) on the ground in Yamaka where they could spend the night together. But this did not satisfy Lacoste, who felt that the CDF 3,000 he had given her was far too little to justify her remaining his girlfriend. She told him that she could easily earn CDF 11,000 if she were to walk the streets at night. She left him and the love was over. Champion Rouge, who had listened to her story, said that CDF 3,000 was a lot for a girl like her «who had already been used up by numerous men». To this, Lacoste replied «Ngai moko nayebi valeur ya bord na ngai, na prix na nga» – «Only I know what my vagina is worth and what its price will be»<sup>10</sup>.

In short, even though CDF 3,000 is more than enough to feed her and her baby, not to mention provide her with other everyday necessities, Lacoste would rather work the streets as a prostitute. She views her vagina as merchandise, and she alone determines its price. Or, as De Boeck and Plissart state (2005, p. 166): «the body is a shop, it is money, it is like merchandise». Furthermore, CDF 11,000 for one night's work is certainly not bad (De Boeck, 2011, p. 69). For the sake of comparison, the tutors who work for the local NGO O.R.P.E.R.

<sup>10</sup> Field note, Lacoste, 19/01/2012.

(*Œuvre de Reclassement et de Protection des Enfants de la Rue*) earn roughly CDF 4,500 each day.

Love relationships nevertheless flourish among the *bashege*. In one of their songs -- sung in the typical *Coupé Décalé* style – the Poison Gouvernement gang sings about street girls as *petites ya caméléon*<sup>11</sup> – they change boyfriends like a chameleon changes colour.

«We are never sure if they are with other men at the same time», complains DJ Grenade. «On the Festival of the Woman – 8 March – she can ask you to buy her a pagne and then turn around and go to another man for shoes. Better to have one woman than no woman at all<sup>12</sup>,» he concludes.

When a man figures out that his *mwasi* (girl) has another boyfriend, a conflict is likely to ensue. Direns of Poison Gouvernement responds by saying that one should not allow this to happen because the man has already «invested» too much money in her<sup>13</sup>. With this «investment» in women, Direns confirms the widely held view of the Subsaharian African male-female relationship, in which love is to some extent purchased by the man and maintained through gifts (Trapido, 2010, p. 139).

The Peuple Arabe gang likewise claims that, when gangs of *bashege* fight among themselves, it always revolves around *basi ou mbongo* – women or money<sup>14</sup>. Women often form the «*most significant source of income*» for a gang (Geenen, 2006). There is a great deal of money to be made from prostitution nowadays. Celeo, a street boy, also claims that other *bashege* pose as a pimp for their girlfriends and try to get them to engage in prostitution: «kende koluka mbongo, oyela ngai» – «go get some money and bring it back to me»<sup>15</sup>. Gifts flow in the opposite direction (Trapido, 2010), though they are given in exchange for a relationship and protection (Geenen, 2006). The prevailing view of the male-female relationship is hereby turned on its head.

Another (illegal) activity engaged in by street girls, and likewise by street boys, is the operation of so-called *ngandas* (meeting places). In a *nganda* one can drink beer and/or eat goat or chicken. This term has a different connotation when applied to *bashege* areas. Instead of eating chicken and/or drinking beer, they come together to smoke marijuana or drink *tsweke* and *agene*. Unauthorised illegal gambling also takes place, such as card games and *jeu de six*, a sort of «Ludo» in which wagers are placed. The *bashege* make up a significant portion of these *ngandas*, though non-street children also spend time there on a regular basis. These establishments are also hugely popular with police officers and soldiers. This makes for ambiguous situations in which police and street children socialise together in the *ngandas* even though these same officers are the ones who regularly pursue them.

<sup>11</sup> Song *Poison Final*, Poison Gouvernement, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Field note, DJ Grenade, 01/03/2012.

<sup>13</sup> Field note, Direns, 01/03/2012.

<sup>14</sup> Field note, Peuple Arab, 05/10/2011.

<sup>15</sup> Field note, Celeo, 29/02/2012.

Merline, a 22 year-old street girl, runs one of these *ngandas*. It is barely visible from the Avenue Kasavubu and the Boulevard Sendwe, in part because her *nganda* consists of no more than a few wooden chairs and benches. Cigarettes are sold for CDF 50 (\$0.06) a piece, a single glass of Tsweke for CDF 100 (\$0.11), and a joint can be purchased for CDF 200. By selling marijuana and hard liquor, Merline earns enough to support herself and her 2 year-old child. As opposed to most other street girls, she does not engage in prostitution. She says this is because she is simply unable to do so:

«I do this [sell marijuana, cigarettes and hard liquor] to earn some money each day to buy food for myself and my child, and for our well-being. It's not like I'm sitting here with nothing to do. I am unable to go out at night and engage in prostitution; because of a bad blow to my leg, I am unable to do much walking to go out looking [for money]».

One day, when Merline went out to purchase her whisky and marijuana, she was involved in a motorcycle accident. She was unable to pay for her medical care at Saint Joseph Hospital, so she sent a religious sister to her family to let them know about her condition. After a few days, one of her family members brought her \$30. This was barely enough to cover the initial care she had received, so she was released from the hospital. To this day, her leg has still not received the required treatment<sup>16</sup>. This led to the formation of a curvature in her right leg, which causes her to limp when walking.

Merline's situation is both significant and telling in that, despite her almost impossible living conditions, she never gives up. «Eza te que navandaka kaka boye»<sup>17</sup> or «it's not like I'm sitting here with nothing to do». She seeks out solutions to her problems and, in spite of the difficulties she faces, is evolving into an active agent capable of providing for herself and her child.

## 5. The illegal activities of the *bashege*

A previous reference was made to theft, which comprises a portion of the (illegal) economic activities of the *bashege*. The Tigo gang in the Matonge district demonstrated how they slice the trouser pockets of a distracted victim with a razor, which, according to them, is the perfect way to snatch mobile phones<sup>18</sup>. Hugar, a 13 year-old street boy, described his fingers as «fetishes that never miss»<sup>19</sup>, and Shada bragged: «Nayibaka, naza diable, motema mabe, moi je suis pas un pasteur» – «I steal, I am a devil, I have a bad heart, I am no priest»<sup>20</sup>.

Kape, the man who assisted with the fieldwork, said that when street children steal, they do so surreptitiously, for the most part: «they play with the intelligence of people». One way is to use an informal economic activity as a

<sup>16</sup> Interview, Merline, 18/02/2012.

<sup>17</sup> Interview, Merline, 18/02/2012.

<sup>18</sup> Field note, Tigo, 11/10/2011.

<sup>19</sup> Field note, Hugar, 13/01/2012.

<sup>20</sup> Field note, Shada, 09/11/2012.

cover, or at the very least to keep a watchful eye out for opportunities that might arise in the course of carrying out other informal activities. Gathering up beans that have spilled onto the ground at the market is just a «movema» («gesture») that Shada uses to mislead people. By his own account, he had managed to steal CDF 200,000 (\$222) that day from a mother at the market<sup>21</sup>. Hugar, who works as a *porteur* at the Zigida market, also makes clever use of the synergy that is afforded by combining an informal activity with theft. The merchandise, portions of it and/or the money of his customers all disappear from time to time. When Merline (see above) labels him a «big thief», he defends himself this way: «Moto asalaka na bank ayibaka, ebongo ngai nasalaka na bureau te, soki nayibi eza mabe?» - «The person working in the bank steals. Just because I don't work in an office, does that make stealing bad?»<sup>22</sup>. Finally Modogo, who has been working the streets since the 1980s, also confessed to being just as alert while shining shoes in the streets surrounding the Grand Marché: «If I see something sitting out in the open, it disappears immediately»<sup>23</sup>.

Though the *bashege* mainly operate surreptitiously, a number of them do so brazenly. During one of my evening observations, five members of the Peuple Arabe gang shoved a passer-by against a parked jeep in a side street off the Boulevard 30 Juin, upon which they emptied his pockets in no time. After a few seconds, they let him go<sup>24</sup>.

Others organise themselves into *kuluna* gangs: gangs of young people who hold up others in a group, threatening them with machetes, clubs and glass bottles (Hendriks *et al.*, 2011)<sup>25</sup>. According to Shomba (2011, p. 13), a *kuluna* gang is organised into four pillars: the leader, *la ceinture du chef*, the members and their girlfriends. The leader - usually the physically strongest of the group - is responsible for the continued survival of the gang and maintains a monopoly on the decision-making. *La ceinture du chef* (literally, the leader's belt, or his inner circle) consists of the members of the gang closest to the leader who assist him in his sovereign rule. The members carry out orders and protect the girlfriends of the gang. *Kuluna* gangs are complex, informal and clandestine organisations (Hendriks *et al.*, 2011).

*General Gato*, the leader of the *Armée Noir*, explained that his gang is composed of five *ceintures* or belts. When the gang battles other gangs in order to capture territory (Geenen, 2009), the members of the first *ceinture* serve as scouts. They survey the surroundings and, once ordered to do so, provoke their adversary. If they feel they are in danger of losing the fight, one of the scouts runs back to the other gang members who have remained behind to request reinforcements, while the remainder of the first belt stays put. The second *ceinture* then goes into action. If this fails to turn the tide of battle, one of the members hurries back to fetch the third belt. This formula repeats itself until the final and

<sup>21</sup> Field note, Shada, 09/11/2012.

<sup>22</sup> Field note, Hugar, 13/01/2012.

<sup>23</sup> Field note, Modogo, 23/01/2012.

<sup>24</sup> Field note, 19/10/2011.

<sup>25</sup> Field note, Kape, 17/10/2011.



strongest *ceinture* arrives on the scene. Specific gang members are also assigned specific roles, such as «chargeur des opérations» and distributor of machetes.

According to Lieutenant Jean-Paul, chief constable of one of the district police stations in Yamaka<sup>26</sup>, the majority of *kuluna* activity occurs at times when there are very few people present: in isolated locations, after nightfall and during or immediately after it rains<sup>27</sup>. It is important to not intermingle the phenomenon of the *bashege* with that of the *kuluna* as they are two different phenomena. While it is true that some groups of *bashege* organise themselves in a *kuluna* gang, the latter consist more out of youngsters that live at home. This argument is also heard when speaking to *bashege*. Often the *bashege* speak contemptuously of the *kuluna*. To them, *kuluna* are *babelesi*, and are therefore *baniama*, or docile cattle that are fed and protected by their family. Before going into action, *kuluna* often intoxicate themselves with alcohol and marijuana<sup>28</sup>. This practice is also used by the *bashege*. Patrick, a member of the Peuple Arab gang, said this strengthens the spirit – *kokoti l'esprit*. By first using whisky and marijuana, they are capable of anything, and fear nothing<sup>29</sup>.

## **6. Cooperatives [coops]: the foundation of the informal economy in Kinshasa**

Much of the economic activity which takes place in Kinshasa is referred to as «*coops*»<sup>30</sup>. The etymology of the word «coop» stems from the French word *coopération*, or cooperation in English. In actuality, a coop involves arrangements/agreements/deals made between two or more parties. «Kinois» are forced to «cooperate» with others on a daily basis due to the precarious state that their deprivation put them in. «Nakey kobeta coop» means «I'm going to close a deal» or «do business». This agreement could entail almost anything from which one might wish to benefit. It is, in essence, an agreed-upon exchange. The «coop» may refer to a service which is paid for in cash, but might also be paid for with goods or with a service rendered in kind. This type of exchange can thus take various forms.

One example would be that of a woman wishing to receive a small service for a minor fee, such as getting her fingernails polished. Because it is too expensive for her to purchase a bottle of nail polish, the woman in question will have her nails polished on the street by a *shege*. Armed with bottles of nail polish and jingling them together with one hand, the *bashege* scour the streets for customers. Other *bashege* guard cars in the city's financial centre, Gombe, or in popular entertainment areas. In almost any parking zone which is not otherwise guarded by private security companies<sup>31</sup> or official police, *bashege* assume this

<sup>26</sup> There are two district police stations which are adjacent to Yamaka: one on the Avenue Kasayubu, and one on the Boulevard Sendwe.

<sup>27</sup> Field note, Commandant Lieutenant Jean Paul, 28/02/2012.

<sup>28</sup> Observation, 3/11/2011, 4/11/2011.

<sup>29</sup> Field note, Patrick, 17/10/2011.

<sup>30</sup> Street children also refer to this as «chida».

<sup>31</sup> In Kinshasa, primarily G4S.

role. They usually earn between CDF 200-500 (\$0.22-0.55) for every car they guard. «Porteurs» are *bashege* who are paid by coops to carry the goods and purchases for their customers. One place they do this is at the beach, where boats from Brazzaville arrive and depart and where many «porteurs» work. Others work at one of the many markets scattered about the city, where they carry the goods purchased by customers to the share taxi or car. The market offers numerous such opportunities for coops (Geenen, 2006). The market is a «libulu ya mbongo» or treasure trove (De Boeck, 2004, p. 176). There, *bashege* can collect charcoal, beans and plastic bags until they have enough to sell them, they can run errands for market vendors, etc. (see also Geenen, 2006).

*Kinois* are thus quite ambivalent about street children. Prevailing popular discourse in Kinshasa deems street children first and foremost to be criminals, even though practically all *Kinois* make daily use of the services provided by street children: helping them take public transportation, shining their shoes, lugging goods and merchandise for them and guarding their car during an evening out in the town. *Bashege* are quite handy and fulfil an essential role in the daily comings and goings of public life in the city.

But it can also entail a situation in which a problem needs to be solved or someone wishes to obtain something specific, such as securing official documents from government officials. This type of coop will make use of intermediaries. These are people who are in a position to influence a specific agency or person and who thus make it fairly simple and/or inexpensive to solve the problem or to acquire the desired item. This coop will then grant the intermediary a commission or «motivation» (Bilakila, 2004).

## 7. Coops as a component of the gang culture

Coops also form part of the gang culture in Kinshasa. Together with his gang, General Gato supervised – in his words – the lorries arriving at the Zigida market to deliver their goods. This is to say that he forced the drivers to pay for a place to park and, along with his friends, coerced them into paying a fee for unloading their lorries. Over time he received threats from other gangs, particularly from the so-called Armée Rouge, which attempted to take over his territory. In order to safeguard his business, he decided to establish the Armée Noir, this name being a direct reference to the other gang. His gang was soon joined by other *bashege*. They made deals with the butchers who boned pork at the market, and in so doing the Armée Noir was able to acquire machetes. What ensued was a bloody battle against the Armée Rouge, with the territory at stake. Even though the conflict has not yet been fully resolved, a kind of truce has been reached for the time being. In order to achieve this truce, the Armée Rouge had to give the Armée Noir no less than 47 crates of beer as a coop<sup>32</sup>.

The Armée Noir was hereby able to transform itself into an organised *kuluna* gang. It is important to re-emphasise the fact that *kuluna* and *bashege* are two separate phenomena. Selestin, who works as a night watchman at a

<sup>32</sup> Field note Gato, 6/3/2012.

monastery, put it this way: «The *bashege* are the pigs in the farmhouse, and the *kuluna* are the wild boars in the forest. But they are both pigs»<sup>33</sup>. Catalogue, one of the members of the Peuple Arab street children gang, characterised the difference between them and the *kuluna* this way:

We do not fear the *kuluna*. This is because we do *kiyankee*<sup>34</sup> for them. They are *babelesi* - children who live at home. They sleep at home. We spend 24 hours a day on the street. They are bandits; they will threaten anyone - even an ordinary man - in order to rob him of his money and telephone. They use stones, machetes and glass bottles. We, on the other hand, only harass bosses and rich men<sup>35</sup>.

In short, in the eyes of *bashege*, *kuluna* are *babelesi* who organise themselves into gangs for the purpose of robbing people. In the words of Modogo: «they extort by force»<sup>36</sup>. Unlike the *bashege*, they almost always operate in groups.

General Gato, leader of the Armée Noir, stressed that whatever a gang member steals in the course of a fight or an operation is later shared with the rest of the group. This gang member then enjoys protection as coop for sharing his loot. If a gang member is picked up for robbery, whether by force or not, the entire gang will pitch in to purchase his freedom. If the gang member has concealed the stolen goods and the police are looking for him, he will in certain cases be handed over by the gang, or no effort at all will be made to get him out of trouble<sup>37</sup>.

## 8. Coops between *bashege* and the public authorities

Quite a few coops exist between the public authorities and street children. The Poison Gouvernement gang members who are actively recruited by the governor of Kinshasa to serve as public workers of a sort are one example. For \$20 per week, they keep the Boulevard du 30 Juin clean, which is one of the showpieces of Kabila's *cinq chantiers* [a series of improvements to five aspects of the Congo (schools, roads, etc.)]. This boulevard was recently resurfaced, pedestrian paths and zebra crossings were added, and traffic lights were installed. But the work is actually informal; a formal employment contract is totally non-existent.

There exists a different type of coop at the political level. In the run-up to elections in late 2011, both the Kabila camp, as well as that of the opposition, tapped the resources of the *bashege* for their respective campaigns. Many *bashege* were given money by up-and-coming candidates to pass out flyers or to participate in demonstrations for them<sup>38</sup>. During this time, many *bashege* could

<sup>33</sup> Field note, Selestin, 20/10/2011.

<sup>34</sup> Prepared to do anything, capable of defending themselves against any threat whatsoever, outside the norm (Kape, 7/02/2012).

<sup>35</sup> Field note, Catalogue, 19/10/2011.

<sup>36</sup> Field note, Modogo, 23/01/2012.

<sup>37</sup> Field note, Gato, 6/03/2012.

<sup>38</sup> Observation, 02.11.11.

be spotted walking around with flags, t-shirts of candidates and other campaign materials, as evidenced by one member of the Bazowa gang waiving a – albeit bloodied – flag of the ruling PPRD<sup>39</sup> (*Parti du Peuple pour la Reconstruction et la Démocratie/People’s Party for Reconstruction and Democracy*). Candidates also made regular visits to the workplace of Ley, the intermediary between the *bashege* and the rest of the *Kinois* in Yamaka, in order to request the support of the *bashege* in return for compensation<sup>40</sup>. The use of street children for political purposes appears to be prevalent during campaigns. For a small gratuity, street children make for an easy-to-mobilise group (Tate, 2006; Kahola, Rubbers, 2008; Geenen, 2009). For street children, becoming actively immersed in political turmoil is a coop just like any other (Geenen, 2009, p. 353). No job is without risk, as proven by the testimonials of many *bashege* who in recent years have been injured or have even lost their lives at political demonstrations (Tate, 2006, p. 34).

Bilakila (2004, pp. 33-34) emphasises that the object of a coop need not necessarily be money, goods or services; for one or more of the parties, the cooperation might revolve around intangible things, such as safety and freedom. If someone’s boyfriend or girlfriend has been thrown in jail, contributions are often made in order to pay the *amende* – usually about CDF 15,000<sup>41</sup> – and perhaps also to buy food for the prisoner. Ley, for instance, grinned while recounting an episode in which he was jailed for a few days during the 2006 election contest between Bemba and Kabila. Thanks to his numerous street connections, he had never eaten so lavishly<sup>42</sup>.

The Poison Gouvernement gang at the central station spoke of having access to a common fund, which is used to buy gang members out of jail and to furnish medicine and care when someone falls ill or is the victim of an accident<sup>43</sup>. The latter – making contributions for medicine and care – tends to be the exception to the rule, however. By contributing to the fine of fellow *bashege*, a kind of social security is created. Should the donor get into trouble with the police at some point, he knows that the same will be done for him.

An obvious coop that exists between the police and street children involves the purchasing of one’s own freedom, or that of others, from jail. This *amende* to be paid also has nothing to do with a formal judicial process. A suspect is normally referred to the prosecutor after 48 hours, who in turn refers the prisoner to the Makala prison after another 48 hours, where he/she will also appear before a judge<sup>44</sup>. In the case of minors, the judge must by law attempt to reunite him/her with his/her family or house him/her in a suitable private or public institution. In reality, however, minors too often end up in prison as well (Tate, 2006).

<sup>39</sup> Observation, 03/11/2011.

<sup>40</sup> Field note, 02.11.11.

<sup>41</sup> Field note, 15/11/2012.

<sup>42</sup> During this time, he was held responsible for unrest that had been stirred up by the *bashege* of Pont-Gabi (field note, 9/01/2012).

<sup>43</sup> Interview with the Poison Gouvernement gang, 24/01/2012.

<sup>44</sup> Field note, Lt. Jean-Paul, 20/01/2012, 28/01/2012; Sakara, 16/11/2011.

Hence in many cases the option of getting out of this is via the payment of an informal fine to the police. In other words, this is a coop between the police and the detainee in which the latter is practically forced into cooperating if he/she wishes to stay out of jail (Bilakila, 2004, p. 34).

Oftentimes the coop plays itself out early on, such that a street child never ends up spending any time in jail. Police officers often designate this as a «private investigation», as was the case during the fieldwork when a mother lodged a complaint against Mandula for stealing her necklace. Mandula is a street child who can often be found in Yamaka and at the Zigida market. A police officer later appeared at Merline's *nganda* to ask where he might find Mandula. If he did not want to be arrested, then Mandula would have to hand over a portion of his loot to the officer<sup>45</sup>.

The public authorities mainly use repressive measures when dealing with the *bashege*, but at other times they enter into cooperatives with them. Police officers often share in the profits of the illegal (and other) activities of street children. Kahola and Rubbers (2008) therefore rightly characterise the relationship between street children and the public authorities as being «between collaboration and confrontation».

## 9. Conclusion

It should be clear from the above that street children, by way of coops, do in fact transform themselves into active economic - but also social, political and cultural - agents. The following quote from a Human Rights Watch report on street children in the DRC is therefore rather simplistic: «For many street children, their ability to survive depends on their finding work to earn enough for food» (Tate, 2006). Although it is undoubtedly true that one is better off mastering some type of - informal or illegal - «work» in order to survive life on the streets and thus earn «enough for food», the economic activities in which the *bashege* engage should not be reduced to mere survival or coping strategies.

Geenen (2006) argues that street children are able to acquire enough money for a concert or football match in Stade Martyr, the biggest football stadium in Kinshasa, built during the time of Mobutu. So in contrast to what one might expect, *bashege* do earn enough - relatively speaking. Street children often engage in multiple coops per day. Direns, a member of the Poison Gouvernement gang at the central station, has three jobs:

I, the work that I do, I work at outdoor cafés, at other times as a porteur, at other times I guard cars, so I alone already have three *chidas* [coops/jobs] in order to support myself.

It is important to emphasise in this regard that street children are not the only players in the informal and illegal market in Kinshasa. In general, the

<sup>45</sup> Field note, Merline, 13/01/2012.

*babelesi* and the *Kinois* are also quick to take part in the parallel economy, the size of which has for decades exceeded that of the formal economy many times over (see MacGaffey, 1991; Geenen, 2006). Unemployment, low wages and inefficiency in the formal economy have forced the *Kinois* to search for creative solutions within the parallel economy (MacGaffey, 1987; Trefon, 2004).

In this context, caution is advised against maintaining an all too romantic notion of the self-reliance of the *Kinois*. Shapland and Ponsaers (2009) recall that the informal economy «flourishes where the opportunities already exist». Street children, and *Kinois* in general, simply find themselves in the same post-colonial boat, and to this day are forced to heed the call of former President Mobutu: «débrouillez-vous» – «Fend for yourself». The difference between street children and live-at-home children in Kinshasa can be summed up by the fact that the latter often attend school and must hand over any extra income, or at least a portion of it, to their parent(s) or guardian(s) (Geenen, 2006). They are also able to rely on their family, which is responsible for their everyday well-being – even though the multifaceted crisis which typifies Kinshasa sometimes precludes this (Trefon, 2004). The *bashege*, on the other hand, who spend the majority of their time on the street, have every opportunity to maximise their economic potential without being interrupted by things such as going to school – unless they are enrolled in courses (literacy, cooking, technical trade, aesthetics) at one of the many open centres in Kinshasa, or have been admitted to a closed centre where going to school is compulsory. Additionally, the *bashege* are usually self-employed, even though the youngest among them must frequently hand over their money to a *yaya* or older child, and the girls often have a pimp whom they must pay (Tate, 2006; Geenen, 2006).

De Boeck and Honwana (2005, p. 3) maintain that young people must be viewed as both *makers* and *breakers* of society: «Young people constantly shake and shape society but are also shaped and shaken by it». Street children are also «made» and «broken» by society, but at the same time they also «make» and «break» it, *i.e.* they give shape to their own life, and even to society. Though it is wrong to view them as violent criminals per se, our fieldwork more specifically suggests that the *bashege* cannot simply be classified as victims of a violent system, for they constitute an integral part of this system. They are continually abused, beaten down and raped by society, but at the same time do the same to others. They are adept at striking a balance between perpetrator and victim, or simultaneously act as both. In other words, the traditional criminological dichotomy, in which the perpetrator is located at one end of the continuum and the victim at the other, does not apply here (Hendriks *et al.*, 2011, p. 11).

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