

Children, Youth and Generational Change in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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A Short History of the Democratic Republic of Congo

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), formerly Zaire (1965-1997), used to be a Belgian colony. At the Berlin conference in 1884-1885, a large part of Central Africa about the size of Western Europe was designated to the Belgian King Leopold II, who made this territory, known as the Congo Free State his private enterprise until 1908. The harsh Leopoldian rule changed the demographic reality of this part of the Congo Basin forever. The population dropped drastically, and some even speak of Leopold II's reign as an organized genocide (cf. Hochschild 1998; see also Van Groeneweghe 1986). Under international pressure, Leopold II handed over his Congo Free State to Belgium in 1908, and from then on until 1960 Congo became an official Belgian colony, known as the Belgian Congo. In May 1960, the country gained its independence from the former colonial master. Patrice Lumumba, the first prime minister of the independent Congolese government, was assassinated only a few months later, in January 1961. In the meantime, the Katanga province, one of the country's most industrialized areas and rich in copper, uranium, cobalt and other natural resources, had started a secessionist war to break away from the central government's control. The difficult and often violent early post-independence years between 1960 and 1965 are commonly referred to as the Congo crisis, causing a lot of political and economic upheaval, and initiating the first large-scale international intervention of UN troops. In 1965, Mobutu Sese Seko seizes power, and this is the start of a long and ruinous reign that lasted until 1997, during which period Congo (or Zaire, as it was known under Mobutu) deteriorated further economically and politically. In 1997, Mobutu was ousted and replaced by Laurent-Désiré Kabila (1997-2001) and, after his assassination in 2001, by his son Joseph (who is still in power today, even if his second and, according to the country's constitutional law, final presidential term officially ended in 2016). The reigns of father and son Kabila were marked by various periods of intense war and military conflict in which many neighboring countries were implicated and in which they fought out their differences on Congolese soil. This disastrous period officially ended with the presidential elections of 2006, but even today, large parts of Congo have not yet been fully pacified, especially in the northeast of the country, and also in the DRC's central part formerly known as the Kasai provinces, where violence by armed groups and the DRC's army against civilians has reached new heights in recent years. Ongoing violence since the late 1990s is thought to have caused –directly or indirectly- the death of several millions of Congolese, and it has also produced a vast number of IDP's within and outside the country, a process that has further unsettled and disrupted the social and family life of many.¹

The (Post-) Colonial Heritage: Some Facts and Figures

It does not come as a surprise that Congo's tumultuous colonial and post-independence history, with its endless cycles of political and economic crisis, and its current situation of

¹ According to figures released by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in January 2018, DR Congo is now home to the largest displaced population in Africa with more than 4.49 million internally displaced persons, including 2.7 million children.

‘violent peace’ (Berwouts 2017) has deeply impacted upon the quality of everyday living in this vast country that (according to 2018 UN estimates) is home to a population of 84,004,989, with a median age of 16,8 (even though the growth rate has been slowing down considerably from the year 2000 onwards). Most available official figures² indicate that the overall quality of life for the average Congolese citizen is far from optimal. Whereas the most recent 2016 UN figures concerning life expectancy show an increase to 59.62 years (up from 54,40 ten years before)³, all other indicators are less positive. Figures from Save the Children International (in their 2015 Annual State of the World’s Mothers Report)⁴ place the DRC at the 178th position, i.e. second but last on a total of 179 countries (just before Somalia), making the DRC one of the world’s worst places to be a mother, as further indicated by the high rates for life time risk of maternal death, as well as for children’s well-being (118 per 1000 live births did not live to be 5 years old in 2013, indicating a rise of child mortality for many parts of the country in recent years), coupled to the low number of expected years of formal schooling (9,7 years in 2013), growing malnutrition and overall decline of health and access to decent health care, coupled to an abominable economic status (a gross national income per capita of 430 US \$ in 2003) (SOTWM 2015, see also the Huffington Post, May 7, 2013).

In spite of the relative slowing down of demographic growth rates in recent years, the DRC’s population is overwhelmingly young, as indicated above. The massive presence of children and youth poses a lot of societal challenges, as the vast majority of the DRC’s youth is unable to find a salaried job in the (small) formal economy, has no easy access to formal (especially higher) education, and has great difficulties to make itself heard through the official institutional political channels. Moreover, the social and cultural scapes in which children and young people grow up today, is no longer that of previous generations who grew up in the early years after independence, which has also led to a lot of intergenerational tensions. In fact, rather than the notion of class, which has become meaningless in a society that is overwhelmingly characterized by precarity and pauperization, it seems that the notion of ‘generation’ is perhaps a better analytic category to understand and explain the tensions and fault lines of social life in the Congolese context. In Congo, as indeed elsewhere in Africa (cf. Cole 2011; Cole and Durham 2007), the nature of intergenerational dialogue has become extremely complex.

Increasingly, also, kinship networks defined by (extended) family ties and lineage or clan belonging, i.e. relations that used to constitute safety networks defined through kin-based solidarity, have become eroded, no longer function as they did before, or have completely ceased to exist. Simultaneously, in many cases, the traditional pathways that were previously available to young men and women to attain adulthood have also become much more difficult to access, and this fact has also problematized longstanding (gendered) notions of gerontocratic and patriarchal authority, and complicated the nature of the intergenerational dialogue. There are numerous historical reasons for this, some of which I will discuss in the next section.

² All of the existing figures for the DRC have to be approached with caution, though, for most are extrapolations of much older data, and therefore not very reliable. For example, in the D.R.C, the last official population census that was organized nation-wide, dates back to 1984.

³ In 2016, the life expectancy for women was 61.11 years and for men 58.14 years.

⁴ <https://www.savethechildren.org/content/dam/usa/reports/advocacy/sowm/sowm-2015.pdf>

Changing Kinship Patterns and Trajectories of Self-realization: the Impact of Christianity

As stated above, King Leopold's brutal era radically changed the demographics of this part of Central Africa forever. From 1908 to 1960, the Belgian colonial administration changed the demographic and societal constellation even further. Colonial rule not only displaced and relocated vast numbers of rural (especially male) Congolese to labor camps and to the periphery of emerging new urban centers, where they were put to work in the service of the colonial industries (plantations, mining, commerce etc...), but it also heavily intervened in people's ways of life, profoundly redefining, for example, existing familial structures away from the realities of larger extended kinship ties towards Western-European models of the nuclear family. The missionary presence (one of the pillars of colonial rule alongside the administration and the industry) further exacerbated this tendency towards redefining existing kinship landscapes into more western oriented notions. In the Belgian Congo, all primary and secondary schools were run by missionary congregations of Catholic or Protestant signature, and this education was primarily a tool to help the colonial state to reformat colonial subjects' minds and reshaping them in the mirror of colonialist modernity. In this way, to give but one example, missionaries and colonial administrators alike waged war against polygamy and other family systems and practices (such as levirate or polyandry) considered to be deviant, and outlawed as a consequence, with varying degrees of success.

In summary, Catholic and Protestant Christianity, together with the political and economic impact of colonialism⁵ (and de facto both often went hand in hand), deeply penetrated Congo's regional belief systems, occasioning far-reaching changes in local life-worlds, and causing a profound mental colonisation which had a long-lasting impact that continues to have a powerful effect even today.

The breaches and ruptures thus introduced by the model of colonialist modernity that the colonial state and its religious emissaries promoted were, in a way, aggravated even further by a second wave of religious colonisation from the late 1980s onwards. During this period, in which the Mobutist regime finally started to crumble after three decades of ruinous reign, Neo-Pentecostal and other churches of Christian fundamentalist signature started to take over the local religious 'market.' One could argue that their impact has –to some extent– even been more profound than the previous waves of Catholic and Protestant evangelisation – some even speak of a Pentecostal 'revolution' (cf. Marshall 2009 for the Nigerian case). Thus preaching a radical rupture with the autochthonous ancestral past which is constantly demonized (Engelke 2010), these 'churches of awakening' (*églises de réveil*) promise a joint venture between 'Business' and 'God' and thereby promote an insertion into the "modern" oecumene of global neoliberal capitalism. Given their tremendous success, Neo-Pentecostalist churches, like their Catholic and Protestant predecessors, manage to intervene in many, often even some of the most intimate, aspects of people's daily lives. This happens, again, by the way in which the new Christian ideologies and theologies are redefining the longstanding Central-African landscapes of lineage and kinship affiliation. Not unlike the colonial forebears, they do so by propagating a move away from the extended family and its accompanying kin-based model of solidarity, by re-centring the focus towards the more 'western' model of the nuclear family and its related forms of singularization and individual rather than collective subject-formation, and by trading the logic of the gift, based on kinship solidarity, for a monetary and capitalist oriented logic, with all that this entails (a new work ethos, new notions of accumulation and maximalization of profit, new forms of self-

⁵ For example, the Belgian colonial policy defined many urban centres throughout Congo as 'centres extra-coutumiers,' that is, in opposition to the 'village', as 'modern' spaces where traditional frames of reference, ritual beliefs and customary policies could no longer be applied. The urban colonial space thus effectively represented a rupture with the rural socio-cultural context which bracketed it.

realisation and individualism...). This explains why Pentecostal preachers in Kinshasa often state that ‘family is witchcraft’: Given the neoliberal notions of selfhood that are also promoted by these churches, those family members (nephews, nieces and other dependents) who, within the gift-based logic of kinship solidarity, could always turn, for example, to maternal uncles for help, are now not only being reformatted as ‘strangers’ but also redefined as ‘witches’ when they try to do so, because, for a true and authentic Christian, it is ‘by the sweat of your brow that you will eat your food until you return to the ground’ (Genesis 3:19).

Redefining Intergenerational Relationships

Profound changes such as these processes of ‘de-parentalization’ (Tonda 2008) have provoked further shifts in the social realm. Rather than creating ‘flexible citizens’ and engendering ‘colluding social hierarchies’ (Kanna 2010) between an older structural logics of personhood and kinship and a newer set of neo-liberal ethical values, millennial capitalism has impacted heavily on local notions of authority and gerontocracy, on gendered labour divisions, on inter-generational dynamics as well as multiple other, often very intimate, domains of daily life. All of these modifications are contributing to what might be described as a generalised crisis of social reproduction that is unfolding in contemporary Congo.

This does not mean, however, that older family structures and models of dependency and patronage that enabled young people coming of age to attain social adulthood completely disappeared. As pointed out by Jennifer Cole (2011), across Africa the established trajectories towards adulthood historically consisted of social hierarchies with older men usually holding positions of (economic and politic) power. This power in terms of economic wealth and political authority usually relied on the control of the labour provided by junior male kinsmen and dependents (children, nieces, nephews etc...), the ritual control over initiation and transition rituals marking the passage of one social stage to the next (from boyhood to manhood, or from girlhood to womanhood, for example), or the control of female sexuality and reproductive capacities, crucial to the reproduction of local kinship networks. For male elders the control over the politics and rituals of marriage and alliance was paramount to the constitution of valued adulthood (cf. Cole 2011: 66). Many (male) elders and patrons continue to build their authority along these lines: political patrons still enroll younger people into their political projects (as child soldiers, for example, who first made their appearance in the DRC with the rise to power of Kabila senior’s AFDL, and who continue to be recruited by warring factions and rebel groups in the DRC’s north-eastern parts today, or else as thugs, as the case of *kuluna* street gangs in Kinshasa exemplifies).⁶ Similarly, hierarchical (and often strongly gendered) discourses based on age difference between seniors and juniors, continue to inform the social landscape as well.

Nevertheless, even for such elders, it has become increasingly difficult to maintain patriarchal authority. On the micro level of the household, the family and the lineage, the pressures caused by the changing demands on the social environment are most tangibly present in newly emerging relations of authority and (lack of) ‘respect’ between the sexes as well as between generations.

These new shapes and attitudes are most clearly illustrated in the current transformation of divisions of labor. Especially in the urban context, many male heads of

⁶ *Kuluna*: territorially defined youth gangs that control specific neighborhoods across Kinshasa’s various municipalities, often through very violent means. In the recent past, the police, the army and the urban authorities organized large scale operations to hunt down these street gangs, and clean the city’s streets from the *kuluna* presence (cf. Geenen 2009; De Boeck & Baloji 2016: 53ff). Simultaneously, however, there is a lot of evidence that the same authorities also recruits these youngsters to attack political opponents or infiltrate anti-government manifestations.

family are socially and economically reduced to the status of unemployed and inactive men. In the DRC's capital Kinshasa, for example, only a tiny fraction of the active adult population is employed in the formal sector and has a salaried job, while they do not easily find a niche in the informal economy either, for this space seems to offer an advantage to women (who often insert themselves much more easily than their fathers and husbands in informal market economies, neighborhood units of cooperation, church support groups, the small-scale production units of goods for sale on the market, and other social networks and daily strategies of survival), and to young people who are often better equipped in terms of social skills to adapt to the flexibility that characterizes such a volatile economic environment. Indeed, in order to survive most young people in the DRC have been pushed into this wide-ranging informal economy, ranging from a multitude of activities in the street economy, to actively participating in artisanal mining, for example. Across the country, artisanal mining sectors include copper, cobalt, coltan, and diamonds, often mined in dangerous and unstable political conditions, and controlled by armed groups and factions of all sorts. Youth's access to informal economic spheres sometimes gives them more economic power (and therefore social status) than their fathers and elders, a fact which also increasingly causes intergenerational tensions.

Migration, Mobility, Marriage

For decades, also, Congolese youth has tried to escape from the increasingly harsh economic conditions in the DRC by traveling abroad. One route that remains popular is that to Angola, where Congolese youth try their luck in artisanal diamond mining in great numbers.⁷ Others try to insert themselves into migratory, and often hazardous, trajectories towards other neighbouring countries (cf. Clark-Kazak 2011), Europe, West Africa, Southern Africa, or new diasporic destinations such as China and South-East Asia (cf. De Boeck 2012).

All of these migratory movements have also added to the further destructurations and transformations of existing family and kinship patterns which I touched upon above, and which also show in other ways, for example through a generalized shift from matrilineal systems of (land) inheritance to a more patrilineal orientation, especially in the DRC's urban contexts, or through profound and generalized shifts in the structuring fields of gift, reciprocity and exchange that have always underpinned social transactions, especially with regard to marriage and alliance. However, in Congo today, many unemployed young men and their families find it impossible to observe and respect the gift obligations and transactions that make a marriage possible. As young people in Congo now say (in Lingala, one of the country's official languages): *Tosalaka te, tobalaka te*, "We don't work, and [therefore] we don't marry." As a result, young people have often switched to alternative marriage systems, sometimes referred to as a *yaka tovanda*, 'come and sit down', or as *marriage raccourci*, a "shortcut" version in which a young couple de facto starts living together, has a child and places both their families before an accomplished fact, thereby short-circuiting the gift cycle of marriage and bride wealth transactions. Needless to say, these non-officialized marriages in turn add to the possible causes for intra- and interfamilial conflict. Often these conflicts find their expression through the use of the vocabulary of witchcraft, and by means of witchcraft accusations occurring in the family context. These accusations often lead to the disruption of family environments, and to real physical or more covert and symbolic violence amongst family members. Increasingly, young children become the targets of this violence.

⁷ For the past 20 years, the Angolan government cracked down hard on artisanal diamond mining in the provinces of Lunda Norte and Lunda Sul. In recent months alone it has deported more than 200.000 Congolese, pushing them back across the border into the DRC's unstable Kasai province. These forced expulsions have caused the latest humanitarian crisis in the DRC.

Child-witches

One phenomenon that has received broad international coverage in the media, is that of the so-called ‘witch-children’ (*bana bandoki*) (cf De Boeck 2005, 2009; De Boeck & Plissart 2004).⁸ In recent years street children have become a familiar aspect of street life in most major Congolese cities. Many of these children were forced to take to the street after being singled out by parents or other family members in a witchcraft accusation. Such accusations against children within one’s own family have become a common occurrence that transcends all rank, class and ethnic divisions and differences that characterize Congolese society.⁹ Increasingly, children between age four and eighteen are being accused of causing misfortunes and mishaps, as well as the illness or death of other children and adults in their family and neighborhood environment. Due to the AIDS epidemic and other causes related to the poor living and health conditions in Congo, many of these children were orphaned at a very early age. Others were abandoned by their mothers, often teenagers themselves, and grew up amongst, sometimes distant, relatives: (classificatory) grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, or one of their father’s co-wives. When one or both parents are still alive they are often absent too, an absence which is increasingly due to patterns of displacement, migration and diaspora under the pressure of economic factors, political instability and war, as explained above. And when this absence occurs in a sociocultural landscape of kin based relations under strain, such shifts form an ideal ground for all kinds of further tensions and witchcraft accusations amongst adults or between the adults and the children under their care. For example, the realities of urban polygamy have called into existence a category of co-wives known as “rivals” (*mbanda*). Unlike rural polygamous households, these co-wives usually do not live together in the same house or even in the same *quartier*, and frequently they do not even know of each other’s existence. The term *mbanda* also applies to the relationship between the wives of two brothers. When one brother dies, the other brother will often be under the obligation to offer shelter and material support to the deceased’s children and wife, who then becomes a rival of his own wife. In many cases, the relationships between these rivaling women are very tense.

When a “rival” dies or when she is absent for a long period because she left in search of a better life elsewhere, her children regularly end up in the recalcitrant care of one of her husband’s co-wives. It is stated that “to take care of the child of one’s rival, is to take care of a dangerous monster” (*kobokola mwana ya mbanda obokoli elima*). Especially when these children’s father dies as well, they often find themselves in a very vulnerable and unprotected position. Such children end up very much marginalized in a family context in which they are merely viewed as a burden and an extra mouth to feed at a time when food is already too scarce to feed everyone. In such a context, children who occupy a structurally weak position in their kin group, or sometimes even end up with no family at all, are more likely to be singled out as witches. This applies even more strongly to children who already stand out in

⁸ See for a more general overview Roulet-Cimpric 2014 (<http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199791231/obo-9780199791231-0065.xml>)

⁹ Today an estimated 40 % of the Congolese population lives in an urban context. Cities continue to attract a lot of migrants from the rural hinterland. Young people tend to leave the rural areas to escape from the social control of elders, out of fear for these elders’ witchcraft, for security reasons, and in search of healthcare (often absent in the DRC’s vast rural hinterland) and job opportunities thought to be more readily available in the city.

one way or another because of a mental or physical disability, for example, or because of their erratic or idiosyncratic behavior.

Youth Accusing Parents and Elders: the Case of Funerals

The accusations of parents and elders towards their children and grandchildren, often culminating violence, are being mirrored by similar accusations made by young people against the previous generation. This becomes very obvious and visible during funerals, for example. Normally, the fathers and uncles of the deceased are the ones in charge of the funeral: they take care of all the formalities, raise the money for the coffin, address the crowd and supervise the burial. In recent years, however, cities such as Kinshasa or Lubumbashi have witnessed a powerful reversal of these norms and rules: upon the death of a young person children and youngsters are increasingly taking over the control of the mourning and burial rituals. The death of a young boy or girl triggers a lot of anger and rebellious sentiments amongst age-mates (cf. De Boeck 2013; Vangu Ngimbi 1997). This anger is directed at all public figures of authority and seniority, starting with the parents and elders of the deceased. They are the first ones to be blamed for this death. In such a case, youngsters will invade the scene, single out fathers and uncles and accuse them of witchcraft. Often, such accusations lead to violent attacks. As a result, the elders are chased from the site of mourning, while the young people of the neighbourhood take over the control of the funeral and confiscate the corpse to perform the burial themselves. In the end, families totally lose the control over the burial of their young relative. In this way, many urban cemeteries have become the site of an intergenerational battlefield for Congo's urban youth (who refer to themselves as *bana désordre*, children of 'disorder'), and in many areas of the country elderly men and women are regularly being persecuted and even killed because of such accusations of witchcraft.

Alternative Models of Social Ascent: Formal Education

Because of the impossibility to find (formal) work, to marry, and to set up a homestead and a family, juniors find it increasingly difficult to ascend towards social adulthood and increase their social power by following the older models through which their parents and great-parents attained such status, models that rested on the control of juniors' reproductive labor (but even so, juniors' expectations of attaining such a social status may still be partly formed by these expectations).

Alternative models of social ascent, through schooling, for example, are also proving to be increasingly hard to realize. Formal institutionalized education became the norm during the colonial period (at least on the level of primary and partly secondary education), and after independence college and university training opened up as a new alternative pathway to attain adulthood and access new job markets (e.g. white collar jobs in the expanding state administration). Education, in other words, became the new norm to constitute oneself as a modern subject. It held out the promise of material independence, and a diploma became a sure way to obtain social adulthood through which one could in turn create dependents and further accrue social status. However, the political and economic disintegration of the country from the mid-1970s onwards gradually made this alternative impossible as well. The collapse of the system of higher education, together with the increasing number of '*années blanches*' (years in which campuses had to close down because of student unrest, strikes by professors demanding a pay rise, war and conflict etc...) ¹⁰ meant that university training could drag on

¹⁰ As recently as November 2018, the campus of the University of Kinshasa (UNIKIN) became a battleground between students and police, resulting in deadly violence in the context of an ongoing strike of the university teachers demanding better pay. (<https://www.garda.com/crisis24/news-alerts/176971/drc-violent-student-protests-continue-in-kinshasa-november-17-update-1>)

for many years before one finally managed to obtain a diploma, and that the promise of a job at the end of this long tunnel, increasingly failed to materialize, due to the collapse of the state administration (the main job market for young holders of a university degree), and the fact that the university training in itself is often ill adjusted to the demands of the formal job market, that in itself is almost non-existent, in spite of the ‘Africa Rising’ rhetorics that has been part of a new (economic) Afro-optimism across the continent. In the DRC, however, the emergence of a new (urban) middle-class has only very partially taken place, and its existence has so far remained mostly hypothetical). But even if many students become ‘*licenciés sans fonction*’ (i.e. jobless owners of a master degree), the belief in schooling and education as the most important trajectory of ‘self-making’ and of accessing ‘modernity’ remains strong, and often still the whole family will contribute financially in order to provide at least one of its members with a college training.

Waithood, Occupation and the Politics of Presence

Barred from the older routes and models of attaining social adult- and elderhood, while the new models of doing so via formal education and accessing a formal labor market have also proved to be impossible, many young people today are ‘stuck in the compound’, as the saying goes, and condemned to a state of ‘waithood (cf. Honwana 2012) in which being a youth seems to have become a social terminus. But as it turns out, this ‘waiting’ is often a very active preoccupation, in which –beyond the sheer necessity to stay alive and survive- a lot of lines of flight are being generated, a lot of ‘moments of freedom’ and dreams (political and otherwise) are being expressed in varied and extremely rich and creative youth subcultures.

To illustrate this, take again the aforementioned example of urban funerals in which the very corpses of the young are turned into political platforms from which young men and women shout their criticisms directed at parents, elders, but also politicians, priests and other authority figures. These, the young seem to say, have not lived up to their promises, they have forsaken their responsibilities and ‘sacrificed’ the younger generations. Violent as their protest sometimes is, the political and moral criticisms voiced by this youth are not expressions of nihilism. They do not, like some exotic version of the Punks of the 1970s, shout: No More Future. Using funeral rites to address civic and moral wrongs, they actually try to convey the contrary: their right to a possible future. Unchanneled, raw, not recuperated by the official discourses of the state, the church or humanitarian organisations this (mostly urban) youth’s often violent and unruly singing and dancing during funerals highlights the urgency of their ongoing efforts at reconceptualising the society they live in and at questioning their place within it. More broadly what is being addressed here is the meaning of the public sphere itself, or the content of a notion such as citizenship. The ‘disorder’ these young men and women create, is often the only way at the disposal of a generation that is excluded from social or political power to define a new moral and political ground from which to formulate alternative futures for themselves, their city and their country. Typically, the form they use to do this is through placing their own body, as a tool to imagine oneself in different and alternative ways (cf. Diouf 2005), to occupy a place and demand the right to be included, heard and seen in the public sphere. The body here becomes the pivotal point of action in a pronounced politics of presence in which ‘occupation as a *radical politics of infrastructure* thus revisions the city [and, I would add, the country as a whole] as a set of relations that take form as alternative *common* spaces for political action (...). To occupy, in this context, is to constitute the common(s) as a point of departure for rethinking how we come to think about and inhabit the city.’ (Vasudevan 2015: 318-319)

In the end, such youthful occupation has less to do immediately with the formal claim of an expectant citizenship, or of a political right to be included in the public sphere, in which notions of citizenship always remain unclear and unresolved anyway. This is not to say that occupation might not encompass such political claims, as recent street protests in Burkina Faso, Burundi, and indeed the DRC, have shown. In Congo today, very active but institutionally still rather weak youth movements such as Lucha and their national network Filimbi increasingly play an important national and international role in their relentless demand for thorough political transformations. But in its very essence, the politics of occupation is part of an even more basic and fundamental (and therefore even more deeply political) claim: the simple claim to be, to stake out a place for yourself, to exist. *Tozali*, as one would say in Lingala: We *are* and we are here, with our bodies *and* our speech (for *occupation* is, after all, also a rhetorical device), we occupy the streets, villages and cities of the DRC, and because of this simple fact, our presence should be taken into account. This urgent demand for visibility and presence is, as W.J.T. Mitchell remarks in his essay on the meaning of the Occupy movement, ‘a demand in its own right’ and ‘an insistence on being heard and seen before any specific political demands are made’ (Mitchell 2013: 102). For him, this performance of *occupation* ‘refuses to describe or define in any detail the world it wants to create, while showing this world in its actual presence as a nascent community. It denounces the demand that it make specific, practical demands, while opening up a space in which innumerable demands can be articulated’ (Mitchell 2013: 102-103). It is a demand to be taken seriously.

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