 CHAPTER 15

Kinshasa: A City of Refugees

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Introduction

In 2006 I met Moïse, a crippled man who was begging on the central Boulevard de Trente Juin of Kinshasa. Over the years, I maintained good contact with him, to the extent possible considering that he does not have a phone, access to the Internet, or a fixed site where he begs—because he must constantly relocate to avoid the police. He introduced me to a world in Kinshasa that is right in front of one but remains invisible to outsiders. Owing to his physical disabilities, Moïse cannot walk and is forced to hop around on his hands and knees. Through his eyes and from his perspective, owing to his limited height, Kinshasa really does look different. The boulevard is a busy road filled with expensive SUVs, in which people that do not see or register people like Moïse are transported here and there. He explained me how the social security networks of the handicapped on the boulevard work, how people look out for each other and care for each other. When he was ill, a ‘colleague’ of his would quickly find me on the boulevard and tell me what was going on. To my great surprise, the money I gave for his medication and doctor visits would always reach Moïse, and he always thanked me for it when we would next see each other, often months later.

Moïse has been working on the boulevard for several decades now. Being handicapped at birth, he has never done anything other than beg for survival. Moïse’s life is extremely hard. For him, life has mainly been about the survival of himself and his family, about being able to provide food, and to provide money to send his children to school. Every time when I have returned to Kinshasa, it has been a relief to see that he is still alive, considering the dangers of his profession for someone that, due to his physical disabilities, is less than a metre high, hopping around between increasingly large and elevated SUVs—which, thanks to the new and improved boulevard, drive increasingly fast. The drivers cannot possibly see Moïse, who is on his hands and knees. I have often wondered how he reflects on what he has seen—the changing of tides for Mobutu, the arrival of Mzee Kabila with his rebel army, the start of the second war and the violent responses in Kinshasa, the deteriorating security situation

1 The personal names used in this paper are fictionalized.
and conditions of life—while at the same time Kinshasa has been transformed into a hub of the international community and a place where some people get incredibly rich. He had not heard of Staff Benda Billi, a group of handicapped Kinshasa street musicians that have become popular in Europe over recent years (in a way that reminds one of a freak show). Nor did he have any thoughts about politics. The turbulent times of Congo’s recent history, however, may have had a positive side effect for somebody like Moïse: people like me tend to be more generous than Congolese, or so Moïse assured me. Moïse may be surviving, but life has not significantly changed for the better for him or for most people, and the promised benefits of peace, democracy, and economic growth have remained beyond the reach of the vast majority of Kinois.

Not surprisingly, people are utterly disappointed. The day after the 50th anniversary of independence, I sent an SMS to a civil servant with whom I had worked intensively during my research. ‘How was the cinquantenaire,’ I asked him, knowing that he had the day off and intended to watch the parade. ‘Cinquantenaire, not good,’ he responded in an SMS. ‘We have not been paid up until now.’ There is little to celebrate for the ordinary Congolese. These disappointments have of course also had a profound effect on people’s vision of the future. Now that the democratic opening of 2006 has been such a disappointment for those that believed the long-anticipated elections and democracy would really mean a change for the better, many are reconsidering their options. Having lost the confidence that real change will come one day, many see a better future outside the country. The sharp contrast between Moïse’s life expectations and the aspirations of the other Kinois I had met could not be more stark. Sitting on the pavement with Moïse, looking at the boulevard, where the whirlwind of development, economic growth, and modernity were passing by, I realized how few aspirations Moïse had and how static his life was—and how much everybody else was trying to find ways to get out.

This paper offers some reflections on how people I have met in the Congo are trying to find ways to get out. They are stories of people that I greatly respect. The euphoria of the peace agreement and the promises it held for real change in people’s everyday lives are long gone. What most Congolese are left with is disillusionment. Not only are they disillusioned with the idea that things can change for real in the Congo; they are also left with a realization that they themselves are unable to change their own lives for the better and realize their hopes and dreams. Through personal life stories, this paper reflects on the concerns of these individuals and their responses. The stories are stories

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