

The African Middle Class of Kinshasa, a Gridlocked City in a 'Fragile' State, 1960-2010

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Introduction

In recent decades there has been a growing awareness of the potential interest in relating the rise and effectiveness of the state historically to the role of cities. (Tilly & Blockmans, 1994) The relationship is far from direct or easy to establish and the possible outcomes diverse. Some of this interest lies in the development of the subject of governance, of ways of looking at state intervention and operations beyond governmental structures narrowly defined. Some is undoubtedly forwarded by the fashionable attack on government in favour of so-called civil society and more localised types of rule that accompanied the triumph of so-called neo-liberalism after 1990. Inevitably this is a question that, if anything, gains interest when applied to the so-called 3rd world and notably to Africa. Can African cities offer possibilities for accumulation and sustainability where states fail? What role do cities play in post-conflict situations? Is local governance able to be an engine of growth where national government has been an impediment, on the Piore & Sabel model (Piore & Sabel, 1984)?

It is understandable that Kinshasa presents a formidable challenge to the application of such a model. In some respects, it seems to fill the bill in terms of potential. This is the largest African city after Cairo and Lagos with perhaps 7-8 million inhabitants so it is of real importance in terms of demographic weight. The Democratic Republic of the Congo after independence in 1960 was under the reins of a state notorious for its ineptitude and inability to sustain economic growth during the long Mobutu dictatorship. This regime was overthrown by force, initiating a period of disorder and military contestation that may perhaps be just now, after more than a decade, coming to an end, so we also have a post-conflict situation. The current government seems more in sympathy with Western nostrums about development and open to institutional changes approved by the likes of the World Bank and other international funders than any other has been.

Moreover, as will be shown below, there are urban agglomerations in the Congo which are suggestive of interesting and original initiatives from 'civil society'. In this sense, queries about Kinshasa are in order. However the burden of this paper will be to suggest that these queries, unless put somewhat differently, will not lead to positive roads of research to any great extent. The Piore & Sabel model, following the pioneering research of Roberto Bagnasco, focuses on the Third Italy of the little, quality—orientated, co-operative but competitive, productive firm in smaller cities. In this sense, Kinshasa is not like Bologna or Prato or Gorizia; it is like Rome. But Rome has always been a home for artisans supporting imperial glory and clerical splendour as well as the workings of a questionably modern state. Kinshasa is a very impoverished Rome which suffers from a dearth of

gainful employment where economic activities have to be shared between many hands for the population to survive. A ruthless ruler like Pol Pot might wish to send its inhabitants off to the land to retool themselves as peasants but the very forces, cultural, social as well as economic, of globalization, ensure that this will be unlikely to happen.

This argument will contain two sections. The first longer section is intended schematically to proceed through the history of modern Kinshasa by stages, emphasizing main trends.¹ The second uses a variety of sources including particularly a survey of middle class professionals undertaken by the author in 2009 in Kinshasa, to take the main argument further. The conclusion points away from a particular crisis-ridden or idiosyncratic interpretation of Kinshasa to consider it more within the range of typical African cities of the early 21st century instead.

Historical Development

The site of pre-colonial Kinshasa was one that offered very considerable advantages to regional trade. This was roughly the southern edge of equatorial forest where it met the southern savanna belt of the African continent. Here was the bottom of the lake, Stanley (now Malabo) Pool, formed by the great Congo River, navigable through the forests of central Africa for hundreds of kilometres. Below this flat marshy terrain, the river turned into a maze of rapids for dozens more kilometres before it flowed into a wide bed that led easily to the Atlantic. Thus in the nineteenth century a number of large villages clustered at this location on flat ground and the hilly ground rising to the south-east in an effort to capture some of the trade passing through although none formed the focus of a powerful state.

In the imperial plans of King Leopold II of the Belgians, this was effectively the bottom of the neck of the bottle out of which the natural wealth of the Congo basin would flow and supplies from industrial Europe needed to be inserted. By the end of the nineteenth century, a line of rail linked this site to the port of Matadi. However it was only after the first World War that the Belgian state systematically laid out and organised the city of Léopoldville and as late as 1930 before it was established as capital of this huge colony, now the second largest country in Africa in size. (Lafontaine, 1970, 12)² Thereafter its growth was fast in the context of a continent experiencing spectacular urban growth starting with the recovery from the Great Depression. By the final years of colonial rule, it was clearly already one of the ten biggest cities on the African continent; only Ibadan and Addis Ababa with their pre-colonial demographic foundations were larger between the Sahara and the frontiers of South Africa. Contemporary Kinshasa has kept this demographic weight as Africa has begun to urbanise.

Colonial Léopoldville included as many as 20,000 Europeans amongst perhaps 400,000 inhabitants in 1960, the date of independence. In their interests, a system of racial

¹ For a somewhat fuller version of this section, see my Working Paper in the website, 'The Congolese Elite And The Fragmented City; The Struggle For The Emergence Of A Dominant Class In Kinshasa, States and Cities Project, London School of Economics Crisis States Research Centre.

² Jean Lafontaine's work is a remarkably thorough and prescient introduction to life in Kinshasa during the first years of independence, a classic of Africanist scholarship.

segregation reminiscent of territories further south was instituted and the European residential and business core of the city (today known as Gombe) was isolated by a green belt from the African residential areas away from the river. Belgians were not often petty traders or artisans. Greeks and Portuguese and individuals of mixed origins were associated with this fragment of the social scale, where direct contact with the mass of Africans was relatively intense. However, Belgian administration strongly promoted the urbanisation of African artisans and clerks, for whom some 13.000 homes had been constructed by the state by 1957 (*Idem.*) These neighbourhoods were called the *cit  indigene*. There were also *lotissements*, including the one named Kinshasa (now called Kasa Vubu) where workers constructed their home.

As is very well-known, no political or social space was demarcated to accommodate an African elite of any sort. Thorough social research towards the end of the colonial era revealed that there was more of an independent stratum of traders, drivers, bar owners, farmers and other small businessmen than the government realised or indeed desired--- perhaps 2000, overwhelmingly male, in the capital. The Bakongo speaking people of the region had been involved in commercial activity long before colonial rule was established after all. However few of these petty accumulators were doing much more than making ends meet. They met with severe obstacles in search of credit or purchase of landed property. (van Cauwenbergh, 1956; Young, 1965). In addition, one could also identify a small stratum at the top end of the clerical scale in state employment already very conscious of status and eager to embrace its insignia, the forerunners of the future national elite. (Baeck, 1959) A special element with far more education and in positions of greater trusts were the increasingly numerous Catholic priests; these were the only black individuals for a long time who were encouraged to pursue higher education. However, Belgian rule altered quite dramatically in the final few years when devolution and training of Congolese elites became a priority. In 1957, Lovanium University opened its doors on Mont Ngafula, above the capital and elite formation moved ahead rapidly.

The years after 1960, the first following independence, brought the faltering Congolese state to headline status throughout the world. The nationalist prime minister Patrice Lumumba, was undermined and eventually fled the capital only to be captured and murdered in the breakaway copper-rich region of Katanga. In the short term, a strongly federal system with numerous small provinces, the so-called *provincettes* (1962), was established to re-integrate Katanga into the fragile new country. L opoldville itself was dominated by a set of parochial minded patrimonial bosses, notably the long-time activist Joseph Kasavubu associated with the ethnic Kongo ABAKO movement.³ (Young, 1965) The so-called Binza group seemed to favour fragmentation and local patronage systems.⁴ They were apt to form economic linkages to mutual advantage with the hardier European business interests still in the harness at a time when, for instance, secondary industry actually was reviving. The possibility of permanent fracture of the national territory remained however. For a time after the death of Kasavubu, the secessionist Katanga leader Mo se Tshombe was actually national president.

³ Interestingly ABAKO formed out of an association of music lovers in 1940, La Fontaine, 1970. La Fontaine suggests that tribal and ethnic associations were historically most important for newcomers to the city and became less significant when long-time urban dwellers formed more diffuse associations.

⁴ La Fontaine notes the significance of the elite gathering in Binza, a corner in the white section of the city..

In several parts of the country, this was a period of open confrontation with the new state. Radical leaders who took to the bush and proclaimed the 'second independence' found a ready following amongst ordinary Congolese who had felt oppressed under the Belgians and did not recognise the authority of the new elite. (Weiss, 1967; Young, 1965) Probably the most dramatic of the insurrections, associated with the killing and rape of Europeans in Stanleyville, also engineered the murder of hundreds of male members of the emergent local African elite. Eventually put down, notoriously with the assistance of mercenaries, it is important to recall that a bond was thereby created between that elite, justifiably terrified of the mob, and forces one is apt to call 'neo-colonial'. (Depelchin, 1981, Pongo, 1999) Thus a new Congolese elite emerged within the house that Leopold built and it depends on that house, however altered, being left standing or reconstructed, for its own existence.

The city changed rapidly in character. With the breach in colonial discipline, squatters, usually following arrangements with local chiefs, seized land beyond the planned confines of Léopoldville and created the first unplanned settlements, *les annexes*. After the initial disorders of January 1959 when the Belgians lost control of the outer reaches of town for a period and which provoked the rapid march to decolonisation, however, the capital itself remained relatively peaceful. (Kueno Tshingi, 1999) As a result, it attracted large numbers of refugees from other areas, especially the Bandundu Province of today to its east but also including a large number of Angolans fleeing the warfare across the border that had broken out. To this day, my interviews indicated that the capital is considered by Congolese as a place of security whatever its other faults.

However, this did not hold true for all larger Congolese towns. Under the Belgians, one can clearly discern a sequence of smaller urban centres defined in terms of administrative and economic function along the lines of the rail and water transport routes that tied the huge territory together. (Bruneau, 1995) Now some of these towns experienced the departure of almost all European inhabitants and dramatic economic decline that would accelerate as the transport system began to weaken. The classic example which has been covered particularly well in the literature is Stanleyville, now known as Kisangani. (cf Omasombo, 2002) Cities such as Kisangani have not actually lost population in absolute terms but they have experienced only modest demographic growth with little in-migration as their economic resources have disappeared.

Class, State and City in the Mobutu Era

This unsteady phase ended with the coup which brought Colonel Joseph Desiré Mobutu, a publicist employed by the military, to power. Mobutu, a key player in the Binza clique, was to rule the Congo, under a name associated with ancient legends of exploration, Zaïre, during most of its independent history from November, 1965. Born in a backwater region up the Congo River in Equateur Province and associated with a minor tribe, Mobutu had no local base from which to operate; he was completely a creature of the state-generated system. He has held the notoriety of being the ultimate neo-colonialist in African nationalist chronicles. It is certainly true both that he and his closest associates [whom he would occasionally dismiss and disgrace or restore to favour] salted away extraordinary

amounts of money, for the most part outside Africa and that he committed himself early on, perhaps learning from the tragic fate of Lumumba, to a set of right-wing international alliances and to earning the approval of the powerful in the West.

But it is a real mistake to underestimate Mobutu who had numerous affinities with other African nationalists with less conservative associations and who was critical in creating, or renewing, the Congolese state that still exists today.⁵ On core issues, he did not interest himself in advice from outsiders. With regard to the first point above, Mobutu directed a process of re-centralisation, restoring the big provinces and decreeing that all significant officials had to be assigned to jobs outside their own home province. He did his best to reduce or destroy the power of any autonomous local notables. (Callaghy, 1984) Mobutu continued the job of expanding—dramatically—the educational system that produced the elite which thereby acquired its legitimacy that had taken root during the federal period and he nationalised the Catholic and Protestant universities that had been established in response to protest at Lovanium.⁶ (Verhaegen, 1971) On the foundation laid largely by the Catholic Church in the colonial period, a public health system was laid out that was a model for tropical Africa. (Persyn & Ladrière, 2004)

At his most potent, he promoted cultural nationalism, symbolised by the compulsory change in names demanded of all Congolese and he sponsored the wholesale nationalisation of businesses and industries. He favoured development in the form of the foundation of heavy industry, concrete, steel, automobiles and to cap everything, the use of power from the Congo river rapids above the capital, itself renamed Kinshasa, to supply the copper mines of Katanga, thereby holding this potentially secessionist area with its logical geo-economical links to Angola and to south-central Anglophone Africa, in the grasp of his state. (Willame, 1992)⁷ The police and the army, enforcing *salongo*-compulsory public works labour- and constantly bullying and extracting revenue from the mass of people, notably in the countryside, were fundamental to the Mobutu system. (Callaghy, 1984, Schatzberg, 1980, 1988)⁸

If some aspects of the Belgian economic system started to crumble by the late 1960s, Mobutu relied above all on the copper mines as his source of wealth. These were nationalised as Gécamines although Belgians continued to operate on contract as managers. It is possible to see the late 1960s and early 1970s as the period when the Mobutu system attained a kind of nationalist efflorescence. (Peemans, 1986) Mobutu did much to prize open the remaining linkages of capital accumulation in the Congo to Belgian corporations. The state, rather than the ruling party (although Mobutu created one) was all-important. (Callaghy, 1984, Schatzberg, 1980) In a series of difficult struggles, the private sector and the Catholic Church continued to hold some autonomy

⁵ In the military, Mobutu was one of the key MNL supporters of Lumumba and from Lumumba he inherited the enthusiasm for a single nationalist party dominating an African country. See Young, 1965.

⁶ By 1972, there were an estimated 17,000 students at university and over 300,000 in secondary schools, Hull, 1979).

⁷ The 'white elephants doomed to early failure'. (Piermay, 1997, 232)

⁸ Schatzberg believed, however, that the police, the judiciary and local government did contain significant elements that attempted to run a solvent state according to correct norms (Schatzberg, 1988) by contrast to the predatory dominance of the military.

from the state but on the whole this state apparatus became synonymous with the country Mobutu ruled.

This was the key formative period of the Congolese bourgeoisie. (Depelchin, 1981) A tiny number of individuals became very wealthy. A larger number of people acquired status and the taste for a middle class consumer life-style that was legitimated above all in their ascent of the educational ladder certified by degrees in a national system and by their knowledge of the favoured former colonial language, French.⁹ It was enough to have the degree to be considered a real ‘intellectuel’. (Tshingi, 2007) This class was organically tied to the state and its bureaucratic formations and dwelt, if it could, in the city; it had relatively little to do with the system of production whether in agriculture, mining or industry.¹⁰ (Biaya, 1985) Mobutu himself, just as his contemporaries Senghor and Nyerere, commented with acrimony on the apparent exploitation of the productive countryside by the parasitic city.

‘In effect these dishonest citizens, concentrated for the most part in the capital city of the country, have transformed Kinshasa into a true centre for the exploitation of the whole interior. Three quarters of the money supply of the country is concentrated in Kinshasa: oil, food products, drugs and other imports from overseas stay in Kinshasa while the money that pays for their importation comes almost entirely from the sweat of the industrial and agricultural populations of the interior of the country.’¹¹ (in Schatzberg, 1979, my translation)

As late as 1983, a huge *ratissage* operation was effected in Kinshasa which resulted in massive shakedowns of the population and expulsions of the unwanted from the capital. As the good times wore off, however, and urban life became more difficult, it became more difficult to apply a simple model of urban exploitation along the lines the Mobutu quote suggested. (Piermay, 1997)

The capital, now renamed Kinshasa—‘Kin la belle’—was deeply implicated in this kind of class structuring project which was absolutely typical of the newly-formed African nations at this time. Here were located the grand, international style hotels where the elite could disport themselves such as the new Grand Hotel erected amidst the diplomatic and government *quartier* of Gombe. Here were the giant stadia where independence days could be celebrated with mass turnouts. The city was the best location for the schools and health facilities that spelt modernity and the good life. The new elite not only felt strongly attached to the gleaming capital but it was inseparably linked to the urban-centred state that effectively acted as the controller and distributor of national wealth. This link, whatever the pride in the capital city, was above all to national identity.

⁹ For some memorable quotes [my translations]: ‘Until the recession, the diploma was the key to happiness and to power and the wealth of the country’ (Tshingi, 2007, 130) and ‘It was a great honour for parents to marry their daughters to teachers. Any girl married to a teacher thought herself blessed by God and her family enjoyed great prestige’. (Mwembe, 2002, 39) The second colonial language, Flemish, died away in Congolese usage quickly.

¹⁰ For a paean to the good life in these days see Mondo Pashi, 2003. There is an extensive exposition along these lines in St. Moulin, 1971 with specific reference to the charms of Kinshasa at its post-colonial peak.

¹¹ For this perspective developed, see Kabongo, 1986 especially.

There was sufficient prosperity in Zaïre so as to create as well an aura of pleasure and sensual emancipation in Kinshasa that percolated well down the social ladder. T.K. Biaya, a particularly sensitive observer of the cultural scene, refers to the triple tableau of Zaïrian urban sociability—*Mundele, Ndumbe, Ambiance*. (Biaya, 1994) The world of the city was assimilated to that of the white man, *Mundele* in Lingala and his status symbols. He stood for ‘civilisation’. A major part of this was the emergence of the ‘free woman’ or *ndumbe*, a figure who could be said to suffer from social death in traditional patriarchal African societies where she had lost all status, but who could now come into her own through her free dealings with male individuals as a model for the new society. Atmosphere, *ambiance*, represented the atmosphere created by Matonge’s numerous bars, a world of prostitutes and dance music so catchy it began to acquire a market across the borders from Zaïre. Michael Schatzberg presciently linked the expansion of the new class of state employees and those dependent on the state to the growing revenues of beer manufacturers in a provincial town up the Congo River, Lisala. (Schatzberg, 1980) Bar ownership was an excellent investment in this period, relatively reliable sources of income for those with enough capital to invest in them. A small beer tax provided a splendid, essentially licit source of income for local government officials. Elite patronage of bars [and the emergence of a network of women fans] was often important in the making of famous musicians.

Employment was not strictly based, moreover, on state patronage directly. Secondary industry, sustained by state policies and aimed at the national market, was relatively successful in this period and by current standards, Kinshasa offered the male public a large range of paid employment. However, this was a classic African primate city, far larger than any provincial town with an economy in which state patronage was central. It functioned not as an inward-looking redoubt, moreover, but as the jewel in the crown, the archetype for the national network of provincial capitals where the new elite could be found. It was a city, first and foremost of services, display and consumption, rather than production or even commerce.

‘The priorities established in urban spending derive from the competitiveness and display that are an integral part of the urban culture from which the city-dweller derives his values.’ (La Fontaine, 1970)

Early on Kinshasa took on signs of housing shortage. This was a city of tenants who felt squeezed by landlords. To own a piece of land, a *parcelle*, (which itself involved a negotiation that tied the owner to the legitimacy of the state and its paperwork) was the height of everyone’s ambition and struggles over land ownership were a typical feature of Kinshasa life. (Piermay, 1997; Trefon, 2009) An increasingly corrupt local state still remains an important player in the struggle over property. The relative expensiveness of access to land probably led to the end of the very rapid growth in the city’s population towards the end of the 1960s. Since that time, human indicators have tended to show an increasingly normal sex balance, a very gradual decline in childbirths per woman and demographic increase shifting in origins based more on natural increase than on migration from the countryside. (Piermay, 1997, 227) The most likely explanation for the declining appeal of

movement to the city lay in cost factors although intense interchange between town and city characterised this phase. (MacGaffey, 1983)

The status of Kinshasa shifted from time to time but a constant feature was the political centralisation of the Mobutu system. Governorship of the province or city was a highly prized plum, offering many opportunities for self-enrichment, but local government at the next level of the *communes* (restructured from time to time) was bereft of autonomy or resources in any more positive sense. (Lafontaine, 1970; Piermay, 1997) It certainly was not an agency of a rising class based in the city.

The Mobutu System in Decline

By the middle of the 1970s, Zaïre entered a period of gradual and then spiralling decay. (Peemans, 1986) The grand plans for industrialization fell apart or collapsed and state revenues declined. One reason for this was the nationalisation of plantations, mines and businesses following a key November 30, 1973 Zaïrianisation decree. Some of the new Congolese owners were capable entrepreneurs; most were not and quickly ran enterprises into the ground, selling assets or letting them fall into decay. This was particularly the case with large, complex operations. (MacGaffey, 1987) Second, the sophisticated and vital transport and communications infrastructure the Belgians created no longer contained men with the commitment for repair, maintenance and modernisation. Most of it fell into ruin and the integration of the nation increasingly became dependent solely on state institutions, especially the predatory military. Kinshasa ‘la belle’ became Kinshasa ‘la poubelle’—*Trashy Kinshasa*. Third, Zaïre, as with most of Africa, was severely hit by the decline in global commodity prices. In the case of copper, one can actually speak of a collapse. A nadir was reached in the 1990s. Most of the other exports typical of the Congo were now spirited across the border to countries with stronger currencies and fell outside the grasp of state authorities. The situation was certainly made worse by the personal hold of Mobutu on what resources did pass his way; these he made sure did not decrease in value.

The decay phase was clearly well advanced by 1980 but it took until 1997 for an army under Laurent Kabila with substantial aid from another ex-Belgian colony, Rwanda, finally to rid the Democratic Republic of the Congo (as it was renamed) of Mobutu. This was true despite the fact that his Western backers had largely washed their hands of him in the latter years. The isolation of the country in the 1990s, when little aid was received, marked its low point in terms of decline and extreme levels of stress. How was this long twilight of decay possible?

One reason lay in Mobutu’s unique ability to more or less hold this huge territory together. Without the state, those its certification had created as a class proved politically very feeble. When a National Assembly was called in and elected in 1990 to hammer out a new constitution following pressure from aid donors and creditors, it was as though the country returned to the situation of the early 1960s with parochial local notables (usually with the status symbols of the ‘educated elite’) quarrelling over turf and patronage; astonishingly the weakened dictator survived. (Willame, 1992) However bitterly resented Mobutu was by educated Congolese and those who dreamt of a democracy in central Africa, they failed

to find a plausible new champion with which to counter him. Only after the 1994 revolution in Rwanda, which finally disrupted and destabilized for good the situation in the eastern Congo, was his doom sealed.

Secondly, Mobutu and his predatory armed men stood between the elite, whose situation we will now move towards elucidating and the mass of potentially rebellious Congolese. The affluent hovered close to the skirts of the UNO troops in the Kinshasa neighbourhoods once inhabited by Europeans in colonial times. (Cuyvers, 2005) Kinshasa was in effect sacked twice by the poor, most notably in 1991 and again in 1993; the elite were unable to find protection for their properties and goods. (Piermay, 1997; Willame, 1992; deVillers & Omasombo Tshonda, 2004; Pongo, 1999) Moreover, in the period of conflict when the capital was disputed between Laurent Kabila and Jean-Pierre Bemba, the warlord who was for a time dominant in the west, there was a further phase of looting and damage to infrastructure. Recovery from this phase remains fragile. Violent eruptions devastating other centres such as Kisangani, the former Stanleyville, and Goma, re-enforced this reality.

Yet another trend during this period comes forward very sharply in the scholarly literature about state, city and elite in Zaïre. It suggests that while the old elite decayed and experienced more and more serious problems, new forms of accumulation began to come to the fore. There continued to be a relationship between accumulation, elite formation and the state but it now was considerably less direct as much of the old elite began to feel the pinch. (Schatzberg, 1980, MacGaffey, 1986, 1987)

This coincided with the nationalisation of the economy: Congolese were effectively invited to take over European businesses at bargain prices so as to make the economy a sphere of African control. In some cases, as MacGaffey showed within her landmark case study of Kisangani, in the case of fishing equipment, the new accumulators simply stole the property of extant businesses.¹² (MacGaffey, 1986). She noted that it was in smaller operations such as sawmills and medium size plantations or fishing that Congolese entrepreneurs were able to survive. These were usually individuals with some connection to European businesses retaining the educational skills to keep accurate accounts, sometimes the wives or childrens of Europeans but also included Greeks willing to live with a minimum of Western amenities. They were the ones who continued to develop and cope with the unpredictable. (MacGaffey, 1987)

In general, business conditions became far more difficult. Transport costs grew and much international trade was taken over by smuggling networks, noted by different writers for Katanga, for the eastern province of Kivu¹³ and in the vicinity of the capital in the west as well. On the one hand, this offered major opportunities for profit, overwhelmingly in the sphere of commerce rather than production, on the part of enterprising individuals who commanded influence and formed useful networks that crisscrossed the immense territory of Zaïre. (MacGaffey, 1986, Willame, 1992) These individuals could withhold or make

¹²This element of looting brings to mind the depredations of Idi Amin in despoiling the population of Indians in Uganda in the same period or the current theft of white owned land in Zimbabwe by the Mugabe regime.

¹³ Today divided up as the two Kivus, North and South.

available supplies, increasing profitability through the decay of the country more generally. (Peemans, 1986, 84) They included women who had been entirely, and still were largely, excluded from the professional careers that the state created, certified or legitimated for some men.. Such women, acquiring a foothold in business, made strategic alliances, perhaps marriages with civil servants or lenders of capital, with men who could assist them and were role models for others. (MacGaffey, 1987)

In one sense, this could be said to shift the process of wealth formation from the public to the private sector.¹⁴ Some bureaucrats were fired, in what was called the *assainissement*, and hungry for finding new ways of making ends meet. (Piermay, 1997, Tshilemalema, 1973) However, the Congolese situation was more complex. Low as wages for civil servants might be, the opportunities that such jobs offered in positioning them for further income continued to give them an important advantage. (MacGaffey, 1991) With the collapse of state salaries, officials began to look to business for making ends meet and to accumulate wealth. To a remarkable extent, Mobutu tolerated and indeed encouraged a process by which scholars have actually been able to tabulate the growing share of income source outside salaries for officials. MacGaffey has explained for the Mobutu period how state officials were able to use privileged access to medical care, protection for locally made goods and many other examples of *circuits personnels* to benefit themselves.

In consequence, it is hard to imagine that an independent bourgeoisie could or would ever want to shake off the state for all its iniquities. (MacGaffey, 1987) At the lowest level, this amounted to shakedowns, often of a brutal nature, on the part of licensed armed men that affected millions of village people. In the words of Jean-Claude Willame, ‘In Zaïre, the subjects of the monarch are thus conscripted, controlled and punished rather than governed or administered.’ (Willame, 1992, 57, my translation) The possibilities for wealth increased directly with one’s stature in the government and, of course, the very most prestigious and powerful individuals under Mobutu had the opportunity to become very rich indeed.¹⁵

Analyses unpacked with considerable acuity the growing irrelevance of official statistics maintained by the state; increasingly wealth acquisition was ‘informal’ and the ‘real’ economy was less and less captured by any licit state agencies. Was this in fact a process of class formation that fed off state failure and relied on the weakening of a corrupt and incompetent governmental machinery? Such a process could to some degree even be celebrated during a considerable phase when international agencies blamed African states for the foibles of development policies and demanded the withdrawal of the state from the commanding heights of African economies, whether under the aegis of leadership apparently devoted to a socialist path or simply pragmatists such as Mobutu who relied on the state to hold society together. Certainly Mobutu was one of those who discouraged independent power as a political tool.

¹⁴ MacGaffey, 1986, explicitly draws the contrast between high official whom she sees as parasites and the new accumulators whose energy and initiative she admires, particularly in the case of the women.

¹⁵ These are described in some detail by Willame, 1992, who notes, for instance, the Lux soap monopoly. Most of this top elite also make their money through using bureaucratic or military power to control commercial networks.

Yet the reality was that he too had to compromise. The state went easier and easier over time on private accumulation. However it did not disintegrate or disappear. Instead Congolese society evolved as a kind of mosaic where a very corrupt and inefficient state tolerated and indeed stimulated, but also held in check, a dynamic of accumulation. Amongst those who have thought about this question, I am particularly impressed with the perspective of Jean-Luc Piermay who has depicted a low level stasis, a mutual dependence of state and autonomous commerce that captured what accumulation processes were able to proceed in the decaying Congolese cash economy of the 1970s and 1980s. Piermay writes that Kinshasa perhaps in exemplary form displays ‘a real state of equilibrium for a weak society within the context of laissez-faire economics at world level’ (Piermay, 1997, 244; see also Trefon, 2004) This seems to me a far more useful concept than state failure or even state fragility in portraying Congolese life. Piermay also points to the importance of fixers, of middlemen, in coming to the fore in enabling people to get anything done with a petrified system in gridlock.¹⁶

The declining capacity of the state to deliver consumption goods had a remarkable effect on the network of Zaïrian cities. Many provincial towns, deeply affected especially by the gradual collapse of the transport system, fell into a deep state of decay. They continued to grow in general in population due to natural increase but at a restrained rate. At the same time, however, relatively unimportant settlements were able to take advantage of disorder and the limitations of state control to burgeon. Mbuji Mayi, a diamond mining town, profited from the forced return of victims of xenophobic attacks to their ‘homeland’ of perhaps the most economically successful Congolese ethnic group, the Luba, and the opening up of legal artisanal diamond mining. (Piermay, 1997, 248-49; Bruneau, 1995) Mbuji Mayi has grown so fast that estimates suggest it has now surpassed Lubumbashi to become the second biggest city in the country. Butembu, an eastern city with quite a different sort of ethnic mix, has also boomed. Nande entrepreneurs shifted from the legal trade in coffee and other Eastern produce to cross-border smuggling to becoming major suppliers from 1997 for armed men in the East while keeping Butembu as a kind of safe urban commercial haven, a populated warehouse. It is now amongst the ten biggest Congolese cities. (Kabamba, 2008) The border town of Gombe alongside the Rwandan frontier is another example of unplanned growth definitely not led by government planning. There are other towns too, such as Tshikapa, the diamond centre near the Angolan frontier, that would repay study here. Figures however do not suggest that Kinshasa has lost its demographic weight amongst Congolese cities. Does this indicate that the decay of the Congolese state has allowed this apparently parasitic and state-centric urban giant to change into a post-liberal model of new forms of accumulation, a question Piermay has already raised?

Kinshasa Today

The setting in recent years might seem propitious to such a shift. The current president, Joseph Kabila, is clearly eager to create some kind of balanced relationship with Western interests that can be mutually beneficial. Western aid presence has returned to the city.

¹⁶ MacGaffey’s take is also telling: ‘The poor and illiterate find the administration incomprehensible, alien and oppressive. They minimize contacts with it. The wealthy and influential backed by the power of office are served by it and given whatever they want. Those in between must resort to personal relations.’ (MacGaffey, 1987, 207)

The state has officially bought into a vision of the state as either ‘rolled back’ or as being transformed into a more functional vehicle for the development of capitalist capacities and structures.

One business expanded rapidly through the years of decay, the mining and sale of ‘artisanal’ diamonds, at first especially on the frontier with Angola where a long civil war raged, often adding both to dangers and to profits but latterly in the eastern Congo as well on a very significant scale. One estimate has it that perhaps at any time 700,000 Congolese venture out to the mines fields, including city-dwellers, while perhaps 100,000 are involved in trade in diamonds. (Cuyvers, 2005) The diamond trade finds outlets, particularly numerous buyers, in the capital, but it is a long way from the diamond fields themselves and urban adventurers who wish to try their hand as diggers have to leave town to access this form of potential wealth. (de Boeck, 2002, 266) The real wealth in the diamond industry has however largely been captured by the hardiest of the outsiders, the Lebanese, who also have a major involvement in this business in West Africa, with Belgians and Israelis playing some part. Another area that would seem to repay investigation is the world of the *cambiste*, the money changers who apparently flourish in times when the currency has been overvalued. Here too researchers have found that the majority of workers in this sector earn very little. (deHerdt and Marysse, 1999)

One should note as well the sustained links with the outer world, the role of N’djili airport, the embassies, aid agencies, the UNO troops and foreign NGOs that have sprung up and support many people with resources from outside the Congo. The historian Elikia M’Boloko has estimated the number of NGOs operating in Kinshasa at over 1.300. Quite a few are essentially vehicles for survival/accumulation. (Giovannoni et al, 2004) The Congolese elite, but also ambitious men and women on the fringe of society, have found means to access sources of wealth outside the country. (Trefon, 2004, de Herdt, 2004) These include drug dealers, physicians with practices in Johannesburg as well as in Kinshasa and traders who cross borders and organise commerce in the basic necessities of life. The most glamorous of such individuals, who have effectively colonised the old colonial capitals of Paris and Brussels but who often aspire to return home to successful business operations-- very typically bars and other places of entertainment-- to multiple property investments and to the patronage of numerous impoverished or ambitious kinsmen and friends. They are the subject of a new anthropological literature which captures how different such people are from the traditional unskilled labour migrants to Europe of twenty and thirty years ago. (MacGaffey & Bazenguissa-Ganga, 2000) But to what does this add up?

In this metropolis of want, the lives of the poor have been investigated both from the perspective of ‘poverty alleviation’ (Trefon, 2004), which has replaced campaigns for industrialisation and inclusive service provision in development thinking and the flowering of a cultural literature that has told us much about changing Kinshasa beliefs, urban witchcraft and the role of the vast number of churches that flourish there. (de Boeck, 2002, 2004; Gondola, 1997; Nlandu, 2002; Tshingi, 1999) There is a general agreement that a distinctive Kinshasa culture has arisen in which people exert pride and identity through their upbringing and survival in the city. Ethnic roots are not forgotten but they are no

more primordial or significant than other kinds of ties that allow people to survive in this environment. Ideas about success and failure, good and bad fortune, witchcraft and conformity have been transmuted from rural roots and turned into a distinctive urban and 'modern' culture. De Boeck has considered this as a process of 're-enchantment' of the meaning of the city for its inhabitants (de Boeck, 2002)¹⁷ although it can be argued that this process was already signalled for the earliest years of independence in the prescient work of Jean La Fontaine.¹⁸ But does this re-enchantment hold as well for leading elements in urban society?

Life in the City: A Survey of the Kinshasa Middle Class¹⁹

In order to test whether new directions could be signalled in the orientation of the Congolese elite of the capital in such a way as to premise a re-orientation towards new forms of accumulation as well as survival, to an interest in local government and to an urban identity of a kind that did not exist before, the rich literature on class formation and crisis in the Congo was supplemented with a survey conducted by the author in Kinshasa during June 2009, almost entirely in French²⁰. This involved interviewing 23 people representing a range of professions-medical and legal occupations, academics and university employees, NGO organisation leaders, and architects/builders. In addition, targeted interviews were also held with a number of business people and several figures from local government. The age range of those interviewed was: 31-40, 5, 41-50 8, 51-60, 8 in the cases where ages were forthcoming. Although they were unfortunately under-represented, several professional women were included in the survey. Interviews followed a schedule included as an appendix but led to open-ended discussions which allowed individual voices to be heard clearly.

In addition to the survey, use was made of a slightly dated but still sadly pertinent and excellent collection in which largely Congolese researchers asked somewhat parallel questions using a range of interview sequences, although largely in cities other than Kinshasa, *Manières de Vivre*, edited by de Villers, Jewsiewicki and Monnier (2002).²¹ Finally, three lively recent books by Congolese authors who comment extensively on life in the capital were deliberately considered as representative voices of native intellectuals and read with that in mind: Fumunzanza Muketa (2008); Kueno Tshingi (2007) and Cornelis Nlandu-Tsana (1997).

¹⁷ As such, this is meant to turn on its head the classic notion of Max Weber that the capitalist city is the seat of disenchantment and rationality.

¹⁸ An unexplored research area would be the extent to which an elite share in this popular culture.

¹⁹ In order to conduct this research in Kinshasa I am grateful to the States and Cities Project, Crisis States Research Centre, London School of Economics, for their efficient and generous support. Professor Jo Beall recruited me for this investigation and came with me to Kinshasa where she participated in the interviewing process. I profited from her insights and comments. In Kinshasa, we were grateful to Xavier Bahaya and to Prof. Selemani of the Sociology Department, University of Kinshasa for their able guidance around the city and the introductions which made our interviews possible. Jules Kassay and Cornelius Mbuluku also deserve special thanks. For leading me towards necessary points of contact in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, I have to thank David and Catherine Newbury and, especially, David Moore. I have the intention of writing an article focussing on this survey in more detail in the near future.

²⁰ Including as well an expatriate Congolese doctor interviewed in Johannesburg at the end of March 2009.

²¹ See also Trefon, 2009.

One set of questions clustered around the interrelationship of the Congolese middle class and Kinshasa as a location. No more than five of those interviewed were natives of Kinshasa; the remainder had come to the city from the neighbouring provinces of Bas-Congo and Bandundu but also from Kivu, Kasai and Katanga, much further afield. At least eight seem to have come to live in Kinshasa in the context of higher education and remained for life. Interviewees were asked about their links with and attachments to other locales. Almost all had some kind of links to rural situations where they had kin; there was no opportunity to ascertain how important these were. Relations to people and places abroad but outside the Democratic Republic of Congo in Africa varied tremendously but almost everyone interviewed could recount relatives, let alone friends, who had emigrated to North America, to Europe (particularly but not only Belgium and France) and to South Africa.

However the most striking result was that virtually every single individual reported regular and intense contact with other cities in the DRC, even though the terrible transport situation means that links could only be maintained over the telephone and via air travel in person. Two people went out of their way to tell me about how their travels had taken them over time to virtually every one of the eleven present provinces in the country. Key organisational links to alumni and professional associations were also in essence national.

Another sub-set of questions concerned the city itself and the *communes*. Our interviewees lived in no less than ten out of twenty-four of the communes. Attitudes towards these sub-units (which house people in six figures each) was matter-of-fact and reflected a statistically ascertainable and well-known hierarchisation based on availability of basic urban services. (St. Moulin, 1969/70) This order has changed little since the 1960s. Most communes do provide the basics for daily living and most contain private, usually but not always parochial, schools and private clinics which are critical given the difficulty of transport beyond walking distance in the city. However, *communes* are generally evaluated in terms of access to water and electricity as well as to the availability of taxis together with the difficulties posed by relatively heavy traffic on terrible roads. Piermay's view that they have thus far demonstrated some development of an identity but little capacity for self-regulation seems still to be the case. (Piermay, 1993) In the southern outer communes, security was several times mentioned as a serious problem after dark. One interviewee reported the systematic local agency of vigilantes and two individuals reported recent serious robbery assaults, one of them himself a judge. Gangs of tough young men who agglomerate without much purpose in such districts clearly continue to constitute a problem but the perpetrators of serious crime are apt to be police or, more likely, soldiers. Outside of the military, Kinois are very unlikely to own weapons. One collective interview with women also reported widespread violence towards women.²² At the same time, several informants reported that they were contented to live in outlying areas because of the access to land and the possibility of feeding the family through growing their own crops. On the Plateau, the section of university property given over to

²² However, while the sex of the interviewees is an important mark of authenticity in this regard, it was equally true that there seemed to be a movement afoot to create an NGO (and thus a money earning scheme) with this as part of its remit, I am hesitant therefore to confirm it as an objective problem.

staff housing, this is definitely a common and much appreciated practice; retired staff are allowed to stay in their houses for their lifetime.

In general, however, the pattern that emerged was one where individuals tended to remain in the commune where they first lived in Kinshasa, even if need be in poorly urbanised and serviced outlying *communes*. This has little to do, however, with affection and far more with the difficulty of getting, and especially purchasing, housing.²³ Being a *locataire*, a renter, is seen usually as a curse and the price of living in the city was seen as a major deterrent by the majority of informants, one that probably limits its attraction to poor Congolese outsiders. Indeed even property that is clearly owned is often disputed and fought over. All over Kinshasa signs are put up to indicate that *parcelles* are not for sale at any price! (Cuyvers, 2005)

Interviewees complained very little about the quality of either schools or clinics although sometimes they had anxieties about costs. Serious illnesses however require referral to a handful of big hospitals however which are far more difficult of access. All were asked about the University of Kinshasa which is in a sad state of dilapidation. (see also Munikengi and Sangol, 2004) They were very well-informed about its problems, particularly transport to the institution from distant communes, severe overcrowding and the poor state of physical infrastructure and the passing of the much admired generation of academics trained up through the 1980s for whom there are few replacements. Conditions are somewhat better in the several private universities that have been established but these cannot charge fees high enough to create genuinely excellent facilities and rely on moonlighting staff from the University of Kinshasa so they do not represent a substantial alternative.

Only half of my interviewees had access to even an ancient car that was functioning; the rest got around on unreliable and scarce taxis and buses. Yet they tend to commute significant distances and conceptualise the city very much as a whole. While informants varied in their knowledge of different parts of Kinshasa, to a very large extent, they take for granted that what was once the Belgian administrative and business centre known as Gombe, is still very much the centre of the city that they visit and use constantly. Even today people refer to Gombe as *la ville* and the rest of Kinshasa as *la cité*, derived from the Belgian usage. While there are virtues for most in going to the *grande marché* which is still located there (although thanks to Laurent Kabila, there is a huge produce market in the south-eastern part of Kinshasa near the airport) and to the shops for more specialised goods, the striking feature was the necessity of all to stay in contact with a variety of government offices all in Gombe. The link to the central government goes without saying in its importance for the Kinois middle class.

Finally, under this rubric it is interesting to consider the question of attitude. The scholarly literature has reiterated the emergence of a transcendent, post-ethnic Kinois identity with strong cultural roots, often given concrete meaning in the use of the Lingala language as

²³ For a magisterial study of land acquisition in Kinshasa and several other Central African cities, see Piermay, 1993. See also Tshingi, 2007.

lingua franca.²⁴ Most informants born outside Kinshasa did not quite see themselves as Kinois. And several explained that to them, to be called Kinois was not a flattering term. People from up-country were seen as more hard-working, honest and, above all, morally upright individuals. The Kinois were identified as shallow people who live for pleasure and are content with looking for easy money, people without any moral fibre. By contrast, only two or three individuals prided themselves in being Kinois. The ambiance of dance, of music, pretty girls and fine music was never hailed and often deplored.²⁵ The perspective the middle class had on the city was essentially one of shame at the deterioration of urban infrastructure and the hardships of urban life. The only systematically positive assessment related to security. Amongst the printed studies consulted, only Fumunzanza Muketa, who harks back to Mobutu's days, to Belgian times and to the pre-colonial roots of life in Kinshasa, gives any sense of pride in the city.

Another set of questions attempted to identify ways in which the middle class has shifted from dependence on state employment to finding new methods of accumulation. One route was to seek identification in associations. However, only two mentioned membership in international business orientated clubs and only one in a middle class savings club. While fifteen placed some emphasis on church membership (eight Catholic and seven Protestant or Pentecostal in some form), few suggested that the church as a source of important business contacts or associations aimed at social purposes; most emphasized the church as a source of morals in an immoral city.²⁶ This is a city awash with religious advertising, revival campaigns and the presence of every type of church but interestingly, two informants expressed complete indifference to Christian worship.

Eight informants mentioned that they were members of organisations reflecting origins in a particular ethnic group or province but the intensity of adherence varied. The woman who was probably the wealthiest and best-connected of all interviewees was one of these however and this link was clearly of importance to her.

Life in the City: The Middle Class, Business and the Local State

It was difficult to identify business people for interviews on our tight schedule and certainly the interviews were inadequate in identifying business opportunities. A chance event made me aware, for instance, of the presence of a Congolese who owned a fleet of twenty lorries.²⁷ However I did not have the kind of access that comes with long-term contact and growing confidence which would have brought out the perspective of such

²⁴ Kinshasa Lingala is not quite the same as the Lingala spoken as a first language in Equateur province up-river.

²⁵ This bourgeois moralism can also be attested in Congolese culture. Here is a quote from Patrice Lumumba himself: 'My Congolese brothers! You are in the process of selling out your own country for a glass of beer! Tragedy threatens our country and yet in the Congolese city, the dances continue. Léopoldville is a cabaret of the people where people think only about their pleasures-dancing and beer' [my translation], see Tshingi, 1999.

²⁶ I attended mass at Notre Dame Cathedral in the presence of the Cardinal Archbishop of Kinshasa. The cathedral was full of people in respectable dress but there were relatively few cars in the churchyard and of these, most had seen better days. Many were Mercedes cars famously imported in the early 1980s and handed out to select Congolese by Mobutu. Only a handful of recently made vehicles that would have attracted admiration in a Western setting could be found.

²⁷ He employed the son of our driver.

people. The businesswomen focus group was clearly more optimistic about this and more aware of money-making potential than others we met but these were also the individuals with the most political clout. There clearly are a small group of wealthy people who are brought into deals at national level (for instance executives in the cellphone business) who seem to be a mixture of survivors from the Mobutu regime and new individuals who have risen under the Kabilas. Here again without winning the confidence of such major players, interviews would be difficult to obtain and they remain an important but shadowy presence. It is difficult to ascertain whether they have the makings of a real Congolese bourgeoisie.

The bulk of professional people felt excluded from this group and were in fact very pessimistic about their prospects. If academics went to teach in private universities and doctors practiced in private clinics²⁸ while various individuals attempted to plant crops where they held vacant land and still others collected rent from tenants, this was clearly largely a means of getting by and restoring some family consumer power. Clear investment possibilities were not discussed except as ideals. One academic reported that he farmed to the extent of hiring six individuals and was able to sell produce systematically but this was most unusual. A number of informants insisted that lucrative business connections involved imports and were entirely dominated by foreigners, above all Lebanese, who formed effective trading networks that filled in various processes of the commodity chain.²⁹ The other complaint was that, just as in Mobutu's time, contacts with central government were the most important factor for Congolese who sought lucrative incomes.

If the state discusses grand projects (especially before the economic downturn of 2008), few have so far got off the ground as of yet and without this, money tends to revolve around imports and around servicing foreigners (aid workers, the huge UNO presence, diplomats, etc.) The majority of my informants made the same political judgement: life had got much better after the fall of Mobutu under Laurent Kabila, who above all benefited their own class through raising salaries to minimally acceptable levels and paying workers regularly and starting to keep the army in check while things under Joseph Kabila were deteriorating. He was too obliging to foreigners and not capable of keeping up wages and salaries in a city where people are desperate for jobs. This was a very surprising conclusion given that the Kabilas are conventionally thought of as having their power base in the east and especially the south with little support in Kinshasa and Joseph Kabila is generally seen as a more valuable collaborator and efficient manager than was his father

²⁸ Tshingi, 2007, shows that almost half of all doctors resident in the DRC live in Kinshasa. One of my informants who was a doctor himself considered that there were *too many* doctors in the city and that most were of mediocre calibre (e.g. too much competition). My impression is that frequently accumulation possibilities in Kinshasa get parcellated and fragmented because there are so many needy people and the resultant profits are as a result very modest.

²⁹ For instance, the produce market at Ndjili created by Kabila replaced the site where once cars were assembled. The UTEXCO textile mills, which went back to Belgian times, are no more and communications companies have taken over part of their property in Ngaliema. I was shown in Gombe what amounts to Kinshasa's first identifiable gated community of the type so familiar elsewhere. Supposedly rents of US\$1000 p.m. are charged residents. Arab constructors are beginning work on twin twenty story tower apartment blocks that will have river views, contain a casino and sporting facilities and enhance closeted wealth display in the city.

by Westerners. A noticeably different view was held by my focus group of businesswomen but then they were really in the class of those who did hold government connections.

Thus the picture that one could draw from these interviews was of a middle class that continued to be attached to the city in the old way as a source of national identity and state-based distribution, a centre of consumption more than production. Alternative routes to accumulation were frequently unsuccessful and at best could supplement inadequate salaries. Nobody questioned the vital importance of massive investments in urban infrastructure in Kinshasa and of bringing back the state as a source of respectable employment capable of rewarding a class of people whose legitimacy stemmed from holding diplomas and certificates from the educational system—a state ‘de la loi et de justice’. (Tshingi, 2007, 18) It is difficult to perceive whether a very different class of accumulators whose money is linked to business acumen exists and on what scale despite the relatively enthusiastic portrait drawn by some post-modern influenced thinkers. Skepticism about the size and significance of such a class can be found in the relevant scholarly literature. (de Herdt & Marysse, 1999; Trefon, 2004; deVillers, Jewsiewicki & Monnier, 2002) One chapter of the Trefon collection is devoted to health workers in Kinshasa. (Ndaywel, 2002) While their situation induces them to take money under the table and work through a regime of created scarcity, this does not make them rich; rather, it just enables them to cling to the coattails of middle class life. Landed property, elsewhere so important a way for landowners to begin to accumulate, is in Piermay’s view too vulnerable to disputation to be seen as a systematic route to wealth. (Piermay, 1993, 547) An important question being asked today about Africa is whether expatriated Africans who earn money in other parts of the world will not in time invest at home and create sources of prosperity. Of this there is so far very little concrete evidence in the Congo despite the dreams that some scholars have picked up talking to such individuals. (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, 2000)

When asked about the potential for local government to create economic possibilities in the city, most informants looked blankly and failed to grasp my meaning entirely. Many mentioned that local government was largely seen as a source of predation; it collected taxes, often through raiding small shops, and provided nothing in return. The police, for instance, were not only corrupt but inclined to stand by meekly in the presence of violent crime. Local government exists in two forms in Kinshasa. First there are the communes under the *bourgmestres*; these have little power and very limited sources of income. Far richer and more important is the ministry that governs the city from on high. In the recent dispensation that has been created, it is responsible to an elected assembly. I interviewed the Minister of Agriculture, who had as well broader concerns on development issues and subsequently, a number of functionaries in a collective interview concerned with sanitation. The former had ambitious and substantial plans for expanding and organising mechanised agriculture, with some influence from a successful riziculture project created by the Chinese on the edge of Malabo Pool to feed their own workers, which he saw as potentially engaging many potential accumulators. Much food still needs to be imported into Kinshasa. The latter were working in a department newly separated from social welfare and given special status. It remained to be seen whether urgency and resources

would follow. All these officials and politicians had obviously been exposed to the current nostrums of area based management, private-public partnership and Western models of local development. Whether the commitment may come to turn things around, either in creating or repairing the infrastructure the city requires or giving some life and breath to a class of Congolese businesspeople, is most uncertain. For the present what one can say is that the professional class in the Democratic Republic of the Congo is reproducing itself with difficulties and there is almost complete unawareness of the schemes to make a difference through local government. However, at least one informant did point to a successful alternative elsewhere: the energetic governor of Katanga Province, Moïse Katumbi, is presiding over the reconstitution of Lubumbashi much more effectively. Here is a real example of improvement if not development (particularly with regard to sanitation) focussed on a particular city, unfortunately not Kinshasa, for the moment.

I was unable to pick up attitudes such as have been recorded especially in provincial boom towns such as Butembu and Mbuji Mayi where wealthy individuals have bypassed the state entirely, thrived on its feebleness and fragility and show some contempt for those who wear the badges of educational privilege. (Biaya, 1985; Kabamba, 2008) Concern for the degradation of university life, for instance, was virtually universal. It is of course fascinating to speculate on where these cities will head if the Democratic Republic of the Congo succeeds in instituting national peace and starts to reconstruct national infrastructure seriously.

Conclusion

I would posit accumulation as possible amongst three fairly distinct groups in the Congo. First there are those with close government connections; how seriously they do business is uncertain. They are certainly very difficult for a researcher to access. Second are the business people without professional credentials. I have only encountered them to a very limited extent and I have no reason that they are particularly successful or numerous. Finally, there is the professional and salaried middle class. From them, the focus of my research foray, what ensued was a lament. A vision of modernisation which was exemplified by Kinshasa as a state-dominated central city in the first two decades of independence especially was held up and remembered. There was certainly the sense of contrast between a corrupt and ineffective state and a suffering civil society but the answer lay in making a state that was honest and effective, that worked and worked especially for the certified middle class.

That this vision is at least somewhat more widely dispersed is signalled by the common sense here with that prevailing in James Ferguson's remarkable study of Zambian copper miners in an age of economic downturn, *Expectations of Modernity*. The Congolese middle class is different from the miner communities in that it does not feel so disconnected or out of touch with the developed world--but it does feel trapped and depressed; Ferguson's phrase *abjection* does seem entirely pertinent. Moreover the good life is defined in terms of a world view created in the middle decades of the twentieth century.

This was a view that was strongly echoed in the testimonial volumes by elite Congolese to which I have referred. For Kueno Tshingi, it is when the state deserts meritocracy and becomes simply dominated by the favourites of the dictator that all hell breaks loose (Tshingi, 2007). The politicians may be our enemy but the state is not: it needs to be turned around. The Congo is a mess but the Congo is a country that needs to be held together. A number of informants discussed their disillusion after the fall of Mobutu. They had always believed that the dictatorship was the cause of their miseries. The last decade have brought what everyone accepts as a genuinely democratic phase with correctly conducted elections and free access to media that exposes scandals and promotes competition. Under Mobutu it was possible to talk about an official world that existed on paper and hid the truth from people and a *radio-trottoir* where you could learn the truth, admittedly at times in somewhat too flamboyant colours, on the ramshackle sidewalks of Kinshasa. (Nlandu-Tsasa, 1997) This is no longer true; partisan newspapers jump at the would-be purchaser on the *trottoir* today. The middle class has wide access especially to radio and television and to Internet sources of information. Radio Okapi, the voice of MONUC, the UNO military in the Congo was named by a number of interviewees as particularly important. However, between democracy and 'governance' that actually works for the middle class, there remains a huge divide.

Kinshasa today is perhaps not a desperate place. It has democratic contestation and its infrastructure is slowly improving. However growing indices of pockets of wealth do not indicate that the city can thrive within a hollow or incompetent state. The state is of great significance to the Kinshasa middle class. The two stand in gridlock with memories of better times that were unsustainable. Real advance for one requires real advance institutionally, administratively, economically in which the state cannot but be intimately implicated. The view, however that between the so-called second economy and corrupt usage of the state, an acquisitive middle class is emerging in the Congo is not sustained by my research in Kinshasa.³⁰

Equally important is what seems to be the possibility of very clearly identifying middle class Africans in the city although the striking Ferguson parallel suggests perhaps a working class may identify itself with them as well, to the extent that one still exists. This class is noticeably separating itself out, establishing key international links, creating appropriate living environments and in some cases restructuring spatially the colonial city. Addis Ababa, Nairobi, Dakar, Lagos, Accra, Abidjan can all be studied in this regard not to speak of booming Luanda and the reconstitution of South African cities. (Nugent, 2009) Here 're-enchantment' for the bourgeoisie may be coming true. In Kinshasa the middle class still remains too weak, too old-fashioned, too hooked on the past and too vulnerable for a restructuring project but it is possible, rather than to fantasize about Hanseatic autonomy, middle class citizenries or industrious productive capitalists, to see even here such a class dreaming about and occasionally moving in the same direction as in the above examples. For the moment, the ambitious take their dreams right out of Kinshasa and out of the Democratic Republic of the Congo perhaps but this may well change in future days.

³⁰ For this view see McGaffey, 1991.

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APPENDIX ONE. QUESTIONNAIRE USED IN KINSHASA INTERVIEWS. These interviews were touchstones for more open-ended discussion in many cases.

A) What is your age?
Were you born in Kinshasa?
Did you grow up there?

- B) Is being Kinshasa a source of pride to you?
- C) Are personal contacts with rural communities important to you?
- D) Are personal contacts with other cities in the DRC important?
- E) Do you have close ties with people in Brazzaville or Luanda ? In more distant cities either in Africa or the West?
- F) Where do you live in Kinshasa? Are there important local institutions in your neighbourhood in which you are involved? Have you much to do with people in other parts of the city? Which parts?
- G) Do you often frequent Gombe? Is it still important as the centre of the city to you?
- H) What is the biggest problem in your neighbourhood in your opinion?
- I) How do you travel about in the city?
- J) How do you deal with the problem of security?
- K) What schools and hospitals do you and your family use? Are they adequate?
- L) What do you think of the University of Kinshasa?
- M) Where do you shop for food and clothing? Is it difficult to find the items you require?
- N) What newspapers and/or magazines produced in Kinshasa are important to you?
- O) Are you a member of any organisations that are important to you from the point of view of business? Of prestige? Of solidarity? Are you a member of an alumni association (association of graduates of a particular institution, for instance?)
- P) Are you affiliated to the Catholic church or one of the Protestant churches? Is this an important source of friends and associates? Does the church make life in the city better?
- Q) Do you see tribal or ethnic affiliation as still being of great importance to who you are? Are there any important ethnic or traditional associations of which you are a member?
- R) What would you describe as the most important business opportunities available in the city?
- S) How would you characterise your contacts with the local state?
- T) What is the most difficult thing about living in Kinshasa in your view?
- U) Do different generations have a very different way of understanding the city?
- V) Has life in Kinshasa changed since the advent of Joseph Kabila? Are you optimistic about the future?