Ecas 4
European Conference on African Studies

Uppsala – Sweden

15 – 18 June 2011

Street Children and the managing of city centre in Lubumbashi
(Democratic Republic of Congo)

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Introduction

> *«You are welcome to Lubumbashi. We are going to give you all the information about our work system with our children. Although at the moment the situation is very hard, because the government shut all the street children in an educational centre. But without any educational plan! You can imagine…»*

On Monday 22th March 2010, some days before my departure to Congo, I got this mail from the person in charge of the largest Centre for Street Children in Lubumbashi (DRC).

Actually, focusing on children accused of witchcraft in Katanga I constantly crossed the problematic of *Shege* (Street Children)[1]. What it immediately struck me was the ambiguity of street children in the Katangese public space and the ambivalent politic discourses deriving from it.

The relation between *Shege* and the most influent actors on the public scene in Lubumbashi (Public Administration, Politicians, NGOs and the Catholic Church) has to be taken in terms of "opportunism". All these actors, either in collaboration or in conflict, participate in building the social and economic geography of Lubumbashi.

The rhetoric emerging from these dynamics depicts, simultaneously, street children as criminals to repress and victims needing care (Kahola and Rubbers, 2008).

In this paper I will try to analyse the reconfiguration, raised in recent years, of the utilitarian relationship between Street Children, Public Administration, NGOs and the Catholic Church. This change of tack, especially by the Katanga Province, seems to be linked to the election of the new Governor.

In studying Street Children I used manly three theoretical approaches.

First, the "agency theory" of childhood and youth. These theories see children and young as complete social actors and not as mere dependents of the adult worlds (De Boeck and Honwana, 2005; James, Jenks and Prout, 1998; Wyness, 2006).

Second, I took the postcolonial studies on the African States "from below" (*par le bas*). These studies consider the connections between popular protesting movements and the dominant power as part of the same dialectic process reproducing continuously the same systems of domination (Bayart, Mbembe and Toulabor, 1992). Although these analyses permit a high conceptualization on the reproduction of some politic processes, I would like to associate this approach with ethnography on the daily functioning of the Public Administration (Blundo, 2001; Copans, 2001;).

Third, I will extend the local case of Lubumbashi to a wider context of the humanitarian interventionism and its links with Catholic Church and the State. It seems to me that the concern of Street Children, and the broader one of "youth", has become a major field for the redefinition of "power relationships" (Burawoy, 1998; Nieuwenhuys, 2010).

Ethnography: between street, state offices and Catholic Centres.

This paper is based on ethnography conducted in two fieldworks in Katanga: from May to September 2010 and from January to May 2011.

During my stays in Lubumbashi I worked in some Katanga Province Departments (most of the time at the Bureau of Child Protection) as well as in the street, following children shifting from one point to another in the city. I also carried out part of the ethnography at the *Centre de Rééducation de la Kassapa*, where all the Street Children have been shut off by the provincial government, and Bakanja, the most popular Street Children Centre in Lubumbashi, run by the Salesians priests.

Let me now spend some words on the methodological postures I hold during my research.

In explaining these methodological positions I do not want to refer to the several difficulties that all ethnographers have to face on their own fieldworks. However, I want to specify the way I took to produce data in such a very complex context as a Congolese State office (Petit and Tréfon, 2005).

In the early months of my fieldwork I progressively realized that I was collecting data saying little on the matter I wanted to investigate. In trying to reconstitute the "official" position of the Province concerning the problem of street children, functionaries presented me a vast amount of documents (laws, conventions, statistics, percentages…) that depicted a coherent picture but told me little about what the Province really thought and did about street children and Katangese youth. Moreover, my presence produced ambiguous reactions: on one hand people did not trust me and I was seen as a spy, a NGO member and even a children dealer; on the other hand, they saw me as an influent person who they could take advantage of in obtaining money, favours or some connections with other white men.

One day Julien, a Congolese friend who was accompanying me, told me: «It's clear, just look at the office they have». It is actually in that moment I progressively learnt to pay attention to details (situations, places, presentation) and how to build relationships with State functionaries, especially according to the position they had in their "hierarchy".

> «[…] it's very important to work with a collaborator who knows the local norms of socialization. There are some norms we (the foreigners) do not know and, sometimes, can't even imagine. For instance "the motivation" ("*motiver*" = to give money) to a functionary like Mr. A.T. according to Julien is completely logical, because I am a white man and I am looking for information. Yet, Mr. A. T. hardly considers his demand of money as a simple "purchase of information"; he seems to consider our exchanges as a request of reciprocity not aiming at extorting money, but rather at building trust»[2]

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[2] Extract from field notes, Monday 24 May 2010, Division des Affaires Sociales, Lubumbashi.

The perseverance in my observations, in formal and informal contexts, about the relations between informants and with the researcher, allowed me to dissipate those former figures they used to associate me to. For example, after some moths I discovered that one of my key informants lived close to my home. Such occurrence permitted to renegotiate my position and to go beyond that "fixed picture" I mentioned earlier. In analysing the different roles my neighbour was playing, as well as all his colleagues were, both at his workplace and outside a complex intersection of roles was raising, furthermore showing contradictory practices and discourses that influence the social politic of the Katangese Government (Strauss, 1993; Goffman, 1997).

The ambiguous discourse of "youth emergency"

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the State has been facing the proliferation of street children for twenty years. For many years the topic of street children was ignored. It came to the fore in the national politic in the '90s under the pressure of NGOs and western medias and through the diffusion of the globalized concept of "childhood". The image of the *Shege* became, thus, symbol of the children as victims of violence and poverty providing justification for outside interventions.

In spite of that, local institutions ignored the emergence of the phenomenon and, at most, they used it just like an electoral campaign discourse. There are two main reasons for this state of affairs.

First, in line with the heritage of colonial regime, the State left education of children and youth to the Catholic Missions and to the main companies of the country like GECAMIN and SNCC (Dibwe, 2001)[3].

Second, the economic crisis in the Nineties, caused by the shock therapies imposed by World Bank and IMF, affected estate budgets allocated for social policies.

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[3] GECAMIN was the most important mining society in Congo. SNCC is the National Rail Society. Both of them, in the colonial period, carried out a paternalistic politic for the workers and their families. With the economic crisis and the failure of GECAMIN and SNCC the welfare system couldn't be sustained anymore.

In Katanga we see the turning point with the election, in 2006, of the Provincial Government. *Moise*, the new governor, gained a high degree of popularity thanks to his charismatic entrepreneur figure and the images of "pragmatic man" and "politician on the field". He is constantly on TV emissions and he is the owner of an important Katangese TV channel. Finally he managed to launch the local football team at an international level.

His electoral mandate has marked out for the aim to transform Lubumbashi into a "European city". Whilst his government applied for a privatization of the crucial economic sectors, he also launched a number of restrictive and coercive actions.

The writing "*Tolérance Zéro*" (non tolerance) recently appeared at the entrance of the prison and it is the political slogan of the moment. The government thus decided to fight against impunity, against the *Shege*, against petty traders and rubbish in the city centre.

On this background, social politics for Street Children (and broader for youth) suddenly accelerated. In the last three years, coherently with the ambiguous discourse on childhood, on one hand a number of initiatives were taken in order to protect children rights[4]; on the other hand, the discourse about security and safe in the city became pervasive and it was the support to launch the anti-*Shege* actions[5].

Shege Zero started in August 2009 aiming to get rid of the Street Children[6]. In the document "*Plan d'action triennal* (2007-2010)" one can read that ERF (*enfants en rupture de lien familial*) are vulnerable children needing to be rescued and protected; at the same time, among the objectives cited in the text we can find the struggle against juvenile delinquency[7].

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[4] Between 2009 and 2011 a new law was promulgated for the protection of the children rights, the government created a police section for children, the International Conference on the Justice for minors was instituted and, finally, the first Court for children was inaugurated.

[5] *Shege Zero*, the *Centre rééducation de la Kassapa* as well as a second action called Ville sans *Shege* (2011).

[6] In an official document one can read: «In the last years, in Lubumbashi, micro-criminality has been increasing. It is estimated that 40% of this criminality involves young people. Cfr. *Rapport final de la Conférence Internationale sur la Justice pour enfants*, Division Provinciale des Affaires Sociales et Solidarité Nationale, Mars 2010, pp. 7.

[7] «Objectifs spécifiques: lutter contre la délinquance juvénile et combattre la criminalité.
Actions à mener : le gouvernement a entamé les actions ci-après: Recenser et regrouper les enfants en rupteur familiale et les installer loin des centres urbains dans les cantonnement à créer; faire un appel d'offre en matière d'expertise de prise en charge et des questions sociales; trouver un site d'accueil et ériger les infrastructures et les équiper pour l'apprentissage des métiers; organiser un cadre de concertation entre les assistants sociaux, les

Despite NGOs and Salesians were not favourable to them, *Shege Zero* and the Centre Kassapa, in which all the street children were gathered met the whole population's consent.

The TV campaign built by the government in order to give visibility to the Centre showed new buildings, clean dormitories, a big canteen with food displayed on the tables, a well-equipped school and possibility to attend free courses.

After three days the Centre reached 980 children. The wide publicity had two consequences: first it celebrated another concrete governmental action; second it attracted a high number of children coming from cities and provinces around Lubumbashi. When it was clear that there were no more places for the remaining children, the *Divison des affaires sociales* stated that the "enrolment was closed" and it left, paradoxically, many children in the street.

Three moths later, a violent protest took place in the Kassapa. A group composed by youngsters aged more than twenty ("*les grands*") organized it. They had claimed for some employment personally promised by the Governor a few moths earlier.

During my interviews whit some provincial functionaries, six month later, nobody told me about this rebellion. They talked, euphemistically, about "needs", "school" and, of course, about "children".

> «most of the **children** claimed for **school** […] They told the Governor
> of the province: «We want a school, we want to study» […] However,
> it wasn't because school had been built…there were other **needs**,
> other people were looking for a job. We employed them in the *brigade
> d'assainissement* […] they got paid…[…] The Government did all it
> could, but they were not satisfied. Thus, another group of children
> asked for training…that group went to Kanyamakasese […]»

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parents et le représentant de l'autorité provinciale pour révéler les options et les chemins de la réinsertion sociale», Cfr. *Plan d'action triennal (2007-2010)*, Division des Affaires Sociales, Province du Katanga, 2009.

Nonetheless R., an employee, explained me how tensions had increased rapidly because of the disappointment of the young for not having a job yet:

> «[…] it was because of the jobs they had claimed for to authorities. So, the Governor promised them an occupation, but he told them: « you have to study before getting a job » […] One week later they revolted and violently protested, we ran away […] Suddenly they surrounded me and started to slap and hit me seriously, I was bleeding, I fainted…some policemen rescued me»

These rebellions continued in the following days and obliged *Moise* to create a *Brigade d'assainissement* (a group of street cleaners). More than two hundred youngsters ("*les grands*") were enrolled in this *Brigade* with an income of around one hundred dollars per month.

Another group was sent to a district 1500 Km away from Lubumbashi, called Kanyamakasese, situated in the north of Katanga, only few kilometers from the border with Kasai. The official aim was to give them training in agriculture and farming. In going deeper with interviews I found out that this action aimed at getting rid of an undesired group of *kasayen*[8].

«*Ici, on nourrit tout le pays*» ("Here, we feed the whole country") said a Minister of the province talking about Kassapa Centre.

Actually, up to day Katangese people are truly convicted that most of the street children are from Kasai. The question on autochthony drives a cultural discourse that in the past caused two conflicts between Kasayens and Katangeses (Bakajika, 1997)*.*

Reinventing oneself as a Shege

Once they got rid of the problematic groups of *Shege*, the matter of street children was no more a priority for the local government. In the City Centre the *Shege* are not visible anymore. Before *Shege Zéro* they were all around the city, mainly where commercial activities are concentrated.

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[8] According to several witnesses the list of those leaving for Kanyamakasese had been written the day before the departure. That list had been done modifying some last names of young men from Kasai in order to make them similar to those of Katanga hiding so the true objective of this action.

Street children made up creative strategies so as to elude the police controls. They changed the way to dress paying more attention in appearing with proper clean cloths. Before, Street Children were easily recognizable for being unclean and wearing torn cloths.

Many of them left the city Centre and settled down in the peripheries of the town (*les cités*). Kenya, Katuba, Kinsanga and Tabacongo are the suburban municipalities where you can find them more often now. The older ones organized themselves in order to find places where to sleep at night safely, occupying abandoned buildings or paying a sort of "rent" somewhere. The youngest children are still sleeping in the street, in the *Karema* (Kaumba, 2003: 41-65) [9], even though (as most of them used to say) to sleep in peripheral streets is more risky than in the city Centre.

In changing Mayor, in January 2011, the "crusade" against the *Shege* got stronger and a second coercive operation, similar to the first one, was launched. It was called *Ville sans Shege*.

This time those who were found in the street were not taken to the Centre Kassapa but straight to the prison. Actually, the object of these action are no longer the street children but those practising illegal itinerant trade (*marché pirate*).

Redefining relations of power

> *«Tous les enfants du monde ont les mêmes droits»* [10]

The repressive politics against the Shege put light on the confrontation between State, NGO and the Catholic Missions. I see this confrontation as a kind of redefinition of the relationships among these subjects.

Particularly, the *Centre Kassapa* was the core of a complicated controversy.

Far from the image of a "re-education" Centre, the Kassapa is more similar to a military camp with control towers, fences and barbed wire.

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[9] The *Karema*, in the street children slang, are places where they spend the night such as warehouses, courtyards, remote street corners and so on.
[10] "All the children in the world have the same rights". This is the writing at the entrance of the Kassapa Centre.

The NGOs in Lubumbashi and the Catholic Missions accused the government of having preferred the rehabilitation of a police campsite to the *Établissement de Garde et Éducation de l'État* (EGEE)[11].

By the way, the NGOs have denounced *Shege Zero* because it violated the new child protection law and some decrees about the placing of the children either in families or in Centres.

The Catholic Church, especially Salesian communities, stressed the violent side of the action of secluding children far from the city Centre. They also protested against the imposition of closing their *Maisons*. Moreover they were really disappointed because of the exclusion from all the provincial policies concerning children and youth.

This evident exclusion is acknowledged by the wide deliverance session organized for the inauguration of the *Centre Kassapa* in order to exorcize all the street children. On one hand, this means that even the Public Administration sees, according to a common Katanga view, street children as "wasted children" (*abimés*) because they spent most of their time far from home and from their families. Being « *abimés* » often means to be linked to the wider world of the witchcraft. This view makes clear why the public powers wanted to exorcize those children.

On the other hand, I interpreted the absence of the Salesians at the deliverance session and at the inauguration of the Centre as a clear sign of their being excluded, as well as a political choice. The local Government is trying to break with the times when the Salesian Communities had the monopoly of the *prise en charge* of the *Shege*.

The province, on the other side, emphasizes on the instrumental use of the *enfants de la rue* by the NGOs and the Salesians. Both of them are explicitly accused by the Governor of not wanting to collaborate with his projects because they have no interest in it:

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[11] In DRC there have been four EGEE since the regime of Mobutu. These structures were used to welcome children in conflict with the law and those called "vagabonds". They were judged by a lawyer in charge of assigning them to a family or to an EGEE. Since the Eighties the State is no longer able to sustain the EGEE and three of them were definitely closed. The only one still operating is the one in Kinshasa.

«[…] you know, it's very difficult, I think we have to be honest…today there are about one thousand children and all this is financed by the Government of the Province. For that reason we apply to the NGOs to come and help us…however most of them don't want these children to be educated anywhere. They just want show the Congolese people suffering in the street. This is not fair… […][12]»

In the *Bureaux* of the Province these topics are even more explicit and the NGOs are blamed for occulting most of the finances they get for projects involving street children. They are also accused of being the cause of the increasing number of the *Shege* in Lubumbashi. A functionary of the State told me:

«There are many reasons, as you can imagine, […] what we observe is a sort of surviving strategy applied by NGO staff…if, for instance, they get one million (dollars), they will promise they will invest them in our country. But it's not true, they may invest two hundred thousand in Katanga and the remaining height hundred thousand may be shared between them…basically that money would go back to the same place it came from […] nothing has been changed for years»

Conclusion: Lubumbashi Wantanshi

«It is also an anthropological truism that the way in which young people are perceived, named, and represented betrays a lot about the social and politic constitution of a society.»[13]

At the entrance of Lubumbashi a huge panel says "Lubumbashi Wantanshi", Lubumbashi the best city.
The construction of the image of "Lubumbashi European City" recalls an old secessionist slogan. Actually, Lubumbashi seems to deal for a National predominance with Kinshasa. The discourses on "Tolérance Zéro" (safety,

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[12] A. Tshonga, *Moise au Centre Kassapa*, Lubumbashi 20/09/2009: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fpQOCg7R-2Y
[13] Jean Comaroff, John Comaroff, *Reflection on youth from the Past to the Postcolony*, in F. De Boeck, A. Honwana, *Makers and Breakers: Children and Youth in Postcolonial Africa*, James Currey, 2005, p 19.

order and cleanness) aim to distinguish the *cuprifère* capital from the politic one, which is considered by many "the cancer of Congo".

This confrontation is shaped by a growing populism. *Shege Zero* seems to be a clear sign. On one hand the globalized discourses on "childhood" is a powerful mean to justify the interventionist agendas and so national sovereignty risks to lose much of its legitimacy. On the other hand, the politic elite takes "possession" of those topics in order to reach its objectives.

However, through this movement between global interferences and local populism, the State, the Salesians and NGOs have to deal with the capacity of response of the Street Children.

Street children in Lubumbashi have the important power to "make and break" the public sphere (De Boeck and Honwana, 2005). Rebellions in Kassapa, the reinvention of their "life style" and the instrumental use of NGOs are some examples.

The autonomy that street children reached in public space reflects, paradoxically, the exclusion of the youngest generation from the most important social spheres: work, education and health (Giugni and Hunyadi, 2003).

In my opinion, this exclusion can be seen as a denial of recognition at the individual level as well as at the collective one (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2005). Following a "theory of recognition" the phenomenon of *Shege* has to be seen as the young people's extreme and marginal struggle for jobs, education, citizenship, consumer's goods and for the social recognition linked to them (Honnet, 1996).

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