

# **Les Combattants—ideologies of exile, return and nationalism in the DRC**

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Focused on London, this article looks at the ideology and practice of Congolese nationalism in exile, and at the ideas of home, belonging and return connected with this. Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) migrants came to Western Europe escaping violence and economic and political collapse but, for a long time, the imaginative concentration of the diaspora was not on politics, but on a consumer-based version of the good life. This article traces how this changed in the 2000s with the diaspora becoming a focus for violent and racialized forms of nationalism. Tracing this evolution historically, we look at how the practices and ideologies of 'return' and 'home' have come to express this transformation of exile nationalism.

Keywords: DRC, nationalism, *Combattants*, migration

In 2006 a group of diaspora Congolese ambushed the senior politician She Okitundu during a visit to London. Okitundu was assaulted, and stripped naked. The incident was filmed and became a national talking point 'back home'; photographs of Okitundu's dirty underpants in particular, were widely shared on the Internet. The attack has come to symbolize the activities of the *combattants*, a group of diffuse, diaspora-based activist opponents of the regime then in power in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Emerging in the early 2000s, the *combattants* have become an important feature of the Congolese political scene. Most strongly associated with the London diaspora, they have been vectors for a set of fiery nationalist ideologies, along with some dramatic practical interventions. While they present some well-trodden themes of diaspora and nationalism, the *combattants* present a paradox. Obsessed with a 'return home', their notions of both 'home' and 'return' have changed radically over the decades. Whereas, in the

1990s and early 2000s, these imaginings concentrated on forms of gift exchange between Europe and Congo, on the gloriously adorned body of the *mikiliste* (a kind of celebrity migrant) and of circulation (individual visits home), they came thereafter to fixate on the idea of a permanent return to a Congo redeemed. These later ideas were strongly linked to highly racialized forms of hyper-nationalism. It is this process of transformation in the long-distance ‘imagining of community’, the political–economic underpinnings of this transformation and its political consequences that are the central themes of this article.

Central to the *combattants*’ political transformed notions of ‘home’ and ‘return’ were transformations in the culturally validated figures of success and authority. The individual who travels to a rich ‘elsewhere’ and who makes a glorious ‘return’ is a recurrent figure. In the recent past, this ideology was associated with the *mikiliste*: a male migrant, who lived in Europe, who wore designer clothes and showered money on musicians, journalists and famous courtesans (see Gandoulou 1989; Bazenguissa-Ganga and MacGaffey 2000; Trapido 2011, 2016). The defining emotion associated with the *mikiliste* was *ambiance*—a kind of joyous folly found in the presence of women, music and beer (Biya 1996). *Mikilistes* would periodically return home to Kinshasa, to enact a kind of potlatch, dispensing designer goods and romancing beautiful women. All the early *combattants* now professing forms of fervent nationalism emerged from this *mikiliste* milieu (some later adopters of this movement have come from a more diverse background). They took up their new way of life, at a point at which the *mikiliste* lifestyle had become non-viable.

### Love of Country from Afar

Malkki (1992) has observed that ‘routinely displaced’ persons

‘invent homes and homelands in the absence of territorial, national bases ... through memories of, and claims on, places that they can or will no longer corporally inhabit’ (Malkki 1992: 24).

This is part of a wider reading that connects modernity to feelings of loss and rupture and the fostering of long-distance relations with absent others (Giddens 1990: 18; Massey 1994: 5), the migrant/refugee being central. The ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1983) and the ‘invention of tradition’ (Hobsbawm 1983) both imply displacement, for which the migrant, exile or refugee is the prototypical subject. Thereby, nationalism itself is intimately connected with long-distance longing and with the construction of transnational social fields (Basch *et al.* 1994; Guarnizo *et al.* 2003).

As Wen-Ching (2018) suggests, ‘home’ and ‘return’ should not be viewed as ‘ontologically given’ nor as things that pre-exist migration, but as dynamic, ‘emergent properties’ that change with social conditions (see also Ahmed *et al.* 2003). Different styles of imagining ‘home’ and ‘return’ are closely related to a migrant’s

current economic–social situation—a point brought out in Den Boer’s discussion of Congolese refugees in Uganda:

The difficulties of exile and the exclusion . . . led to a profound feeling of being out of place. This . . . impacted the way my informants imagined home or, more accurately, what is not home (Den Boer 2015: 492–493).

This dialectic of ‘not home’ and ‘home’ was crucial to the Congolese migrants studied here, as the changing ways in which they have felt themselves to be ‘not at home’ has profoundly affected their ideas of return. If, following Wen-Ching (*ibid.*), ‘home’, ‘return’, ‘nation’ and ‘displacement’ are emergent rather than primordial properties, it follows methodologically that they should be studied as sociological, but also *historical*, phenomena. Thus, our article attempts to move away from the synchronic focus often adopted by ethnography. Drawing on two decades of engagement with Congolese communities in Western Europe and in Kinshasa by both authors, we attempt a historical narrative, showing how refugee identities and long-distance nationalism were constructed over time in relation to a wider social and economic field (Glick Schiller 2005). The material gathered here draws overwhelmingly on our ethnographic involvement with the community during this time.

### The Context of Migration

The term ‘*combattant*’ was first applied to members of the Union pour la Démocratie et le Progrès Social (UDPS), the main opposition in Kinshasa, circa 1990; ‘*combattants*’, then, were those ultras who dared to confront the tyranny of Mobutu’s security forces. Now, in current usage, it denotes a specifically diaspora-based phenomenon and is closely related to the Congolese experience of migration. It is most strongly associated with the London diaspora, the *bana Londres*—a not accidental association, given that Europe, and London in particular, occupies a place in the Congolese imagination that is at once economic and quasi-mystical (Bazenguissa-Ganga 2005; IOM 2006).

Of the many significant migrations in the last 30 years—those to Western Europe, in numerical terms—were not the most important, African countries absorbing a larger number. Yet, for migrants in other locations, Europe/the rich North was the ultimate goal (see Den Boer 2015: 494; Inaka and Trapido 2015: 144). South Africa, the site of a large and relatively privileged migrant cohort, is often compared unfavourably to Europe, depicted as the *libulu ya nguma* (‘the hole of the python’) (something into which you fall and cannot get out of)—scorn that cannot be attributed purely to economic calculations. High-status Congolese migrants in South Africa and Angola (e.g. Angolan diamond dealer Tshatsho Mbala or South African nightclub owner Noisy Muamba) made frequent trips to Europe and competed in those various rituals of consumption so strongly associated with Congolese in Europe. Other relatively privileged outposts of Congolese migration have great cachet, but they have not yet had such cultural

sway, perhaps being too small or, in the case of Canada and the US, too dispersed to yet exert the gravitational pull of the Paris–Brussels–London axis. Certain characteristics of population are apparent. Despite Congo’s huge Swahili-speaking population and two decades of turbulence that have focused on the Swahili-speaking east, the community in Western Europe is overwhelmingly Lingalophone (Lingala being the main vehicular language of Kinshasa and the west) with proximate origins in Kinshasa and the western DRC.

Within this European group, London-based migrants took on an especially important role. London’s importance may seem surprising, but any knowledge of Kinshasa’s popular culture amply confirms this. As we will see, London, being perceived as a city of extremes, of fantastical wealth, of witchcraft and latterly as *the* site of radical political opposition within the diaspora, is firmly ensconced in the popular imagination. In line with this, our focus is also predominantly on London. Clearly, informants’ perceptions are not infallible and magnificent studies of the *combattants* taking other locations as their primary viewpoint have been produced (see Inaka 2015). Any point of view will be selective; nevertheless, we do feel justified in characterizing London, and a music-related *demi-monde* found there (see below), as the most important single node in the network of oppositional migrant politics in the Congo and, as such, it is an appropriate place from which to start telling this story.

#### ‘The Time of Easy Money’

The figure of the glamorous returning *mikiliste* who performs a potlatch on Kinshasa’s city stage is a fixture in the Congolese imagination (see Trapido 2011, 2016); as we have intimated, the *combattant* is in some sense a transformation of this earlier figure. *Mikilistes* were able to access the resources necessary to perform lavish forms of cultural patronage and expansive ritual. How did they access the resources? In one sense, the answer is simple: they stole them. Space prevents us from looking into this criminal economy in detail here (see Trapido 2011, 2016: 133–164), but it included circuits of stolen designer clothes known as *kula* and intersected with economies of import–export, drug and people smuggling, counterfeiting and various forms of credit-card, cheque, benefit and document fraud (see also Tipo-Tipo 1995; Bazenguissa-Ganga and MacGaffey 2000). While this economy began in Paris and Brussels, it flourished as nowhere else in London. The period stretching roughly from 1990 until 2000 is obliquely referred to as *le temps de l’argent facile*. The universal perception among informants was that fraud had been easier and more lucrative in the UK than in other European countries, and soon certain *bana Londres* were using this wealth in ostentatious ways (Trapido 2011: 214–217).

#### Cultural Patronage: Creating a Name Back Home

Central to creating this transnational social field was music and related to this a form of patronage, known as *mabanga*. This refers to a raft of patronage

practices ranging from sponsored short name checks to a more expensive *dedicace*, involving a patron being named as the object of desire in a song's narrative of love. In this form, the singer, generally male, sings in the first person 'as a woman', often in a quavering falsetto, hopelessly smitten with the patron, who is also generally male (see [Trapido 2010](#)). In the version of this system that flourished between the 1980s and mid-2000s, *mabanga* was strongly connected with migration, with members of the diaspora paying to get their names onto recorded music, but also to be sung during landmark concerts in Paris, Brussels or London. Musicians repeatedly travelled to Europe to record, perform, but above all hang-out and establish patronage relationships. Predominantly, the point for the patron was to have one's name return to Kinshasa, to be heard 'back home' blaring from bars, and patronage concentrated on artists esteemed by the Kinshasa public. The songs often created a scenario in which a woman in Kinshasa was pining with love for a beau far away in Europe and served as templates for the romantic successes of migrants during their brief returns to the Congolese capital ([Trapido 2011](#)).

Payments for mention on record could be negotiated in the studio itself, but contact was often made in the Congolese bars of European capitals (on bars see [Bazenguissa-Ganga and MacGaffey 2000](#): 137–165; for a longer discussion of patronage negotiation, see [Trapido 2016](#): 71–92). Similar forms of cultural patronage developed around journalism, with a series of music-related television programmes filmed in the diaspora but screened in Kinshasa. Often, patrons' appearances would take the form of *polemique*, where *mikiliste* would flaunt new clothes, make wild claims, praise musicians and insult rivals (see [Trapido 2016](#)). This context, of a vigorous transnational public sphere, heavily based on patronage payments, is part of the essential context in which the *combattants* emerged; and this patrimonial context is important in considering the violent contestation that would follow. Journalists and cultural performers have always been explicitly attached to certain patrons.

The flourishing criminal economy meant that, by the 1990s, Congolese from London were decisively outdoing their rivals with their fantastically expensive clothes, their lavish showering of money onto musicians and journalists, and a theatrical expenditure supplemented by extravagant returns to Kinshasa, involving throwing money from car windows, parading extravagant wardrobes, reconnecting with musicians previously met in Europe and romancing beautiful women. The returns of the *bana Londres* were especially famous for their ostentation (see [Trapido 2011](#)). Similar spending took place in the religious sphere, where celebrity tele-evangelists from Kinshasa would sojourn in the diaspora, acquiring contributions from congregations and becoming wealthy in a way that is sometimes taken as an indication of God's blessing. The aforementioned fraud economies were ultimately on a relatively small scale and, unlike the kleptocratic activities of the ruling classes (both Congolese and European), much of the money was put into circulation back home in the form of remittances and gifts. Nevertheless,

London as a site of particular wealth has become so woven into the texture of Kinshasa popular culture that the city became associated with witchcraft, sudden enrichment in central Africa being often thought to necessitate the mystical sacrifice of others. One informant in Kinshasa from the early 2000s expressed a common view of return migrants: ‘you have to pay attention when you see these *bana Londres* going past in their Jeeps. They are very dangerous.’

### *Political Context of the DRC Leading up to the Combattants*

The *mikiliste* economy came about when a group of young Congolese men emerged into adulthood in a world that was no longer able to provide for them, where the fabric of the state was torn apart. From the mid-1970s onwards, a series of disasters—vertiginous economic collapse, farcical military adventures in Angola, domestic uprisings only quelled with foreign assistance—had destroyed any pretence of competence that had once adhered to the regime. By the 1980–90s, Mobutu’s strongest suit, namely the backing of Western governments, especially Paris and Washington, began to dissipate as the imperatives of the Cold War grew less urgent. In this context, the domestic opposition, led by Etienne Tshisekedi and the UDPS, had forced a series of concessions, most notably the formation of a Conference Souverain National, which was intended to initiate a democratic transition of power.

Yet Mobutu adapted to the new dispensation with an alacrity that left his opponents flat-footed. Making the most of his control of state apparatus, he injected successive infusions of worthless currency, fake opponents and real violence into the body politic, all the while fomenting splits within real political formations, as rivals were tortured then bribed. Beyond Kinshasa, and especially in the east, he manipulated political ethnicity. As the 1990s wore on, it became clear that Mobutu had the measure of his domestic opponents.

Against this backdrop, the Rwandan genocide and the resultant influx of refugees into Zaire took place. And, arriving in the wake of the genocide, the new Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) regime in Kigali, along with its allies in Uganda, saw the refugee camps as an existential threat, supplying a base to Hutu revanchists as they plotted their return to power. Their initial plan was to disperse the camps but, as the Forces Armees du Zaire melted away, they pressed on towards Kinshasa to depose Mobutu. Seeking a Congolese face for what was in reality an invasion, Rwanda and Uganda cobbled together the Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo-Zaire (AFDL), which assembled the leaders of several largely defunct rebel groups. Laurent Kabila, erstwhile revolutionary-cum-businessman, emerged as the eventual figurehead. But having emerged as spokesman, partly because he was seen as more pliable than his main rival (see [Prunier 2009: 123–124, 130–131](#); [Turner 2013: 54–55](#)), Laurent Kabila confounded expectations.

Trying to escape dependence on external support, Kabila dismissed his Rwandan advisers and, in 1998, ordered the Rwandan Patriotic Army to leave Congolese territory. Kagame and his lieutenant Kabarebe responded with a

lightning offensive on several fronts, again with Ugandan support, hoping to overwhelm and decapitate the administration they had installed. They reached the outskirts of Kinshasa but, in the process, alarmed the most powerful military force in the region: Angola. With Angola, Zimbabwe and Namibia weighing-in on Kabila's side, it became clear that there would be no rapid victory. The Rwandan–Ugandan axis itself fractured into a series of competing proxies, organized more around pillage than territorial conquest. The war would drag on for years, with horrendous consequences for the Congolese people.

It was during the year of RPF tutelage, and in the subsequent war with Rwanda, that racialized anti-Rwandan and ultranationalist formulations first became important in Kinshasa political conversation (and, by extension, to the Congolese diaspora). With the enemy at the gate, Laurent Kabila and associates exhorted people to resist in terms that identified the enemy as an ethno-racial other: discourses relating to the 'Hamitic hypothesis'. Drawing on an inverted version of colonial racial theory, this utterly fantastical narrative suggests that Tutsi and other pastoralist peoples in east and central Africa are 'Hamites': dynamic, warlike, quasi-Caucasian late-comers to the region (Spottel 1998; Taylor 1999). Colonial versions initially suggested that Hamites' superior and warlike nature imbued them with a debased version of 'the white man's burden' to carry civilization (Spottel 1998). Later elaborations, both indigenous and colonial, suggested that peace-loving 'bantus' were subject to incursions from violent and grasping pastoralist/Hamites.

Versions of the Hamitic hypothesis have great importance in the politics of Rwanda itself (Taylor 1999). In the troubled political microclimate of the Congo's far east, the prominence of these ideologies, partially intersecting with land claims, arguments over control of local government and successive migrations of workers and later refugees from Rwanda and Burundi, has recurred at various intervals, though their salience was highly variable over time. In Kinshasa, as in much of the country, such a vocabulary had begun to make some marks in public conversation: a series of changes in citizenship laws in 1980 and especially in the 1990s pushed public conversations around national belonging in a less inclusive direction (see Turner 2013: 93–95). But these conversations were predominantly driven by constituencies in the far east and had relatively little direct purchase in the west just a few years earlier. While such discourses were initially deployed by the Kabila regime, and indeed it has continued to espouse anti-Rwandan themes, it soon lost control of the narrative. Popular rhetoric, particularly linked to the Congolese diaspora, began using these ultranationalist and racist discourses against the regime itself.

There is no doubt that the majority of Congolese people welcomed Mobutu's departure. But enthusiasm for Kabila's administration soon waned. The new president sidelined the civilian opposition, eventually banning their parties altogether. Dissidents were imprisoned, demonstrators shot. Furthermore, Laurent Kabila's political compass seemed unwilling to register any events that had occurred after the 1960s, when (at least in the highly stylized version of the story Kabila subscribed to) the eastern, Swahili-speaking half of the country had

risen in revolt against the CIA-sponsored regime imposed on Kinshasa, while most of the west (with the exception of Kwilu) remained quiescent. This ossified political geography was combined with eastern stereotypes of the Kinois as lazy, unproductive good-timers and of Lingala as a ‘rude’ language. Thus, Kabila surrounded himself with outsiders and generally with Swahili-speakers with origins in the east.

In 2001, Kabila was assassinated. When his son Joseph emerged as president, he immediately appeared to take a different tack, initiating a peace process and soliciting better relations (and aid) from Western governments. But, while the ‘international community’ purred, all was not well. The transitional government again sidelined the real opposition, instead assembling a cast of gun-toting rivals, carpetbaggers and curiosities. A place in this government granted access to the plunder of national assets generated from the sale of the state mining complex. Kinshasa, while a site of relative privilege, remained extraordinarily dilapidated. In the east, militias, often strongly linked to neighbouring states, continued to act with impunity, providing ample material for narratives of national grievance.

In this context, Joseph Kabila became a focus of nationalist opposition. Raised in Tanzania, he did not speak Lingala. Initially, he spoke French haltingly with an Anglophone accent. He was easy to mark as an outsider. Emerging from a large and opaque presidential family, his origins became the subject of a powerful myth. According to this, Joseph was not Laurent’s son, but really a Rwandan Tutsi called Hyppolite Kanambe. This played into an evolving form of ethnogenesis, in which the Lingalaphone west and the Swahiliphone east were cast as ancient political rivals, with some in Kinshasa suggesting that ‘*ba Rwandandais*’ began at Kisangani, the town straddling the border between Swahili and Lingala-speaking regions. In reality, the recent and highly fluid nature of this conflict was apparent; even in the early 2000s, the dominant ethnopolitical rivalry was between the ‘bangala’ and ‘luba-Kasai’—both groups who were now included as ‘westerners’ and perceived as allies.

This newly polarized ideology owed much to the diaspora (see also [Inaka 2015](#)).

### *The Diaspora*

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the stance of the European diaspora was similar to that of the Kinois population from which it emerged. There was general sympathy for the opposition, mainly for the UDPS. As in Kinshasa, political opposition was cross-cut with relationships to the regime. This was especially true in Europe, where prominent Mobutiste often kept their children and primary families. And these ‘rich kids’ enjoyed migrating from the wealthier suburbs to inner-city bars and clubs that were focal points of Congolese life in Europe. Here, social classes mingled and struck deals (the aforementioned *kula* was something that the rich kids often wanted). There were exceptions of course, but the dominant tenor of life for Congolese migrants in this period showed no strong orientation to formal politics.

An early sign of change was a verbal attack on the UK Congolese ambassador, Henri Nswana, in 2003. This was connected to the wider feeling of opportunism surrounding the new regime, where many of Kabila's key advisers seemed to have risen without trace, minus requisite qualifications. Nswana had been appointed with no diplomatic background. Within the year, he had sold the embassy building, replacing it with an apartment in Kings Cross, and was rumoured to have embezzled the profit. While attending a community event in Manchester, Nswana was surrounded by angry people demanding explanations. Those who berated him included both former Mobutu supporters and supporters of the Kinshasa opposition. In a sign of things to come, fierce enemies from the 1990s would become allies in the new political dispensation, though the attackers did not yet express themselves in the fiery nationalism that was to become characteristic of diaspora politics in the years to come. In 2004, responding to this political foment, UK-based UDPS members, still the major political formation in Kinshasa and the diaspora, moved to establish a community forum: the CCU (Congolese Community in the UK).

Meanwhile, Honore Ngbanda was hard at work. Known in Kinshasa as 'Terminator', Ngbanda was from Mobutu's own Ngbandi ethnic group; he had been head of military intelligence and the secret police for the ancien regime. Now, in Paris, he launched a political movement known as APARECO (Alliance des Patriotes pour la Refondation du Congo), where he promoted two of his books, *Ainsi sonne le glas! Les derniers jours du Maréchal Mobutu* (1998) and *Crimes organisés en Afrique Centrale* (Ngbanda 2004a), also recording a video drawing heavily on their themes.

His first book, *Ainsi sonne le glas!*, was a kind of internal investigation into the failings and fall of the Mobutu regime, though the great man's recall is predictably selective. *Crimes organisés* is more significant in its attempt to place this fall into a wider geopolitical perspective in the Great Lakes region of Africa. This put forward a view of central Africa riven by post-Cold-War political rivalries, particularly between Paris and Washington, and it interweaves a racist-nationalist narrative of the region that draws heavily on the aforementioned 'Hamitic hypothesis'. In Ngbanda's version, a 'hima-tutsi/nilotique' racial group is allied to the manipulations of Anglo-Saxon capital. This alliance sought the 'balkanization' of Congo, better to access its mineral wealth, to the detriment of the noble Bantu. In Lingala, interviews accompanying the release of the text also brought out the vocabulary of binary contrast between the *bapaya*, the (African) strangers/foreigners; the *mindele*, 'the Whites' who were their allies; and the *bana mboka*, the 'children of the country' (Ngbanda 2004b).

While it had several precursors, Ngbanda's works, penned in exile, synthesized and systematized the emergent ideology into a superficially coherent narrative. Proposing several tropes that would become characteristic of the extreme nationalist-racist ideology of the diaspora, they are seminal texts in the evolving movement. Combining key elements of an earlier pan-Africanist anti-imperialism associated with Lumumba with racist tropes that identify Rwandans as a racial-national enemy (though several less familiar others could be drawn into

this matrix) linked to ‘enemies within’, especially Kinyarwanda-speaking minorities in the DRC (see [Turner 2013](#): 91–93). *Crimes organisés* also argues that Joseph Kabila’s collaboration with global capital was linked to his genetic–racial characteristics. And Joseph himself, as a likely Hima-Tutsi, should publish his DNA-test results.

Without dignifying the absurdities of Ngbanda’s argument with a refutation, it is worth noting that his rhetoric runs counter to Kinshasa’s history of urbane ethnic mingling. Ngbanda’s chutzpa in posing as an anti-imperialist also merits some comment. As Mobutu’s right-hand man, he served a regime built on connections to the CIA ([Devlin 2007](#)). Ngbanda’s books tend to obscure rather than reveal the real mechanisms of imperialism in the region ([Trapido 2015](#)). But Ngbanda was effective. His message was carried to London by a close follower who circulated the video among the Congolese community prior to the formal establishment of APARECO in London in 2004. Ngbanda himself visited the UK in 2005, by which time his ideas had already generated considerable local interest.

### *How the Music Died*

Despite this activity, the life of the Congolese community in Europe retained continuity with the 1990s: ludic rituals focused on designer clothing and visits from Kinshasa’s pop groups were still the centre of attention. This was to change. During 2004, London received an extended visit from the *Orchestre Wenge BCBG (Bon Chic Bon Bon Genre)*—then one of the most popular groups in Congo, with its charismatic ‘president d’orchestre’ JB Mpiana’. JB’s main musical rival, Werra Son and his *orchestre Wenge Maison Mere* were known to be intimate supporters of Joseph Kabila. Some in the diaspora hoped that JB might be less favourable.

During an informal London community meeting, some CCU/UDPS leaders had asked JB Mpiana to make a clear announcement against Joseph Kabila to ‘inspire’ his musical colleagues to reject the regime. It was unlikely that JB could have acceded to such a request without jeopardizing his own safety, but his response was not diplomatic. Kabila had ‘supported’ his orchestra, he said. Support here meant financial support and the financial reference implied a humiliating rebuke.

Wenge BCBG’s UK visit was not as profitable as JB might have expected. In 2004, there had been a series of arrests and crackdowns in many of the simple forms of fraud practised by the Congolese diaspora. Members of post-office-based cheque-fraud syndicates were arrested and the introduction of chip-and-pin credit cards removed another source of income. This fraud had floated much of the cultural patronage that the London diaspora was famous for. The cash monsoons that had characterized earlier tours by Congolese musicians were a thing of the past. Small businesses reliant on this largesse had also begun to close.

The CCU, again claiming a role as *the* community voice, took a radical decision. Given JB’s comments in support of Kabila, his last scheduled London concert would be ‘banned’ and henceforth no more UK concerts by touring musicians would be allowed. This was backed up by the credible threat of violence and disruption when CCU members descended on JB’s residence in Tottenham

meaning to attack the *orchestre* physically. On this occasion, JB had been forewarned and guards repulsed the attack but, in its violence and in its extraordinary concentration on musicians, it was an important moment, establishing a repertoire of political action that came to be associated with the *combattants*.

### *Election fever*

JB's comments furthermore reflected the fact that the downturn in Europe had coincided with a bonanza in Kinshasa, albeit a bonanza that missed the vast majority of the population. Mobutu had been kind to cultural performers, but Laurent Kabila had an austere style that matched the empty state coffers. After his assassination, things changed. During the period of transition, from 2002 and especially in the run-up to the elections in 2006, those seeking to establish political constituencies in Kinshasa began to lavish money on cultural producers (journalists and musicians) in the hope of capturing the public eye. Linked to this was an explosion in the number of television channels in the capital, from one in the early 1990s at the start of the period to over 40 free-to-air channels in 2007. They were owned by wealthy politicians and the business model relied not on advertising revenue, but on unsalaried journalists receiving fees for hagiographic interviews with other politicians, combined with frequent playing of *mabanga*-infused music.

Those with the deepest pockets had connections to mining rents, which began to increase with the China-related upturn in the price of copper. At a time when financial fortunes in the diaspora were in decline, this upsurge in political patronage from Kinshasa began to attract attention. Celebrity journalists and famous *bon-vivants* who had found Europe an advantageous location to attract resources were tempted back to Congo (see [Trapido 2011](#)). As elections approached and as politicians in Kinshasa started preparing their campaigns, some among the diaspora returned to run for office.

It seemed, then, as if the emblematic figure of success had shifted from the *mikiliste*, who visited Kinshasa for the occasional glorious return, to that of the politician based in the Congolese capital—a change well illustrated in the magazine *Grand Lacs*. In the early 2000s, this was produced in London by Sam Mpenge Mbey. Concentrating on music and fashion, it funded itself by taking fees from *mikilistes* who paid to appear, displaying their new robes, boasting extravagantly and talking about their favourite musicians. In 2005, Mpenge Mbey transferred his operation to Kinshasa. While the hagiographic nature of its features remained constant, its new subjects were the giants of Congo's new ruling class: cabinet ministers and members of parliament in sharp suits replacing the cheque-fraud superstars of yesteryear.

### *A community in trauma*

During the same period, the UK community underwent a collective trauma. Family break-ups rose. And, while Congolese fraudsters had traditionally rejected violence as unsophisticated, their closed, music-obsessed *demi-monde* dedicated to

the pursuit of beauty and folly, this was not true for their children, who became young adults with few qualifications and fewer connections to the wider society. There was a world of crime that scared their parents. A sense emerged that the dream of *mikili*, of a glorious life in Europe, had curdled. The violence directed against musicians and celebrity journalists can in part be attributed to their tormenting presence as figures from a vanished dream. They served as a reminder of what was lost.

The *temps de l'argent facile* had created a cultural world that minimized engagement with the conventional labour market and left many with a poor understanding of the wider society. Despite a superficial abundance, little money had been invested in the capitalist sense, leaving long-standing migrants stranded. Migrants who had spent decades chasing a mirage began to think longingly of home. Into this vacuum the *combattants* stepped (see [Trapido 2016: 158–162](#)).

The diaspora had not been especially politically active, but most had supported the UDPS opposition. Now support split three ways. The UDPS retained a sizeable constituency, but alongside it networks of former Mobutistes began to coalesce around Ngbanda and APARECO, while some of this support went to the MLC (Mouvement de Libération du Congo; see below). A third tendency was towards co-optation by the regime and allied factions. Meanwhile, a new umbrella organization, the CCUK (Congolese Community in the UK), was established, replacing the CCU and having less direct connection to the UDPS.

In this atmosphere, Ngbanda's 2005 London visit became a focus for evolving anti-Kabila rhetoric. Ngbanda played shrewdly to his audience, drawing attention to the need for unity at a time of national crisis. Evoking London's history as a venue for radical exiles (he mentioned Karl Marx and especially General De Gaulle's Free French), he suggested it was the destiny of the *bana Londres* to forge a new unified resistance that could carry the fight to the 'invader', conceptualized in explicitly racial-national terms, making his assertion that, until Joseph Kabila agreed to a DNA test, he was not Congolese. Ngbanda took the malaise of the diaspora and focused its anger into a new anti-Kabila rhetoric, his words spreading far and wide on DVD and online.

And then came the stripping-naked of She Okitundu, director of Kabila's Cabinet, just as the elections were in full swing. He had headed for the London studios of a cable/satellite TV channel catering for the Congolese diaspora, to fulfil a widely trailed appearance on the show of presenter Boni Tongomo. The interview never took place. In the car park, Okitundu, with ambassador Nswana and the Parti du Peuple pour la Reconstruction et la Démocratie's (PPRD) UK president, Placide Mbatika, was pulled from the car, beaten about the head and stripped naked on film, his soiled underpants having subsequently become a focus of political mockery in Kinshasa.

Such events interlinked with the febrile atmosphere in Kinshasa. The UDPS, then the main opposition, boycotted the poll—a choice that ended up marginalizing the party. In the vacuum, the one-time rebel leader and transitional vice-president Jean-Pierre Bemba (son of a key *Mobutiste*) and his party the MLC

emerged as the main opposition. Echoing Ngbanda's nationalist tropes, he presented himself as *Mwana Mboka* (the son of the country), contrasted with the 'foreigner' running against him. In a campaign characterized by the violent contestation of the public sphere, two events stood out: first, the burning-down of Bemba's television station, presumably by regime agents; second, an attack by Bemba's supporters on two establishments associated with prominent Kabila supporters. Both were set on fire: the half-built church of Sony Kafuta 'rockman', a tele-evangelist and one of several preachers to suggest that God favoured Kabila; the other the Zamba Playa, a bar belonging to the singer Werra Son, Kabila's closest musician ally (see [Trapido 2010](#)).

### Back to London

The stripping-naked of Okitundu generated a new political form—'mutakalization', from the lingala for naked: *mutakala*. Nakedness carries a metaphysical charge in central Africa. Showing one's bare behind, '*kolakisa libabe*', signals not disrespect, but a curse. *Libabe* (bottom) is also used for 'misfortune'. The significance of stripping naked depends on who does the disrobing. To strip an enemy leaves them vulnerable and devoid of protective magic, ritual devices conceived as being stored next to the skin. To strip oneself presents an invulnerability that negates harmful occult attacks by enemies. Thus, a soldier involved in the plot to assassinate General Mahele—an event notorious in the DRC—recounted being instructed to strip the general before killing him, thus depriving him of metaphysical protections ([Mbu-Mputu 2019](#): 660). More recently, Mai-Mai in Butembo demonstrated naked—an act that appears to have forestalled police attacks ([Laprunellerdc 2018](#)). This polyvalent symbolism was evident a few days after the Okitundu attack, where, during an anti-regime demonstration outside London's Congolese embassy, one of the demonstrators stripped naked.

The humiliation of Okitundu had an immense effect and the cachet increased further because British authorities failed to mount a trial. Okitundu and embassy staff were called as witnesses, but did not attend and the case collapsed. Their no-show followed death threats, not only widely circulated in the Lingala online press, but also sent by SMS directly to the telephones of those concerned. The impunity with which the *combattants* carried out a raid on the detested political class was savoured by Kinosis and diaspora alike, increasing their renown.

Those involved in the attack and their allies held a press conference in which they presented yet another new organization: the CRC (Conseille de la Résistance du Congo), complete with self-appointed president and committee. The organization announced that London was now a 'zone rouge' where Congolese politicians, musicians and pastors supporting the regime would be banned from setting foot. Those breaking this injunction would be *mutakalisé* and the 'fatwa' authorized such operations as a civic duty for diaspora Congolese to perform when the opportunity arose.

The committee wrote to the All Party Parliamentary Commission for the Great Lakes Region (APPG)—a group composed of British MPs—stipulating the

morally deleterious effects of frequent visits from regime supporters, especially musicians, to whom they attributed the spread of disorder and corruption. To general astonishment, in a community that had interacted little with the formal apparatus of the state, its concerns were forwarded to the Home Office, who replied on headed notepaper, agreeing with the recommendations—namely that visas for Congolese musicians be issued with more care. This letter, apparently a standard missive from an intermediate Home Office official, was widely circulated in the London community as a sign of the group's Olympian mandate.

As its confidence swelled, this self-appointed body became evermore implicated in regulating forms of political expression within the community, acting as censor of acceptable positions and threatening violence to anyone who did not concur. The *combattant* positions themselves, and the aggressive enforcement of their hegemony, were spread ever more widely in the diaspora, with individuals linked to the movement travelling both within the UK and to other European capitals. These attempts at political regulation became evermore hysterical as the regime became increasingly unpopular in Kinshasa itself.

#### *Violent Regulation and Demonstrations at the Embassy*

In the following years, *les combattants* triggered a series of events in London and elsewhere. The cars of diaspora pastors perceived as collaborators were torched. Injunctions against all visiting musical stars were reinforced with physical threats. Pop star Koffi Olomide was shown a gun (possibly a toy) and told never to return. These threats soon spread to other European capitals. By 2007, concerts by Kinshasa's touring musicians, once the diaspora's central cultural event, had ceased. In 2008, two celebrities narrowly escaped being *mutakalisé* in Belgium: Tshala Muana, megastar folk-singer-turned-politician, one-time girlfriend of Laurent Kabila and current president of the PPRD Women's League; and Zaccharie Bababaswe, erstwhile Belgium-based celebrity journalist and latterly Kinshasa MP and media-mogul.

In 2009, the *combattants* disrupted a visit to Oxford University by Paul Kagame, president of Rwanda, widely perceived as national enemy number one. Several demonstrations outside London's Congolese embassy in London boiled over into invasions of the embassy itself. During one such invasion, President Joseph Kabila's portrait was torn down and walked on (in designer shoes), the episode filmed and put online, to create yet another defiling image: the president trampled underfoot.

Seeking to undermine these frequent attacks, ambassador Kikaya Bin Karubi, Nswana's successor, is alleged to have bribed some young diaspora Congolese to stage a counterdemonstration; such tactics having a strong pedigree in Congolese political life, where paid-for demonstrators are the norm. But the confrontation sparked a riot. Disgruntled members of the rent-a-mob, having not received their share of fees for demonstrating, approached the police. Enquiries were made regarding Kikaya behaviour, which, again, was seen as a victory for the *combattants*.

*Communicating*

The *combattants*' use of violence was communicative. Assaults were filmed and assumed a deliberately theatrical aspect. Targets were concentrated on disrupting the public and cultural spheres, with journalists and musicians singled out. Attacks on politicians frequently took place in and around media appearances: several press conferences in Paris by prominent politicians were also disrupted by *combattants*. But they have also made direct use of the media themselves. Some groups, like APARECO, have used professional productions to spread their message. In a more low-budget fashion, many *combattants* have staged YouTube videos that resemble the old *polemique* genre: individuals making extravagant and semi-ludicrous claims to authority, issuing DIY fatwas to pop stars and announcing new *combattant* formations. Other media efforts look in new directions. One '*Pretre Schrek Ndundu*' dubs oppositional Lingala dialogue onto the film *Shrek*—in one clip, Shrek's persecutors are cast as André Kimbuta, mayor of Kinshasa, Zaiko Langa Langa superfan and die-hard Kabila supporter (Ndundu 2010). A German group calling itself Mampinga Records began rerecording classic Congolese records and refashioning Mobutu-era political chants, turning their lyrics into critiques of the current regime. These became popular in Kinshasa itself, where they echoed long-standing political tactics—DRC football fans often sing insults about the regime from the safety of the terraces, setting them to the tune of current Congolese music hits (see Trapido forthcoming).

*The 2011 Elections and the Imperium*

With the 2011 elections, the UDPS this time fielded candidates and Tshisekedi stood for president. With Bemba still on trial at the International Criminal Court, Tshisekedi was unquestionably Kabila's main challenger and he again became the focus of diaspora hopes. And Tshisekedi had been listening. In the years leading up to the election, Tshisekedi's and the UDPS's discourse seemed to adopt many of the diaspora's hyper-nationalist talking points. From around that time, Tshisekedi first characterized the president as a 'Rwandais' directed by Kigali (Ngongomanganga 2011). As the campaign heated up, he was acclaimed everywhere by crowds exhorting 'Ya Tshi-tshi' ('Old Tshi-tshi', Tshisekedi's nickname) to 'zongisa ye na Rwanda' ('send him (Kabila) back to Rwanda') (Congonetradio 2011)—a ditty inspired by a Mobutu-era political chant; it had been composed by and disseminated the European diaspora.

But the Electoral Commission announced Kabila the winner in a result strewn with anomalies and blatant fraud. Both the EU Observer Mission and the Carter Centre concluded that the result 'lacked credibility' (Carter Centre 2012). After a week ensconced in his house in Kinshasa, Tshisekedi made a speech in which he announced himself the president. He was 'president', he said, but was still waiting for his '*imperium*'. Quite what he meant has never been clear. Educated Congolese, especially those raised before Vatican II, are given to extraneous Latin quotation

and Ya Tshi-tshi's pronouncements often had a Delphic quality. Nevertheless, the phrase was seized upon by the Congolese diaspora. Speeches were laden with references to the eagerly awaited *imperium*. Figures connected to the *combattants* and to the UDPS in London began to collect money for the *imperium*, all the while giving no idea of what it actually was. After a year, Tshisekedi announced that the hoped-for *imperium* was nearly at hand and the funds raised by the London diaspora amounted to around £7000. Predictably, the money went missing. And, soon after, Tshisekedi's health began to fade. He spent most of his last years in a Belgian hospital.

### *Elections 2018*

During the 2018 elections, the Congolese street had been highly mobilized, both to force a date for the much-delayed election and to prevent Joseph Kabila from standing for an unconstitutional third term. But the formal opposition was divided. While there was an initial agreement by all the main opposition parties to back Martin Fayulu, this was quickly broken by Etienne Tshisekedi's son, Felix, who had become the leader of the UDPS after his father's death. This aroused some hopes among the governing Kabila clan that their candidate, Shadray, would reap the rewards. But opinion polls soon revealed that, however you divided the electorate, Shadray would lose any fair poll massively (Njehia 2018).

Nervous of angering the citizenry, who had repeatedly rioted against the continuation of the regime, the result that emerged raised many eyebrows. After the poll, Felix was declared winner. Few believed this to be the real result and both the Catholic Church's observer mission and a leak from the Electoral Commission itself appeared to show Fayulu had got far more votes (Stearns 2019), with Felix only in second position. Most interpreted this as a result of negotiations with the Kabila clan, who despaired of forcing their own candidate Shadary on the people, but were also loath to give up many of the political and economic networks that they had controlled for the last two decades.

Unlike in 2011, there was no united position among Congolese abroad: the hostility to Kabila remained a constant, but Fayulu and Felix both had supporters and there was a sense that oppositional impetus had shifted to youth-led protests in the DRC itself. After Felix took office, some former *combattants* with UDPS connections returned to Kinshasa, hopeful of being favoured by the new regime. To our knowledge, those who undertook such voyages have now returned disappointed. This has been taken by many in the diaspora as a confirmation of the hypothesis floated above—that, despite the formal transfer of office, many of the levers of power and patronage are still in the hands of the Kabila clan, and not in the gift of the UDPS.

### *Imperium of the Mind*

The 2018 election is itself a fascinating story of popular pressure and elite wrangles, but it is the *imperium* and the debacle of 2011 that are the most fitting coda to

our story. At once strident and nebulous, the *combattants* resist definition. The impressive list of events and incidents enacted in what is more generally a repressive political space has led to their acquiring a prominent position in the Congolese political imagination. This is certainly true for ordinary Kinshois, but is even more true for the political class that the *combattants* oppose. At times, the *combattants* seem to have been attributed the status of avenging superpowers. During the 2010 London Olympics, the DRC's minister of sport and all his staff, for fear of the *combattants*, spent one single day in London before retreating to Brussels for the duration, leaving the coach and the athletes to compete unaccompanied. Congo's politicians, who previously would make extensive visits to the British capital, have now renounced recreational travel to London. Several recent official visits have been disrupted by panicked retreats from an imagined posse of *combattants en route* to deliver retribution. The spread of these tactics, from Washington DC to Pretoria has transformed once treasured travel privileges into nerve-wracking experiences for Congolese politicians haunted by the spectre of retribution as they trawl shopping malls. These tactics have even spread to the diasporas of other Francophone African countries, with Congo-Brazzavilleois, Gabonese and Ivoirian diasporas all adopting 'zone rouge'-type practices in response to their own political classes.

### Conclusions

And yet, as mentioned earlier, there is a paradox. The exaggerated space the *combattants* occupy in the imagination contrasts with their existence in more conventional terms. This should not be taken to imply that their political importance was negligible. Nationalism is, as Anderson tells us, a work of the imagination and the *combattants* have played an important role in the transformation of Congolese political life. But the contrast between their imaginative and institutional presence is stark. Emerging in moments of collective life like mushrooms after rain, they exist largely as a series of disruptions, with occasional, highly theatrical and ludic press appearances and YouTube broadcasts. Politically, they have supported no one party or political tradition, though major opposition figures like Jean-Pierre Bemba and Etienne Tshisekedi attracted their support and drew on the vocabulary that they helped to popularize. Ideologically, they espouse, and helped to create, a strident form of wounded nationalism that has become a dominant discourse in Congolese national life. Yet, even at this level, their rhetoric has not remained static over the last 20 years.

In one sense, they belong to a longer-term pattern of Congolese social life, where the frantic fluidity, inventiveness and creativity of Congolese cultural forms, social structures and political formations—but also their incessant tendency towards fragmentation and division—reflect desperate attempts to control or remain attached to networks of patronage: patronage that is continuously leaking out of the region; networks that are themselves constantly in the process of being violently disrupted.

In this flux, continuities are nevertheless observable, the importance given to ideas of departure and return and to a life lived in Europe but focused on an audience in Kinshasa. Even where *combattant* practices differ sharply from what came before, these differences often resemble symbolic inversion. Thus, the *mikiliste* were cultural patrons, offering money and tributary forms of friendship to the musicians, journalists and pastors who dominate the Kinois public sphere. The *combattants* by contrast are implacably hostile to these groups, doling out threats and beatings and banning cultural performers from entering Europe.

But, alongside this continuity, there has also been the refashioning of notions of exile and return. In the 1990s, the Kinois diaspora dreamt of making periodic ‘returns’ to Kinshasa, lavishing consumer goods on a retinue before going back to Europe. Complementing this was their regular appearance in recorded popular music where, via *mabanga*, their names and their reputations could be spread ‘back home’ on the city stage. With the fraud economy in decline and the rise of the new regime, *mikiliste* dreams became unreachable. While some made a transition from bon viveur as *mikiliste* to bon viveur as politician, most were unable or unwilling to do this. For many of these, the *combattant* movement offered an alternative, offering new forms of authority via demonstrative rhetoric and disciplinary violence within the diaspora, but also through daring attacks on an unpopular and apparently untouchable regime. Like the *mikilistes* before them, the *combattants* were focused on the absent object of Kinshasa, but their dream is of permanent return from exile to a Congo redeemed.

The *mikiliste* mode of success had always contained that element of long-distance interaction that many suggest is characteristic of modernity. But, as *mikiliste* transformed, the *combattants* fashioned a new kind of nationalism, drawing on earlier elements but, in its comprehensive presentation and its conspiratorial, high-pitched moral tone, it was new. The paradox involved here is a brand new national myth that proclaims its primordial origins is a familiar one (see [Hobsbawm 1983](#)) and the broad outlines of our argument are also common: the rupture of modernity drives imaginative constructs of a lost totality of which romantic nationalism is one variant. But our article goes further, situating the emergence of ‘primordial’ myth and of intransigent political form within a specific historical and political-economic conjuncture.

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