Rumba Under Fire: Music as Morale and Morality in Music at the Frontlines of the Congo

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We are like refugees. We move around like refugees, we live like refugees, we eat like refugees. Yet, the refugees are better off, they get humanitarian aid from the United Nations, but we do not. Lieutenant Kalupala is fuming. The soldiers of the armed forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo (FARDC), never tire of pointing out their miserable living conditions and the hardships to which they are exposed. There’s always hunger. If you’re lucky you get food twice a day, but never meat. Meat is too expensive. So there is rice and beans, or ugali, the doughy stuff made from cassava or maize flour that is a staple food in large parts of the eastern Congo. It’s never enough. So you buy extra food and if you lack the money you smoke. Bangi. Ganja. Stuff, you know. It makes the hunger disappear. But sergeant Affasha does not like to smoke. It’s bad, he says. It makes you mjinga. You get crazy and then you start doing crazy things. The devil will walk behind you and you lose control. He rather drinks. Alcohol. Not the strong liquor in plastic bags like Furaha or BT. He mostly drinks kanyanga, a brew made from cassava and maize waste. You drink just

I am grateful to Maria Eriksson Baaz for analyzing the transcription and translation of the lyrics presented in this text.

RUMBA UNDER FIRE
MUSIC AS MORALE AND MORALITY IN MUSIC AT THE FRONTLINES OF THE CONGO
Judith Verweijen
some, in the morning, before you go to the roadblock. Then you feel much better, because the roadblock duty is long and boring. But *kanyanaga* helps. And it’s very cheap.

The FARDC is a poorly resourced force. It lacks infrastructure, logistics and equipment. There are few barracks, especially in the interior of the vast country. Thus, soldiers either build their own huts from bamboo sticks and banana leaves or live in the houses of civilians. The makeshift *manyata* are far from comfortable. Given that soldiers are rarely given tarps, the improvised roofs cannot withstand the torrential rains that mark the rainy season. In cold, mountainous zones, the bivouacs do not offer sufficient warmth. Therefore, soldiers have to warm themselves around the fire. But there is often no charcoal and not sufficient time to let the firewood dry, causing them to have constant sore eyes from the smoke. Cold also fosters poor health and being sick is bad, for one simply has no money for it.

Congolese soldiers are paid around eighty dollars a month, a derisory amount in the light of the costs of living. Moreover, as for many other state agents in the Congo, there are no social benefits: no health insurance, no family allowances, not even pensions. And soldiers have to pay for everything themselves, including basic necessities like salt, sugar, soap, charcoal, buckets to fetch water, tools, and medicine. While many units have an *Omed* (*officier medicalet*), these often have little more to offer than paracetamol, a painkiller. Most of the funds for health care are embezzled. Other funds, like for military operations, intelligence, rations or funerals, undergo the same fate. At every stage of the command chain, a part is “eaten,” leaving the soldier at the frontlines with little more than the crumbs. So soldiers who are sick commonly have to pay for health care themselves, or simply leave huge debts at health-care centers. Only when you get seriously wounded on the battlefield does the military have any pity.

Major Dieudonné shows the huge scar on his belly. Soldiers love that, I have noticed, showing me their scars. Evidence of
their bravery. And perhaps a road to intimacy? He lacks some vital organs. If it were not for madame Jeanette, a French doctor working for a humanitarian organization, he would have been dead. He was shot down in the fight against the CNDP rebels in Rutshuru in 2008. While he was lying in coma in the hospital of Kiwanja, the rebels took the town. All nurses, patients, and doctors fled. Mais Dieu m’a envoyé madame Jeanette. Le Sauveur m’a sauvé. It took him over a year to recover, then he was ready to go back to the frontlines. If you are not assigned a good position in the FARDC, you earn no makuta, and you have nothing to send home. And the kids need to go to school. So when he could get a position as an S2, an intelligence officer, of a brigade, he did not hesitate. But he needs to move around a lot, conducting investigations, gathering information, including in the most isolated zones. After long journeys by motorcycle on the bad roads of the Kivus, which change into rivers of mud in the rainy season, his thorax often hurts. Thorax, he emphasizes, the medical vocabulary giving more weight to his medical condition. Travelling is also dangerous. Coupures de routes or ambushes are a common phenomenon, not only by rebels but also by the multiple bands of bandits roaming the countryside. Being a soldier in the Congo is a boulot du sacrifice, Dieudonné emphasizes, you even have to be willing to make the ultimate sacrifice. But we get nothing. Civilians are ungrateful, they give you a merci bapesa na mbwa, the gratitude given to a dog. Civilians deride us. They spit at us when we pass by, they shout at us when we get into a minibus, eeeeh soldat utalipa!, fearing that we will not pay. In the time of Mobutu, civilians flocked to the military as we gave them food. Now it’s the opposite. We are reduced to beggars, we have no value in their eyes.

The eastern Congo is littered with armed groups of all shapes and sizes. Nobody can keep count of them, for they wax and wane, almost like a natural phenomenon. The FARDC is supposed to fight this armed potpourri, but does so erratically and ineffectively. Some brigades collude with
armed groups in their zone of deployment, concluding gentlemen’s agreements of non-aggression and engaging in mutually beneficial economic activities. Other units conduct military operations, but lack means and motivation. In many cases, the rebels simply withdraw into impenetrable forests and mountains, only to return when the FARDC has left. The result is a rebel kaleidoscope, with ever-shifting pieces in constantly changing combinations. “Civilians,” a superordinate identity category that ill captures the multitude of social roles played by non-combatants, further contribute to the volatility of the military landscape. In a militarized social order, armed groups are not an exogenous evil preying on society. They are an integral part of society itself, deeply woven into its fabric. Thus, civilians collaborate with and have multiple ties to armed groups, encompassing a range of forced and voluntary interactions. Similarly, the boundaries between the FARDC and civilians are porous, as they form part of the same social webs, allowing both military and civilians to capitalize upon the manifold threads spun between them. Despite the military’s bad behavioral track record, in many zones awash with armed groups and bandits, the FARDC is seen as one of the lesser evils. The resulting “you can’t live with, you can’t live without” configuration introduces a profound ambiguity in civilian-military relations. This ambiguity further feeds into and is fed by the ambiguity that soldiers feel towards soldiering itself, hating and loving it simultaneously.

Rumba

Every morning at 4.00, lieutenant Kalupala wakes up to the tones of one of his favorite songs by Koffi Olomide, an old one, before going for morning prayer. It reminds him of his wife in distant Mbandaka. They used to listen to this song together. It reminds him of his children, whom he rarely sees,
but he talks to over the phone. Especially his youngest son, he misses a father. Military staff in the Congo rarely get leave, especially those deployed at the frontlines in the east, for they cannot be missed for prolonged periods of time. At least that’s what their superiors say. For those whose family is in the distant western part of the country, like Kalupala, visiting home is simply too expensive. Road infrastructure in the Congo has crumbled due to decades of mismanagement and war, turning the country into even more of an archipelago than it already was, with islands of accessibility amidst seas of isolation. There are no overland connections linking east and west, and a return ticket by airplane costs hundreds of dollars. Lieutenant Kalupala last saw his son after birth, eleven years ago. He has become a stranger to his own children, and to his wife. But he has no choice. The military is a service commandé. There is not much he can do but accept. God has predestined him to be a soldier, like his father. But he misses his family, a sense of home, a sense of “normality.” Here in the east, there is always war, craziness, one attack after another. He has been fighting since 1996, when the First Congo War broke out. Since then, the country has never fully returned to a state that some would call “peace.” Always war. He is tired of it. Home has become a mythical place, it’s there yet it’s not there. And this longing, this loss, is captured by Koffi Olomide’s words. Koffi sings absence ya moto olinga, ekomisaka lokola mwana ya etike, the absence of the person that one loves, transforms those who loves into an orphan. And we are like orphans in the military, Kalupala says, we are abandoned by our superiors, by civilians, by our family. There is absence.

As for millions of Congolese, music is a basic necessity of life to Congolese soldiers. Congolese popular dance music that is, generally but inadequately called “rumba” or “soukous” as a catch-all term.¹ The Congolese often call it simply ndule, music. Enchanted by the rhythms and tones of Cuban

¹ This contribution uses “rumba” as a catch-all term, reflecting generic use.
music, itself a mixture of African and Latin-American styles, Congolese musicians started to color the rumba and the merengue with their own timbres from the 1930s onwards. They added new instruments and introduced innovations in the seben, the percussion-dominated instrumental break with rapid rhythms that is characteristic of the rumba. In the 1950s, this evolution culminated in the creation of orchestras with a distinct style, like l’African Jazz with its famous singer Le Grand Kallé, who produced the immortal song “Indépendance Cha-Cha.” Celebrating the Congo’s accession to independence in 1960, this song marks the starting point of the gradual melting of music and what might be termed “nation,” the sedimentation of the rumba in collective consciousness. Its rhythms, lyrics and associated dances shaping and being shaped by representations of what it means to be “Congolese,” music has become a cement that binds this bewilderingly vast and diverse nation together. Even in the Swahiliophone east, the mostly Lingalaphone music is a staple, and the choreography of the latest dance in fashion is mastered in detail. In fact, to many people in the east, rumba is the primary channel through which they become acquainted with Lingala language, which dominates its paroles.

One of the Congo’s foremost artistic expressions, the rumba provides essential ways of making sense of, coping with, and commenting on the stunningly adverse conditions the country has faced over the last decades. The paroles of the rumba and the cris of the batalaku reflect and are incorporated in common parlance, becoming and drawing upon popular expressions, containing wisdoms, guidelines,

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3 Batalaku are “animators” who shout/sing short texts and melodies during the instrumental part of a song (seben) in order to liven up the music and dance.
reflections, social categorizations, aspirations and desires. While generally not explicitly political, the lyrics and dances reflect important developments in society, whether related to political changes, economic decline, or the outbreak of wars. Crucially, the rumba is one of the primary means of softening the harsh realities of everyday life by commenting on them with subtle irony or by normalizing them as a shared fate. This also applies to the realities generated by the processes of militarization that have swept the country since the 1990s. Commenting on the *kadogo*, the very young soldiers from the east that engulfed the capital after the *AFDL* rebellion overthrew Mobutu in 1997, Koffi Olomide sings *moto asimbi mandoki batuna kambula na ye te* or “those who carry a gun, one cannot ask their age.” Civilians in the eastern Congo continue to draw upon this expression today to reflect upon and criticize the dominant position of the military, as I discovered during over a year of ethnographic field research for a doctoral thesis on civilian-military interactions. Read in the light of the military’s tendency to always claim a separate status and place themselves above the law, the meanings of Koffi’s words have transformed into a more general expression indicating that “one cannot ask too many questions to the military.” This transformation reflects the ways in which the signification

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of *paroles* constantly evolves, as they are appropriated, reapropriated and adapted to changing circumstances, like the rumba itself.

Just as civilians in the eastern Congo draw upon the *paroles* of the rumba to comment on the militarization of the social order, the military employs metaphors and expressions derived from popular *paroles* to comment on their interactions with civilians. Describing the perceived irreconcilable attitude and stubbornness of civilians in the east, an FARDC officer once evoked an expression he had heard in a song by Chancellor Desi Mbwese: *kunda ebembe aboya koyoka pardon ya ebembe*, the hearse refuses the apologies of the corpse. The words of the rumba also give meaning to other dimensions of soldiering, such as the desolation of life at the frontlines, poverty, and the anxieties of combat. Recognizable narratives of life, love, and death, these lyrics provide grids of intelligibility to digest adversity, express hopes and desires, and make sense of everyday life, with the omnipresent word *bolingo*, love, often serving as a container for a host of other concepts, and reflecting notions of abandonment, uncertainty and isolation.\(^8\)

But the electric rhythms of the rumba also provide, to civilians and military alike, a narcotic way out of sorrow, a way to enkindle erotic fire, to fire oneself up before difficult and dirty jobs, an outlet of energy that helps one to carry on *malgré tout*.\(^9\)

In these multiple ways, the rumba is a lubricant of both individual and social life, providing common frames of reference, shared musical, bodily and spoken languages, and enkindling similar passions and hopes. As such, it also breaks down the boundaries between civilians and soldiers, highlighting how, similar to other social phenomena,

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9 Although Congolese music indeed offers distraction, I do not subscribe to the widely held view that, in the words of Didier Gondola, it turns on “an escapist ethos” that fosters “a fixation with the instant gratification of consumption with its immediacy and certainty,” thereby paralyzing criticism. Cited in Katriona Manson, “Sounds of Kinshasa: Music, Dance and Culture Are a Lifeline in Congo,” *Financial Times Magazine*, August 29, 2014.
the militarization of everyday life is reflected in and plays out through the dances and paroles of Congolese music.

Bolingo

The ciné-video, the movie theater of the poor, is cramped. For as little as 100 francs congolais (less than $0.10) you can forget the troubles of daily life. In isolated rural areas, where there is no electricity and few people can afford a television and video-player, the ciné-video is the foremost source of organized entertainment. Sergeant Affasha frequently goes. He does not have to pay, he says. They give him free access because he provides security to civilians. Affasha takes another sip of his Furaha. Only in the ciné-video he drinks that, he now says. It makes him all fired up when he listens to his favorite artists. He likes the music but even more the videos. The Congolese girls are the best dancers in the world! Look at that, he says. The synchronized movements of rows of invitingly dressed women vaguely resemble Kracauer’s mass ornament, but there is too much energy, too much irregularity, too much individuality for this to be a mechanical mass ornament. The hip movements are phenomenal. Hips in a dizzying whirlwind. The bazungu, the white people, cannot dance like that. Affasha likes to dance as well. He likes the fast, energetic style called ndombolo, produced by megastars like Fally Ipupa, shooting rays of ecstasy into the dreariness of life in the village. It is fast like a machine gun he says, pahpahpahpah, without charging. When not hunting for the enemy, the days pass by monotonously in the village. We are ku pori, in the bush, a non-civilized space, a non-existing space for the outer world, but also a space of exception, especially for armed actors. Sergeant Affasha hates it. The dreariness. Always the same villagers. And there are no easy women in the village. They think you will marry them, that you will pay mali [dowry]. The only thing you can do is go to the mining site when you
are on patrol. There one can find women who sell their body, bamalaya, putes, ndumba. But that costs a lot, you can only go there when the RCA (*Rations Calculées en Argent*), soldiers’ salary, has been paid. He suddenly jumps up. He loves this song by Werrason, *le Roi de la Forêt*, from the album *Techno Malewa*. Le Le Le Le Le Le, Le Le Le Le Le Le. The latest dance. Le Le Le Le Le Le, Le Le Le Le Le Le. There are almost no lyrics. Le Le Le Le Le Le. He bumps against a person but he does not care. He is a soldier. He rules. Now.

Major Dieudonné is in a bad mood. His *copine* lied to him about other men she was seeing. Yes, he had a mistress, he confides. Many of the lower ranks take their wife with them on deployment, but those who can afford it do not want to expose their loved ones to the miserable conditions of nomadic military life. It’s no life for women. So he often searches for a girlfriend in new deployment locations, to satisfy his needs. What else can he do? Just one, he says, in each place. He is afraid of diseases. But they are treacherous, women. They are only interested in soldiers for the money. If someone else has more to offer, they are gone. And he gets money irregularly. He was to make money out of the sale of wood from *muvula* trees, which is first quality hardwood, but it fell through when the customary chief refused them access to the envisaged part of the forest. He couldn’t strike a favorable deal. It was *nzela mokuse*, a shortcut to money, but it failed. And he had already made some down payments. So he was short of money for a while and could not spend anything on his *copine*. He had to borrow money to buy her a *pagne* (cloth) for her birthday. But she still got dissatisfied. You see, we have a saying, *bolingo ya mbongo eyebanaka na tango ya mpiaka*, love that is for sale shows itself in times of scarcity. And the women in this region are very opportunistic, they only care about the money. He also worries about his wife at home. When he speaks to her on the phone her voice is cold. He has been trying to be good to her, always sending money for the children. But he distrusts her. How can he know what she is doing while he is at the
frontlines? She is very beautiful. Dieudonné shows a picture on his phone. A typical woman from Kisangani. Beautiful but dangerous. And he fears she does not love him anymore. A common chorus among FARDC soldiers, alingaka nga lisusu te, my wife does not love me anymore. But Dieudonné is doubly hurt. He truly loved his mistress, she nourished him like vitamin. Aaaah, Joyeuse, ma fleur, bolingo eleki trop, love overflows. He feels as much pain in his heart as he does in his thorax after traveling. Like more vital organs are missing. He will not sleep tonight, unless he drinks some Primus, the most-sold beer in the Congo. He wants to forget tonight. How could she betray him? It’s killing him, killing like the hunters among the Mai Mai, those knowing how to shoot. He searches in his phone in his collection of songs. L'amour n'existe pas. Il n'existe que des preuves d'amour, says Koffi in “Fouta Djalon.” The song fits his mood.

Eh amour amour amour fulu nini obwaka nayo mawa eh?
Oh love, love, love, love in what trashcan have you thrown compassion?

Yo moko oteyaki nga kopumbwa
It was you who advised me to fly

Pona nini obotoli nga mapapu amour
Why did you take away the wings, love

Eh amour amour amour amour mpo nanini ozongisi nga na zero
Oh love, love, love, love, why did you return me to zero

Nazalaki mohumbu na yo
I used to be your slave

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10 “Mai Mai” is a general name for smaller armed groups that appeal to discourses of autochthony and communal self-defense.
Pona nini okomi kopesa nga liwa avant l’heure ya la mort
Why did you try to kill me before the death hour

Eh amour okosuka na nga wapi e
O love, till where do we go

Bolingo pourquoi vraiment osili elengi
Love, why do you no longer give pleasure

Bonbon na nga pourquoi vraiment okomi ngayi
My candy, why have you become sour

Chiclet na nga vraiment osili sukali avant
My chewing gum, you have really lost your sweet flavor too soon

ha a a a an Diamo oo na

Diamona okomisa nga pondu ya matanga eh
Diamona you have turned me into the pondu [manioc leaves] of mourning

Moto nioso na linga akumba oyo ya ye partie
Every person who eats it, takes a piece away

Nga mboto osangisi nga na malangwa
Me a fish of value, you have confounded me with the fishes of the first price

Okakoli nga sans qu’otuna motuya na ngai
You have sold me without asking my price

Okomisi nga etula oyo ya simba zigida ah a a a an
You have turned me into an unsellable item at the market of Simba Zigida
Diamona ata kala okobanza nga e e
Diamona, one day you will think of me

Banzungu ya kala elambaka ba supu ya bien
The old casseroles make good soups

A près tout moyi ezuwaka se elongi
After all, the sun only reaches my face

Elengi ya makoso ezalaka na mokuwa a a a
The taste of pig feet is in the bones

Okati mandalala nanu na weyi te
You have cut the [palmtree] branches while I have not yet died

Somba sanduku olela nga dans pas longtemps
Buy a coffin, you will cry for me not within a long time

Eh bolingo okolela nga ee
Oh love you will cry for me

Ehh bolingo o o o o oh
O love o o o o oh

Visa ya bonheur bazwaka wapi eh?
The visa of happiness, where does one get it?

Ambassade ekangama na libanda ah
The embassy is closed

Tozali ebele molongo molayi.
On the outside we are numerous in a long queue

Tozozela ah
We are waiting
Ata na ndenge ya kundalupé, ata na ndenge ya kundalupé
Even in an illegal manner, even in an illegal manner

[spoken]
Pona nini moyi ezuaka moto se kobe na elongi, kasi na motema te?
Why does the sun reach the face of people and not the heart?

Moke eza ndambo te
A bit does not imply half

Motema Mabe

A vos ordres mon major, je pars tout de suite. The work of Bureau 2 (intelligence) never stops. It’s vingt-quatre sur vingt-quatre. And it’s even worse for him, lieutenant Kalupala says, as he has to do all the work. His chef, the S2 battalion, is from the rebellion. He knows nothing of the work of an intelligence officer. He does not even speak French. How can he make a procès-verbal (charge sheet)? He, lieutenant Kalupala, has enjoyed a good education, he attended the École de Formation d’Officiers in Kananga. Three years. Then he did the École de Prévôté Militaire, he was trained in the Military Police. So he knows the law, he knows the Règlement Militaire. But his boss knows nothing. A cow herder from Masisi, thrown into the army. No military education, nothing! But appointed major. Those are fake ranks, ranks from the bush. Given to people who have no military mindset. Who only went into the military for opportunistic reasons, to protect their kith and kin. Not the country. They lack patriotism. We say baleli grade bateki mboka, those who most need ranks, have sold out the country. But he, lieutenant Kalupala, he has always remained loyal to the government. He is a real patriot. Today, with the integration
of all those rebels, those who have always stayed in the loyalist camp are called *ex-gouvernement*. But there is nothing ex about it, he says. He has always served the government and he will always serve the government. The lieutenant starts arranging his things, he needs to go on a mission. Apparently, there have been *dérapages* (troubles) by some of the newly integrated troops, deployed to an isolated area. And the S2 of the brigade has pushed his superior to send him for investigations. He lacks faith in Major Muombamungu, who is from the same ethnic group as the soldiers that went on a rampage. They will always protect their brothers, these ex-rebels. That’s how it works in this military today. Tribalism. Everything is negotiable. *Politique des composantes.*

They robbed several people of their phone, and some of their money, on the way home. *Basoldats mubaya.* People no longer dare to come to the ciné-video at night. How will he make money now, the manager wonders. And the soldiers who come here never pay. They just enter with guns, imposing themselves. *Nguvu iko yulu ya sheria*, force is above the law, he says. If he asks them to pay, they tell him to “go and ask Joseph Kabila.” And they drink a lot during the screenings, they are loud and they disturb people. A bunch of *bamwizi*, thieves. They live in total insecurity with this brigade. *Les Malewa*, that’s how they call them here. For they steal everyone’s mobile phone, and many phones have this song, the *Malewa*, as a ringtone. *Leta telephone ya malewa*, they will say. They especially want the phones with double SIM-card holder. Sometimes they grab your phone and they give it back if it’s not a double sim. We want the return of the *intégrés*, the soldiers of the Integrated Brigade that was deployed here before, the ciné-video manager continues. Regret enters his voice. Those were good soldiers, we used to call them MONUC, after the UN mission deployed here. They behaved professionally. Well-educated military! There was even an officer who taught

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11 Joseph Kabila is the current president of the DR Congo.
English at the local school. An exemplary brigade. But these new soldiers are different. *Watu ya Nord Kivu*. They are Rwandophones, you see. They speak the same language as the rebels of the FDLR. How can we tell the difference? They behave worse than a rebellion. All goats in the area have disappeared. Women no longer dare to go to the market. People do not cultivate anymore because their harvest will be stolen at night. *Tunateseka*, with this new brigade, *vraiment* we suffer. 

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*Baraia habajue kazi ya jeshi.* Civilians do not understand a thing about the military. They are stubborn. We tell them not to walk around at night because the enemy might be close, but they won’t listen. Affasha is agitated. He got news about complaints made against his *pleton* by the *chef de groupement*, the highest customary chief in the area, who went to see the battalion commander. But it’s the population itself who brings *fujo*, disorder. *Bamai mai ni batoto ya huko.* The Mai Mai are their children. Yesterday they found a wounded Mai Mai officer who was hiding in the village. You see! They are plotting behind your back. *Leo iko muraia, kesho iko adui.* Today it’s a civilian, tomorrow it’s the enemy. This tribe here has a very difficult mentality. They are not open to outsiders. It’s not only the soldiers who face this problem. Other state agents are also seen as *batokambali*, those coming from far. The locals do not like it if outsiders tell them what to do. They keep their secrets, only speaking in their local language, which the soldiers cannot understand. They feel afraid here. If they get into a conflict with someone, this person might mobilize the Mai Mai who will ambush them. Especially the *chef de localité*, they distrust him. His uncle is an important officer in the Mai Mai. Before we came to this village, there were weekly food collections among the population to support the rebels. Now we collect the food. Otherwise it will go to the rebels. And
we have to because we have nothing to eat. We haven’t been paid for over three months. Three and a half months, no food, no nothing. The brigade commander says he has not received anything from the hierarchy, that there is a blockade in Kinshasa. Anasema bongo, he lies. Imagine, maman, three months without salary. And the civilians refuse to sell us on credit. Because of their difficult mentality. They distrust us. You go to a shop and they say ulipe kwanza, pay first. You see, the population here does not like those who speak Kinyarwanda. They believe we are not Congolese. So they complicate things.

At 19.00 Kalupala’s phone is still out of the réseau cellulaire. We were supposed to have a Primus tonight, but maybe he got stuck on the way. The contingencies of travelling in the rural areas, one never knows when one will arrive. I decide to stay in and work on my field notes. The mood in the whole brigade is plummeting due to months of salary arrears, but certain officers make money out of that, I discovered today. Soldiers desperate to pay their rent and cater to their family’s needs borrow money from higher officers at usurious interest rates, a system called Banque Lambert. This puts a large part of the soldiers in a position of exploitative dependence on their superiors, feeding anger towards them. Tu es là? Kalupala is knocking on my door. We stay in the same lodge. It’s a shitty place but usually full of military staff, so perfect for my research. That platoon are miyibi, he says, thieves, not worthy the name of soldiers. They steal with the complicity of the commander, giving him a part of the butin. And worse, he found, one soldier also raped a woman, although it is not yet sure if it was a case of rape. Sometimes the sex is consensual but the parents start accusing the soldier as they hope to gain something out of it. Rape is business here, because of all this international money. But some soldiers really take women by force. Contrary to the Règlement Militaire. In the Forces Armées Zaïroises (FAZ) we would not rape, he contends, we were given very strict orders. The mission of the military is kobatela population na biloko ya bango, to protect the population
and their goods, so you can’t take the wife of another person. These young guys have had no education, he says. Rien dans la tête. They grew up during the war, all they know is fighting. And they are influenced by this music promoting obscenity. Artists like Fally Ipupa, ils incitent à la débauche. We were taught that if there are no women you have to persevere. But then they listen to such music. What music, I ask. I want to know more. He calls a friend whom he knows has an album of Fally. Together they translate.

Moto ya bilengi eza ko flamber
The heat of pleasures flames

il faut l’avoir vu pour ne pas l’oublier
You have to see it in order not to forget

il faut l’avoir gouté pour ne pas l’oublier
You have to taste it in order not to forget

tes jolis lexéts’e [sic] braquer nga arme à feu
Your beautiful lexéts’e [sic] like firearms

dans un combat sans mercie
In a merciless fight

Un fait divers na canapé ya salon
A “fait divers” on the sofa of the salon

e déclenché conjoncture ya sentiment
Has triggered the conjuncture of sentiment

mon agent secret te fait craquer
My secret agent makes you split

to tshutshi [sic] tonga na clandestinité
We have “tshutshied” [sic] the needle in the underground
Comme les chauve-sourris le soir
Like the bats at night

Nous aimons vivre dans le noir
We like to live in the dark

Tout ces secrets à se raconter
All these secrets to tell

Tout ces baisers mbebu yuuu mbebu
All these kisses lips aaa lips

Butu ya mukuse bolingo ya liboma
Short night crazy love

Odope moteur ya fusée na feu d’artifice
You have enkindled the engine of the rocket with fireworks

Effet ya bombe epimenté elengi
The effect of a bomb has spiced up desire

petite dose esali grand effet
A small dose has sorted big effects

nazo comprendre te
I do not understand

mais ça me fais danser
But it makes me dance

miliki na nyampuli
Milk to *nyampuli* (sweet coconut milk)

nyampuli na miliki ehh
*Nyampuli* to milk
elengi
Delicious

paradisier nga oohh
Paradize me oooh

rotation d’amour sentijoie
Rotation of love joyfelt

libérer (glisser) na moselu ba vitesses
To free (glide) with velocities on slippery ground

loboko na nzungu eloko ya nyama ezosala
The hand in the cooking pot this giant work

le jeu de jus d’amour
The game of the juice of love

mongongo ezo tremblotter
Trembling voice

You see, nothing but incitation. This has a bad effect on soldiers, explains Kalupala. When they have not seen a woman for a long time they start imagining things. They get bad ideas. We used to turn to music for wisdom. Especially Lutumba Massiya Simaro, *Le Poète*. He gives advice on all the important matters of life. Love, friendship, ungratefulness, jealousy, rivalry, disease. Really, they have developed it all. He also likes songs that draw upon the bible. He is a Catholic and the Bible is very important to him. So he likes the song Esau from J.B. Mpiana. It refers to deception in life and that acknowledgement is not of this world. Esau, the eldest son of Isaac, was going to inherit all power, but they did not like him, they tainted his reputation. So it was Jacob who obtained the power. It’s very similar to the situation in the FARDC, he says.
We believed that in the FARDC it was us, ex-FAZ, who were going to get the power. We are the older son. But in the end, they gave it to the ex-rebels, and they did everything to taint our reputation. We will not be recognized in this world. In this world, nobody is thankful to us. I have no money, no rank, nothing. There is nothing but pasi (suffering). But Nzambe (God) he knows that we sacrifice ourselves. Like Jesus. He knows that we are being tricked even by our own bamikonzi (superiors). Especially those in Kinshasa. While we are risking our lives here at the frontlines, they are driving around there in expensive cars. Having lots of money. You can hear it in the songs, you know, mabanga,\(^1\) when they mention the names of important people. Colonel this and that, General X. Sometimes we do not even know these officers, but we hear that they have money through the songs. Some pay as much as $1000 dollars just for some artist to sing their name.

Suddenly his train of thought bends. He pauses, lighting a Sportsman. But we have to learn to be humble, he continues, even towards those from the rebel groups. If we only feel resentment we will be devoured by it one day. Even if he is a rebel and he has no education, he is still a colleague. And I need to greet him, even if I feel a pain somewhere in my heart. We have to be on the guard against motema mabe, evilness, just as Félix Wazekwa teaches us. We have to fight it also within ourselves. We have to master our anger. So I listen to Mokuwa ya Bongo, the bone of the brain, as they call Félix, Sagesse Grave.

\begin{quote}
Nzambé ozipa ebalé té kasi ezalaka peto,
God, you created rivers without any roof but they are pure and clean
\end{quote}

\(^{12}\) Mabanga (stones) is derived from the expression kobwaka libanga (to throw a stone), which refers to the practice of citing or singing names of sponsors during performances or on recordings, commonly for payment.
motema ya moto ozipa boni etonda mbindo boyé
Why is the human heart, which is protected by the rest of the body, so dirty?

nabotama na mboka moko congo au coeur de l’Afrique,
I was born in a country named Congo, in the heart of Africa

congo na biso etonda ba richesse, scandale géologique
Our Congo is full of richness, a true geological scandal

congo eza na ba diamant pé na or, zinc cuivre coltan cobalt
Congo has diamonds and gold, zinc, copper, coltan, cobalt

kasi na cours ya geographie babosanaki koyebisa nga que congo eza na richesse mosusu kombo motema mabe
But in geography class they forgot to teach me that there is another richness named evilness

motema mabé ezali kozanga kolimbisa, kozanga bolingo
Evilness is refusing to forgive, lacking the sense of love

koyoka motema pasi soki moninga azui
To feel bad when another person succeeds

motema mabé ezali koyina sans motif, kotonda jalousie, kobo ya kofuta moto asali mosala na yé
Evilness is hating people without any reason, being deeply jealous, refusing to pay somebody who did his job

motema mabé ebandaka tango okomi kobomba bolamu ya baninga
Evilness starts when you do not want to admit good things other people do
Evilness is destroying public goods, spreading false information about someone

Having bad thoughts about somebody, based on things he did not do

Kokufa

For the umpteenth time, the mud is too thick to get the motorcycle through so we need to walk. Many soldiers are jealous of the black rubber boots that I brought but they are no redundant luxury. *Matope* or *potopoto* is omnipresent. Never thought mud would ever come play such a prominent role in my life. But I am happy to get off the motorcycle. Major Dieudonné’s AK has been pressing against the flesh of my back. He needs to have it at ready, he said, when going through *La Forêt de 17*, a stretch of forest of seventeen kilometers that is plagued by regular ambushes. As with many crimes in this area, the main perpetrators are so called *HUNI*, *Hommes en Uniforme Non-Autrement Identifiés* or Non-Identified Uniformed Men. Ghost perpetrators, becoming screens that each person can project their own narratives onto. So the population says the ambushes are laid by the *FARDC*, dressed up as *FDLR* rebels and the *FARDC* says it are the Mai Mai and local bandits. Perhaps it is a bit of all. But in the Congo the truth does not always lie the middle. Major Dieudonné is nervous, the road is windy here and every bend potentially harbors an ambush. He prayed before we left towards the gold-mining area, where the *État-major* of his brigade is established. A long journey of around ten hours, depending on the state of the road, or
rather the mud. The rain starts pouring. *Merde*, that implies further delays. We find a shack where people are drinking *mungazi*, palmwine. He needs some, his thorax hurts terribly. We share a bottle. A comfortable shelter.

The *commandant brigade* receives me reluctantly. He believes I am Major Dieudonné’s girlfriend. There is not much I can do to reduce the confusion. We are hanging out almost every night. Major Dieudonné is a so-called key informant. I could also call him a friend. Could I? I have never been able to define friendship. There are affective and instrumental dimensions, but what’s the composition of the mixture? I need access to insider data. But I also need to maintain distance. Tightrope. Will I be able to maintain the equilibrium? *Hali ya usalama iko sawa*, the security situation is good, the brigade commander thunders. He is clearly not of the educated kind. And he lies. He is trying to keep up a show for the *muzungu*, the white person, but I know that the Mai Mai have been regrouping in the hills nearby, where there are dozens of small artisanal gold mines. *Tunachunga baraia muzuri*, we guard civilians well. Again, he lies. I know for a fact that the chair on which he is sitting was looted from the office of the human rights defender with whom I have been working in this area since last year. A human rights defender who is also involved in the gold trade and rumored to sell to middlemen at the service of the Mai Mai. The contours of good and evil, victim and perpetrator, do not neatly overlap with the military/civilian divide. As I get spun in more deeply myself, the complex social webs linking the military and civilians mainly turn out to be colored in many shades of grey. I am seeing less and less black and less and less white.

Kalupala is jealous, I notice, upon seeing me with Major Dieudonné, who is parading me around like a prize bride. They rotated the second and third battalion, so he is deployed here as well. In the mining area. The main town here has a Wild West type of feel to it. Bustling with *femmes légères*
prostitutes), fortune seekers, misfits, demobilized and many layers of competing military and other state services. And a lot of *ambiance*. The nightlife in this place redistributes some of the money earned during the day. But for the moment there is crisis. The *Malewa*, as this brigade is called, has a stranglehold on the mining sector, and the production has plummeted. And gold is the main currency in this area. Kalupala approaches us with hesitation. He clearly does not want to show his boss that he knows me well from his previous deployment site. Jealousy is omnipresent in this military. But what to think of a force where superiors can take the women of their subordinates? A practice pioneered by Mobutu, but which has survived till this day. Kalupala needs to talk business. There is growing unrest among the *motards*, the motor-taxi drivers who constitute the main source of transport in this zone. One of the trigger-happy newly integrated soldiers accidentally shot down a *motard*, and now there is a *colère généralisée* (general anger). They are on a strike and are blocking the main road, levying fees to pay for the funeral. But they also want to see blood. It’s a hotheaded lot, the *motards*, young guys with a macho type of subculture. They have attacked the *carporal* that fired the shot, almost stoning him to death. He is in the hospital now.

We have to celebrate anyway. It’s *nouvelle année*, Major Dieudonné says. December 31st. He is already well on his way to getting drunk, one of his main weaknesses. The situation in town has remained tense. But dancing is inviting. Intel officers can never really party, the major explains. The war does not go on holiday. The war takes no rest. The FARDC always has to be on the alert. They get tired of it. To forget the war, only for one evening. To be like civilians. And dance. That’s what he wants. Dance with me. The rumba is irresistible. One can simply not remain static. *Nzoto basala mpo eningana*. The body is made to move. But I only like the fast paced songs—dancing is a solo activity for me. Major Dieudonné insists. I
need to dance the slow rumba with him. Koffi Olomide and Cindy Le Coeur, that singer with the chillingly beautiful high-pitched voice. We dance. Uncomfortably. His phone rings, he refuses to answer. I continue dancing alone. Nwa Baby by Mr Flavour, a Nigerian artist. Very hot at the moment in the Kivus. Werrason. Techno Malewa. The human rights defender teaches me how to dance Mukongo ya Koba (the back of the turtle). Many brigade members are on the floor. They are not like soldiers anymore. It seems as if the rumba dissolves the boundaries between the military and civilians, makes us transcend social identities. There are only people dancing and not-dancing. This is the second year on a row I am spending Christmas and New Year’s Eve with the FARDC. Home has become a distant abstraction. Indeed, rumba blurs the boundaries between social categories. Between researcher and what is called “research subject.” His phone rings again. This time he answers. Makelele (trouble, noise). The shit is going down. An angry mob of motards has dragged the soldier out of his hospital bed to finish off the job. They clubbed him to death. There were only two garde-corps at the hospital entrance and they were easily overwhelmed. We hear shots in the distance. There is something terribly wrong. When does one stop dancing? This is rumba under fire.

A fine intelligence officer, Major Dieudonné says, a true ex-faZ. Well educated. He died in the harness. Am I overly emotional because I have a hangover or does it touch me? At 03.30 Lieutenant Kalupala died. A brutal visiting platoon commander lost control of himself and started firing on the crowd, shooting down two motards. His name? A certain Affasha, one of those troublemakers. He was apparently on a mission to protest payment delays. Those shot down appear to have been civilian collaborators of the Mai Mai, as a guerilla attack followed soon after. No less than three bullets pierced Kalupala. There is no specialized surgery in this area. They tried to transport him to the nearest hospital but he died from blood loss on the way. That’s life in the FARDC, ma
chérie, we die by the dozens. It’s a system of hell, the FARDC. As Koffi and Papa Wemba sing: *Système ya lifelu, veut dire moto ezopela mais tozozika te*, the system of hell/hell’s system, there is an intense fire, but we do not get burnt. I mean the FARDC as a whole does not get burnt. The hell perpetuates itself. The analysis is depressing. Who will mourn for Kalupala? We need to pay honor to him, somehow. An improvised *kilio* (period of mourning). One of his friends proposes we listen to his favorite music. The oldies. He was someone from the old generation, after all. He did not like the new stars too much. *Le Poète*, we need *Le Poète*. I buy everyone a beer. *Testament ya Bowule*.

Oh Yawe, ndenge osala biso
Oh God, we are like you created us

Otinda biso awa na mokili
You sent us to this world

Moto na moto azali na lingomba naye asambelaka
Each person is part of a particular religion

Bamosusu ba sambelaka na Catholique
Some people are Catholic

Bamosusu na Mission Protestante
Some people Protestant

Bamosusu na Armee du Salut
Some are Salvation Army

Bamosusu na ba Musulman
Some are Muslim

Bamosusu na Kimbanguist
Some are Kimbanguist
Bamosusu na Mpeve ya Longo
Some are Mpeve Ya Longo

Bamosusu na Maikari
Some Maikari

Nzambe ndenge toyokaka
God we hear that

Mangomba nyonso wana na tangi
All these religions

Bayebi que soki moto akufi bayebi epayi akendeke
Know where we go when we die

Est-ce que, Yawe, okoki koyebisa bango mokolo mosusu
Yahweh, can you ask them to tell us one day

Epayi to kendeke te
Where we do not go

Nzambe po toyebi epayi towutaka te
God, because we don’t know where we come from

Toyeba quand meme epayi to kendeke
Can we know at least where we go next

Okomona mwasi na mobali bavandi
You will see a couple together

Moko na bango akei
One of them dies

Oyo akotikala nzoto ya kokonda, kokonda
The one who will stay alive continues to lose weight
Mikolo ekoeka te alandi moninga, Nzambe mawa
A few days later the one remaining also dies,
God it’s sad

Toyebi epayi to kendeke te
We don’t know where we go

Nzambe toztala bobele yo
God, we rely on you only

Bowule pesela biso mbote na bango banso
Bowule greet everyone who has died

oyo toyebi oyo ba kende
On our behalf

Bino ba angelu batu bozali pene pene ya nzambe
You angels, the people who are closer to God

Boyebisela biso ye te
Why don’t you talk to him

Ah pitie
Ah mercy

**Pinzoli ya likoko**

Torn out of the web. Some threads remain. Some have dissolved but will be memorized. Imaginary threads to a distant web. The field. Months have passed since I left. One morning the phone rings. Do I already know that Major Dieudonné has died? They think he has been poisoned. He was at a military base for regrouping and there was heavy competition for
appointments. However, he could have also died because of heart failure, given his fragile state. They simply don’t know. They only know he is dead. *Pinzoli na nga lokola ya likoko* (my tears are like those of a fish) *na se ya mayi nani akomona* (under water who will see it?). The wisdom of Koffi consoles. He was not afraid to die, the major used to say. He knew he would not live long. Like most FARDC soldiers that I met. He will live on in the rumba.

**Discography**


