Youth, Death and the Urban Imagination. A case from Kinshasa

By Filip De Boeck

1. Introduction

In their introduction to a recent special issue of African Studies Review on ‘mourning’ in Central Africa, the editors, Bogumil Jewsiewicki and Bob White, write: “As death seems increasingly present in the lives of people in many parts of Africa, emerging forms of social mourning echo the need for new political futures, and mourning shows itself as an important terrain for the social production of meaning.” (Jewsiewicki & White, 2005) The collection of essays which they edited looks into the ways in which practices and perceptions of mourning are linked to real and imagined divisions in political time and offer a way to rethink that time. The editors’ stress on the transformative qualities of death and mourning in relation to time echoes with Foucault’s understanding of the heterotopic capacities of the cemetery to reformulate time (in Of Other Spaces he mentions the heterochronic capacity of the cemetery). On top of this temporal dimension, Foucault also emphasises the spatial dimension of heterotopia: the cemetery, in his view, is that inclusive space which enables to (re)connect the lives of individuals and all the spaces these individuals cross in their lifetime, thereby enabling a redefinition of social space and the public sphere.

But in how far does the cemetery still materialize as heterotopia in a complex postcolonial context such as Kinshasa, capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, and one of Africa’s largest cities? Does mourning still help to put the dead at rest and to move on, for example to shape a political future in these Central-African worlds? Is it primarily the political aspect that is addressed in these practices of mourning, or do they speak to us about something else, about a crisis that is essentially, also, a moral crisis?

Using the example of the cemetery, Foucault already indicated that heterotopia are not fixed once and for all, but that the very nature of their functioning can change over time in
any given society. It is precisely the changing place of the cemetery and of death itself in that this chapter will address. More specifically, I intend to offer a reflection on mourning rituals as they emerge today amongst young urbanites in Kinshasa, and will look at the ways in which funerals and burial rituals have not only become moments for youngsters to contest and rethink the time of the state and political order and authority, and thereby express the longing for new political futures, but also how they have become, in their very form, moments to dissociate oneself from the religious time-frame of the church (of Catholic, Protestant and, above all, Pentecostal signature) that currently defines the city’s temporality and moral geography. The new place of death within the contemporary Congolese urban environment, and the new rituals and practices of burial and social mourning that are emerging along with them, not only give form to new collective attitudes amongst urban youngsters to deal with the continuing political and socio-economic crisis in which they live, but they also express emerging social imaginaries that deal more broadly with notions of the sacred, ancestrality, and existing structures of authority and gerontocracy. In doing so, urban youth, paradoxically, seem to revive more ‘traditional’ forms of ‘rituals of rebellion’, and tap into moral matrixes with much older roots, thereby inventing a future for traditions that are themselves already reinvented in the urban context.

My ethnography builds on several years of field research in the city of Kinshasa (cf. De Boeck & Plissart, 2004). Most recently, in September 2005, I worked in a number of cemeteries in and around the city of Kinshasa. In this chapter I will focus on one of the older cemeteries of the city, the cemetery of Kintambo, which is located between two of Kinshasa’s more popular, populous and poor neighbourhoods: Camp Luka, a neighbourhood in the commune of Ngaliema, and Jamaik, part of Kintambo, one of Kinshasa’s oldest communes. Over the past two decades the urban authorities of Kinshasa officially closed this cemetery at
least three times because Kintambo’s burial ground, not unlike the city itself, is more than saturated. Yet, people continue to bury their dead there even today.

2. Congo’s Political Crisis, Death and the Religious Imagination

For decades now, Congo has been in the grip of a profound crisis which makes itself felt in every field and on every level of Congolese society: politically, economically, socially and culturally (Trefon, 2004). In fact, the crisis is experienced to be so multiform and omnipresent that there hardly seems to be a way out of the harsh living conditions it has created. “We live like animals” (Lingala: tokomi kovivre lokola banyama) is an often heard remark in Kinshasa’s streets. One of the only available answers to face the hardships imposed by this widespread crisis is provided by religion. Over the past two decades, as elsewhere in Congo and indeed Africa, Kinshasa has witnessed the rapid spread of Christian fundamentalist churches. Replacing to an important extent the ‘traditional’ Catholic and Protestant religious practices that were introduced during colonial times, Pentecostalism, churches of awakening, charismatic renewal churches and other millenarian movements have deeply penetrated the lives of city-dwellers. It is this Christian fundamentalism that has imposed its logic and its temporality onto the city. This temporality is of a very specific eschatological kind and takes its point of departure in the Bible, and more particularly in the Book of Revelation, which has become the omnipresent point of reference in Kinshasa’s collective imagination. The lived-in time of daily life in Kin is constantly projected against the canvas of the completion of everything, a completion which will be brought about by God. As such, Kinshasa is captured in this moment of what I have coined ‘the apocalyptic interlude’ (De Boeck, 2005), a moment that has also profoundly changed the meaning and the emplacement of death in the religious realm.
Christian fundamentalism not only outlines the city’s geographies of hope and despair, but it has also drastically redefined and constructed the public urban realm. The mere presence of thousands of churches on every corner of every street has transformed the physical urban reality, and it has also redrawn the lines of Kinshasa’s social and moral cartography. Pentecostalism strongly promotes a new form of individualism and a new attitude towards work and money: one realizes oneself as authentic Christian through one’s own individual effort, labour and prayer, rather than through one’s social belonging in terms of descent or ethnic identity, as used to be the case before. As such, Pentecostalism has also drastically redefined the boundaries between public and private, rendering public, through the act of témoignage or witnessing in the church community, of what used to belong to a more private group or family level before. It has turned the city of Kinshasa, already a spectacle city in which appearance is very important if one wants to exist socially, into an even more theatrical environment, the main stage of which has become the church.

The fact that daily reality is constantly interpreted in religious terms is nothing new in Congo. Prayer has infused itself in every aspect of private and public life in Congo, thereby determining its form and content. This is certainly true for political life in Congo. The constant religious transfiguration of the formal political sphere has always been typical for the way in which politics is commonly interpreted. High profile politicians such as Mobutu, Kabila, Tshisekedi and others were and are commonly compared to Moses, the Prophets, Jesus and the like. Their actions are constantly interpreted in biblical terms.²

But even if prayer, directly or indirectly, controls and redefines much of the political action in Congo, one major field of Congolese life seems to escape, at least to some extent, the hegemony and control of the churches of awakening. That field is death, or rather, the specific ways in which death is managed in Kinshasa today. More than anything else, I contend, death, as omnipresent as the churches themselves, has reshaped the city’s
(increasingly overlapping) political and religious arenas. In a general way, in Congo, death has become a model for collective social, political and religious action (De Boeck, 1998; Vangu Ngimbi, 1997). In this country where, for many years now, political action has been translated in the creation of a ‘dead city’ (journée ville morte), funerals and mourning ceremonies (matanga) have themselves become the motor of social and political criticism, especially for youngsters. Especially the funeral processions that accompany the deceased to their last resting place in the cemetery have turned into informal, and often spontaneous, moments of political contestation. When the coffin with the corpse is carried through the streets young people flock around it to sing songs which often have an outspoken political character.³

3. Youth and the Politics of Death in the Urban Public Realm

As in the case of the churches, the presence of death has deeply penetrated and reconfigured the city’s public space. For one, the dead are brought into the street. For lack of space within the parcelles the body of the deceased is often placed upon a bier in the middle of the street, under a funeral chapel, and people gather around the body to mourn the deceased and hold nocturnal wakes. Streets are blocked and palm leaves placed at their entrance. As such, the dead, also because they are so numerous, have taken possession of public space and have reconfigured its meaning. Some decades ago, placing the body of a deceased person in the middle of the street would have been unthinkable in Kinshasa. In the 1960s and ‘70s mourning rituals took place inside the compounds. Children and youngsters were barred from any contact with death itself. If a funeral procession passed through the street, mothers would call their children indoors, for children were not supposed to come into contact with death, since they represent the beginning of life and should not be contaminated by its end.
The *matanga*, the mourning rituals accompanying the death of a parent, beloved, or neighbour, have always been extremely important to maintain and regenerate the social network. *Matanga* are moments of encounter. They are organized by the deceased’s relatives. Usually, the maternal uncles of the deceased are the ones in charge of the funeral. They decide upon the time and place of burial, raise the necessary money, hire chairs, an orchestra and/or choir, contact the authorities, take care of the formalities for burial, meet the cemetery authorities, supervise the unfolding of the mourning period until the burial, assemble the deceased family (the mother’s and father’s side, and often also his or her allies), conduct the palavers surrounding heritage, and above all they establish the cause which lead to the death of the person in question.

Today, in Kinshasa, suspicions about witchcraft are quick to surge to the surface (*balei ye, babomi ye*: they ate him, they killed him) when someone ‘has gone’ (*akei na ye*) or ‘has been called by God’ (*Nzambe abengisi ye*). Usually, such suspicions lead to a major dispute in the families concerned. In recent years, suspicions of a witchcraft related death have tended to drastically change the course of the funeral itself. In such a case, and especially if the deceased was a young person, control over the mourning and funeral proceedings is taken, often in rather drastic and violent ways, by the family’s youngsters, but often also by groups of other young people who are no relatives of the deceased (see below).

In fact, death itself has become embedded in drastically altered structures of solidarity, of kinship and of relations of gerontocracy. This is illustrated by the changing position of the *noko*, the maternal uncle, whose authority has greatly diminished in the urban context, and most notably in matters related to death (cf. De Boeck, 2005).

Whereas burials and funeral wakes have always played a tremendously important role in strengthening the social network, they no longer seem to be able to fulfil that role completely. Much as the role and the position of the uncle are questioned during these
occasions, the role of the preacher is not assured either. In particular cases his presence is strongly contested, especially by youngsters. In fact, the most drastic change that has occurred in recent years is that the management of death is increasingly in the hands of children and youngsters themselves. Whereas before they were physically barred and protected from contact with death by their parents and elders, they now seem to have developed the most intimate connection with death and dying.

Not only is death no longer the prerogative of elders, they are also no longer the only ones to die. Death increasingly touches children and youngsters in Kinshasa. Simultaneously, in the collective urban imagination, they have also become the ones to administer and inflict death to their elders and to adults, as is attested by the widespread phenomenon of *bana bandoki*, child-witches. In Kinshasa today, children are commonly blamed for every form of illness and death that occurs in their family (De Boeck, 2004; 2005b). What these beliefs illustrate, in fact, is that children are increasingly seen as the ones who have appropriated adult discourses of ‘eating’, i.e. of power. In the public realm, which is increasingly shaped by the realities of the occult ‘second world’, they are now able to speak and act as elders before their turn.

4. Youth and the Marketing of Death

In summary, death and youth are no longer mutually exclusive, and Kinshasa’s children and youngsters have developed an intimate relationship with death itself. This can be observed in all kinds of ways. Let me illustrate this by a brief description of life in the cemetery of Kintambo, where the cohabitation of the living and the dead is no longer a source of surprise to most Kinois.
Stuck between two poor and crowded neighbourhoods, Camp Luka and Jamaik, lays this vast, and equally over-populated cemetery. One dust road leads straight through the cemetery and forms the main access to Camp Luka. The cemetery itself consists of a labyrinth of graves, chaotically placed next to, and often on top of, each other, without an apparent ground plan or structure. During the rainy season grass grows man high in the cemetery, turning this city of the dead into a forest, hiding all the activities which take place in it. These activities become much more visible during the dry season, when the grass has not started to grow yet. Everywhere in the cemetery little groups of very young children and older boys and girls are walking along the graves, playing cards, drinking beer or smoking marihuana, or dancing and singing. Some have turned the cemetery into their home, sleeping, eating and making love on the tombstones. The resemblance between these children and the dead that lie buried there is striking: both have been abandoned by society.

In this way, various groups of street children, who are referred to by the Kinois as a ‘dead society’ (société morte), share their living space in close proximity with the dead. More generally the living and the dead live in constant competition over land, a scarce resource in this overpopulated city. In some cemeteries, such as Kinsuka and Kintambo, which are officially closed but where corpses continue to be buried every day, people have started to destroy graves in order to squat the cemetery and even erect houses, with cement bricks and corrugated iron roofs, located in the middle of the cemetery. So far the city officials have not put an end to this.

For many children the presence of the dead also provides a livelihood. In fact, through an informal commoditization of death, the cemetery has become a market, a place to satisfy one’s ‘thirst for money’ (lokoso). Also, in very real terms, cemetery and market have mixed: along the road leading through the cemetery of Kintambo into Camp Luka, women use the tombstones as counters for the goods they sell (cigarettes, biscuits, soap, toilet paper, pencils
etc… Bottles of palm wine are sold and drunk on the spot, using the tombstones as chairs and tables…)

Referring to themselves as *bana état* (‘children of the state’, i.e. imposing their own rules in their state, the cemetery), youngsters offer their services to the family members of the deceased or to the official gravediggers. The latter are organized in an *écurie* or stable. The children help to locate empty spots where a grave may be dug; they sell cement crosses, help to construct tombstones, unearth corpses or offer their services for clandestine burials. Very often, people cannot afford to finance a burial, and are therefore forced to bury their dead in a secret and non official way. This happens more frequently when the deceased is a young child. Along the dust road which cuts through the cemetery and forms the access to the neighbourhood of Camp Luka a small group of male adolescents, members of the *écurie Tshico*, are waiting to be contacted by parents who want to bury their child through a *coop* or *likwala*, i.e. by bypassing the authorities and the regular formalities, without registering. They will carry out the burial at nightfall, but very often in complicity with the cemetery authorities who will be paid a small percentage of the boys’ payment for the illegal burial. Other groups of youngsters spend their days waiting along the cemetery to be hired as singers and drummers during the funeral. Others still await nightfall to dig up and steal the coffins of those who were buried during the day. These coffins are subsequently resold (cf. De Boeck & Plissart, 2004: 136). Finally, some youngsters await the night to pillage the graves in the hope of laying their hands on clothes and jewellery.

Death, in other words, has become the motor of a vast informal economy that pervades life in the city in profound ways. Another practice that has started to emerge is the ‘confiscation of the tombstone’. Upon the death of a grandfather or grandmother, his or her grandchildren will ‘steal’ the tombstone during the *matanga* and the other family members will have to pay a sum of money (usually ranging from 50 to 100 U.S. dollars) before the
tombstone is returned and the burial can take place. Other practices as well point to the commercialisation surrounding death and its management. In that respect one can mention the 'pillaging of death' in the recent emergence of funerary practices such as Ekobo (Lingala word for 'adultery') in Kinshasa’s streets: “[…] Ekobo was originally conceived as a means to preserve and protect persons exposed to the attacks of returning dead from evil, as well as a means to finance the burial payments within the family. Ekobo has become, however, the practice of delinquents who stop innocent people in the street to extort money from them, which they say will be used for buying coffee, sugar and firewood during the funeral wake. […] In case one refuses to pay up, these youngsters throw dirt at one, or physically harm one.” (Elima newspaper, 21-22/9/91, quoted in de Villers, 1992: 192-194. See also Kamandji, 1998).

5. Youth, Ancestrality, Ritual Authority and Death

Compared to the elaborate funeral rituals and mortuary prescriptions which existed in the rural hinterland surrounding Kinshasa until recently (cf. Devisch 1979), death has become a banal reality in the urban context. This banalization, and according to many older Kinois, even desecration of death, expresses itself in various ways: in the language youngsters use to denote death for example,⁶ in the general attitude towards the dead who no longer inspire fear, awe and respect, or in the mere fact that the dividing line between the living and the dead has become so difficult to trace. As Kinois say: “We (the living and the dead) are all the same” (biso nionso bato moko). Many of my informants pointed out that the general attitude towards the dead also changed drastically with the events in 1996, when many people suspected to be Mobutist collaborators were publicly lynched and neck-laced, and again in 1998, when the same fate befell the Rwandan rebels who attacked Kinshasa. In general it is felt that the earth of the cemetery does no longer hold ‘power’. For most youngsters, and in
spite of the influence of Pentecostalism, death signifies the end. There is nothing beyond
death, one just disappears. This attitude sharply contrasts with former autochthonous beliefs
in ancestrality. Today, it seems as if the production of ancestors, at least in the mind of these
youngsters, has grounded to a standstill.

Not surprisingly, therefore, a drastic transformation of existing structures of authority
and gerontocracy is operated through these new forms of managing death. No longer the
prerogative of elders, the management of death is used by the young to contest the authority
of adults: “If you do not watch out”, they threaten their elders, “we will make you eat the
shovel” \((\text{okoliya mpau})\), i.e. we will bury you. “How can we still respect the elders?”
youngsters told me. “They are the ones who should uphold tradition, who tell us about the
important place of the ancestors, but when you see how they cope with the dead who will
become the ancestors, when you observe how their corpses are put in the street, how they are
buried hastily, how can you continue to believe this?. Our elders have turned the process of
dying into a fait-divers, and they have started to treat the dead with disrespect. So why should
we still respect the elders?” Funerals have not only become a means for political contestation,
but in a much broader sense death has become an occasion for youngsters to criticize the role
of parents and elders who have \(\text{démissioné}\), who have given up, who no longer seem to be
able to fulfil the role expected of them by society. The dead, it is said, have become the
responsibility of the youngsters of the neighbourhood \((\text{bibembe ekoma ya bana quartier})\). The
dead have become their ‘toy’ \((\text{eloko ya jeu})\), and the coffin, so this urban youth claims, has
become like a football that one tosses up and plays around with. Youngsters, in short, have
become ‘the directors’ \((\text{bazali kodiriger})\) and have taken over the control of the dead, while
elders ‘have become little children’ \((\text{bakomi bana mike})\).

This aspect of contestation of the elders’ authority is most poignantly expressed when
a young person dies and his death is suspected to be related to witchcraft. In that case, the
matanga almost invariably ‘turns into disorder’ (*matanga ekomi désordre, pito-pale*) and becomes an intergenerational battle-field. When that happens, the deceased’s friends, his or her classmates, or just any youngster living in the same neighbourhood, are likely to take over the control of the funeral rites. These groups of youngsters, the ‘people of disorder’ (*bato ya désordre*), sometimes in collaboration with the *bato ya makassi*, the ‘strong people’, the *yanke* (from ‘yankee’) or leaders of local youth gangs or sport clubs which exist in every neighbourhood, will start throwing stones at all who are present on the site of mourning. They will attack the deceased’s parental home (frequently destroying it or burning it down in the process), and they will also chase away the parents, uncles, aunts and preachers who are gathered to mourn the deceased. The general atmosphere quickly turns into a chaotic and often violent mood, further enhanced by the youngsters’ singing and dancing (in ways inspired by South-African toy-toying), and the lavish use of marihuana and locally brewed alcohol (*lungwuila, chichampa or lotoko*). Invading the scene of mourning they sing out loudly: *Toyei, toyei matanga, toboyi baconseillers, soki olingi koteya, teya bandimi na yo.* *Soki olingi koteya teya bana na yo. Soki olingi koteya teya na ndako na yo* [We go, we go to the mourning ritual. We refuse the councillors (the elders’ authority). If you want to preach, preach for your believers. If you want to preach, preach for your own children. If you want to preach, preach in your own house]. The parents of the deceased will inevitably be accused of having ‘eaten’ or killed the latter by means of witchcraft (*kindoki*), and sometimes the crowd will attack, physically hurt and even kill them, singling out certain elders while singing:
* Tango mosusu ndoki ye yo ye yo* [Maybe the witch is this one or that one]. The youngsters will then confiscate the abandoned dead body, and will block the street and erect a ‘frontier’ (*barrière*), establishing their rule, the order of disorder, and forcing passers-by to make a monetary contribution before they are allowed to continue their way (or otherwise risk, at the very least, to be dirtied with a mixture of burned rubber and palm oil – see the Ekobo example
above). The money collected in this way will be used to buy more alcohol and marihuana, though sometimes some money is also spent on the burial itself. Clearly, at that point, the deceased’s family members no longer control the funeral. Frequently, it is only after completion of the burial that the responsibility for the dead person is handed over again to his family, and not without long negotiations over whom the *muziku*, the money raised by the *matanga*’s participants, should go to. Sometimes the family of the deceased tries to mobilize the police to regain control over the corpse during the funeral procedures, but as often as not the policemen refuse to get involved.

Under these circumstances, the funeral itself inevitably turns into a highly chaotic event. Minibuses and cars are routinely confiscated in the street by youth. Sitting on the car’s rooftop or hanging out of the windows while singing and shouting, they use these hijacked cars to drive to the cemetery at high speed. Sometimes the corpse is paraded through the streets, surrounded by dancing boys and girls, who address bystanders with crude songs, full of sexual license, while revealing certain body parts and making obscene gestures: *Lelo libola etuli, lelo libola ekei kopola* [Today the vagina no longer works, today, the vagina will rot away]. Another song goes: *Werrason anginda yeye. Eloko ngo nini eee? Muziki, mfwenge!* [Werrason (a popular musician of today’s music scène in Kinshasa) has become rich! What is this thing? Music, buttocks!]. Other songs include: *Awa ezali hotel. Oyei, osali, ya premier coup ezalaka direct* [Here (the cemetery) it is a hotel. You come, you make love, and from the very first shot it is ‘direct’!] or *Mayi! Mayi! Mayi mibali, mayi mayi mikongo, mayi mayi! Soki nakangi yo nakocha yo etsubeli, etsubeli, etsubeli! Nakosiba yo!* [Water (= sperm), men’s water, water from the backbone, water, water! When I catch you, I will put my penis inside you, the penis, the penis, I will introduce it!]

The same atmosphere characterizes the burial itself. Here youngsters often start to dance on the graves, sometimes totally naked (*mutakala, nzoto libanda*, ‘the body outside’).
This aspect of total abandon is even more pronounced when the deceased is a military person, and is buried by his fellow soldiers.

6. Conclusion: Sacrificing the Sacred? Youth and the Morality of Disorder

The repositioning of death enables youngsters in Kinshasa to break away from older models and to redraw the social and moral landscapes of urban public life. Firstly, funerals offer the possibility to reject current official political and religious orders (all the more surprising given the thorough grasp of the millennial churches on all other aspects of public life in Congo today). Secondly, funerals form key moments to contest the role of the elders, who are perceived to have abandoned their responsibilities and have failed to live up to the expectations of the young they are supposed to guide and protect. Mourning rituals and funerals thus bear witness of the profound crisis of intergenerational transmission and of existing structures of family and kinship. Funerals, in their guise of ritualised moments of rebellion against established orders, allow youngsters to design an alternative political and also moral landscape. By replacing the state, the church, the ancestor and the elder with their own law and order, which is characterised by ‘disorder’, young Kininois reshape the city’s outlook, drawing an alternative cartography of the urban public sphere through their management of death. They abandon older prescriptions, taboos, norms and forms surrounding death and mourning and are thus perceived by the generations of their parents and grandparents as sacrificers of the sacred, as desecrators of the dead, and therefore as highly immoral actors in an urban universe that is otherwise characterised by the high moral discourses of Pentecostalism. Paradoxically, though, the same young urban actors reintroduce other aspects of much older, pre-urban ritual dynamics. The lewd songs, the insults, the exposure of body parts, the act of love-making on the graves is a form of ritual reversal, a Turnerian anti-structural moment quite common in a number of Central-African rituals (cf. De
Boeck, 1991; Turner, 1969). In this way, Kinois youngsters shape a future for more traditional ritual forms of which they often do not even have firsthand knowledge, but which they reinvent single-handedly in the urban context nonetheless. Against the order of the state and the church, with their promotion of what essentially remains a very colonialist modernity, urban youth introduces its own moralities, while rejecting the moral codes of church and state and the modernity it promotes. In using the body of the dead as alternative political platform to speak out, they introduce their own bodies as tools for self-making and for exercising their critique against older forms of authority. I contend that, rather than being strictly political or social, their criticism is essentially a moral criticism of the world they live in. Against the omnipresence of death, and the constant threat of disappearing, of being annihilated and forgotten, the corporeal dimension of these juvenile vocabularies of self-realisation celebrates vitality and life, and forcefully posits the city in the immediate time-frame of the moment, the now. Juvenile bodies, with their specific temporality, here appear as ludic but also subversive sites and frontiers of re-territorialization of official cultural and political programs. It allows these youngsters to move beyond the standard frames, restrictions, rules, norms of colonial and postcolonial models, for these have failed to fulfil their promises, and are perceived to have lost all authority, all explanatory power, and all mobilizing force to contribute to a better understanding of the world and turn it into a better place to live.

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The official Catholic and Protestant churches have always participated in the country’s political debates, contrary to the new churches of awakening. Although the latter increasingly seem to offer the vocabularies and ethic framework by means of which political action is understood in Congo today, they have, however, been very careful not to play an overt political role. The exception is the action of Sauvons le Congo (Let us save Congo), or Congo pour Jésus (Congo for Jesus), which was launched by Fernando Kutino, one of Kinshasa’s most prominent preachers. Some years ago, he and some other preachers started to use prayer as a weapon against the dominant political class. It did not take long before this led to an open clash with the government, culminating in Kutino’s spectacular arrest and subsequent jailing, only weeks after his return from a long exile abroad, in May 2006.

These are examples of common funeral songs with political overtones: 1) Mobutu Mobutu tango okenda loso na loso (Mobutu ever since you left, we only eat rice (we are hungry). 2) Bana na diplome bakei koteka mayi, bana na diplome bakeyi koteka boudin. Pays riche lokumu ezali wapi? (Children with a diploma sell water, children with a diploma sell sausages. A rich country, but where is dignity?)

In the cemetery of Kintambo the main “stable” is called Shamukwale, i.e. the name of a village near the Angolan border where people cross in a clandestine way to access the informal diamond mines of Lunda Norte in order to dig and dive for diamonds. Grave-digging is here compared, not without irony, to diamond digging. The members of the écurie Shamukwale, youngsters of the surrounding neighbourhoods, are often solicited by the cemetery officials who resort under the city’s governor’s authority. The latter are supposed to register the dead and collect taxes. Other youngsters who offer informal services in and around the cemetery are often also organised in similar écurie structures, such as the Écurie Bana cimetière Écurie État-Major or Camp Kawele, Écurie Camp PM (Military Police), Écurie Camp Police, etcetera. These various groups at the cemetery of Kintambo offer specific services (digging graves, fabricating crosses, maintaining the tombs, etc…) and sometimes also collaborate amongst each other. To my knowledge, the members of these ‘stables’ working at the cemetery are always boys and men.

A coffin for a child up to the age of 5 costs 7000 Congolese francs (the equivalent of 10 to 12 US$. A coffin for a child between the age of 5 and 10 is 10.000 FC whereas the coffin for an adult can cost up to 28.000 FC. To hire a funeral chapel ranges from 10 to 20 $, and the plastic chairs to seat the people who will assist at the mourning have to be hired as well. To fulfil the formalities for burial with the cemetery authorities usually costs between 6.000 and 6.5000 FC.) (Prices of September 2005)

For example, youngsters will no longer use the Lingala word –kufa, to die, but will speak instead of dayé (from the English: to die), which connotes indifference and disdain.

On street gangs see also Pype, 2006. In Camp Luka some of the legendary Strong Men include: Sylva Gweni, Wa Djina and Shay.