*Visual media and political communication: reporting about suffering in Kinshasa**

KATRIEN PYPE

*Institute of Anthropological Research in Africa, Parkstraat 35 Box
3615, 3000 Leuven, Belgium*

Email: Katrien.Pype@soc.kuleuven.be

ABSTRACT

Many sub-Saharan African societies have undergone significant political shifts
in the last two decades. Changes in political representation and leadership have
generated new forms of political mediation and communication. This article
interrogates one of the most visible transformations in Kinshasa's political
society: television news reports about urban misery, often resulting from a
malfunctioning state, in which Kinshasa's inhabitants testify about their
difficulties and press fellow citizens, as well as local and national leaders, to
bring about change. Exposing suffering is a shame mobilisation strategy, and so
becomes a political act. Through the discursive and visual aesthetics of the
proximity account, citizens and political leaders are inserted into one political
community. The main argument of this article is that the proximity account
illustrates a new kind of political communication. In this article I analyse the
socio-political contexts in which the proximity report emerged and became
popular. I trace the materialisation of this new kind of interaction between
political leaders and citizens to the transformation of the late Zaïrian 'state', to
vernacular understandings of 'democracy', and to the influence of NGO
activities and Pentecostal Christianity.

INTRODUCTION

During the previous decade, DR Congo and various other central
African nation-states have undergone significant political transform-
ations, which have had an impact on modes of political communication.
The end of the regimes of autocratic leaders such as Mobutu, among
others, and the organisation of elections are probably the most visible
of these changes. It is time to investigate how these have altered
the 'dialogics of power' (Karlström 2003; Mbembe 1992), and are
materialised in terms of a public expression of experiences and
desires. Apart from ostentatious corruption, spectacular violence and
coercive ceremonialism, media control was a strong component of the
ideological apparatuses of African post-colonies during the twentieth
century. Written and audiovisual media productions contributed to the
dramaturgy of the state, while also allowing for moments of derision and
parody, yet did not create space for strong oppositional voices
(Schatzberg 2001: 6–7). Recently, Africa's media have been opened
up. But, as Nyamnjoh (2005) documents, these have not necessarily led
to free and open media participation along 'liberal-democratic' lines.
Rather, groups based on common identity (ethnic, religious, etc.)
impose themselves in creative ways in the realm of public communi-
cation. In Zaïre/DR Congo, during the final years of his regime, Mobutu
introduced a process of democratisation in order to 'provoke intensified
political competition between [his political opponents]' (Vlassenroot
2006: 56). This suggests that political efforts such as the opening up of
the Zaïrian media space in 1996, which could be understood as signs of
democratisation, were more in line with Mobutu's survival strategies, in a
decade when his power had waned substantially, than truly producing a
democratic society in the Western sense – a discursive space for
expressing and debating conflicting opinions. Moreover, this opening
of the media space occurred in a society where the 'state' was also
perceived quite differently. Concerning the late Zaïrian state, De Boeck
(1996: 98) argued that

the concept of the state should . . . be problematised and redefined in terms
of a great number of political strategies which cannot simply be described as
forms of political 'decay' or pathological dysfunctioning, but which aim at
the creation of networks and spaces of contact, palaver, (asymmetric)
exchange, solidarity and complicity, enabling the circulation of commod-
ities, money and wealth in people.

At the end of Mobutu's regime, therefore, democratisation meant the
creation of a new model of interaction 'between multiple, dialectically

interdependent, socio-political and cultural spaces and groups' (*ibid.*: 97). The media space, as a space that could enhance contact and palaver, offered new platforms for this model of interaction and continues to do so. Furthermore, 'democracy' does not mean the same thing everywhere; and the opening up of the local media space does not necessarily entail freedom of press or more transparency. A Zaïrean/Congolese understanding of *démocratie* could be cast in terms of 'personalised, "feudal" structures of decision-making, deliberation, sharing of power and distributing of wealth' (*ibid.*: 99).

As communication scholar Marie-Soleil Frère (2007: 54) argues, press freedom has posed a real challenge to the Zaïrian/Congolese rulers, because Congolese media have a long tradition of 'praise singing' and propaganda. From the very beginning and continuing to the present, government actions have threatened freedom of the press (*ibid.*: 56–64). These have included inserting security service undercover agents into the editorial boards of newsrooms; threatening or even killing journalists and editors who publish anti-government opinions; detaining journalists and editors; the imposed closures of television and radio stations; and arson attacks against the offices of television stations.[1]

During Joseph Kabila's regime, moreover, despite the existence of a relative and perhaps nominal freedom of press, the government continues to maintain a strong power over the infrastructure and content of media; this control is overtly performed by national censorship committees, but also enacted in more hidden ways. The latter are most strongly felt when journalists receive anonymous threats after having transgressed formal and informal taboos (Frère 2007; Pype 2011).

In the context of this violence against journalists, and within the representational space allowed for by the Zaïrian/Congolese government since 1996, two significant transformations have occurred in Kinshasa's media world. First, media ownership in Kinshasa (and the national territory as a whole) has changed, allowing individual entrepreneurs with their own agendas to exploit the field of written and audiovisual media. Next to commercial and religious entrepreneurs, politicians have also set up their own radio and television stations, in order to increase public visibility and thus increase their followings. And second, apart from various new forms of media patronage, the content and format of media genres, including audiovisual news broadcasting, have altered. In recent years, one particular kind of television news coverage, *la proximité* (the proximity report), has gained momentum in Kinshasa.

This article is concerned with the proximity report, and seeks to analyse the aesthetic transformations in local television news production and their political significance.[2] The proximity report appears in all of Kinshasa's television news broadcasts,[3] alongside stories on 'hard politics', and is usually produced at the request of individual citizens. These reports focus on urban poverty, violence and death, thus transforming television news broadcasts into ledgers obsessed with questions of well-being and the role of the state in guaranteeing it. One example of such a proximity report was filmed and broadcast on 9 July 2009, in which the failings of the public utilities SNEL and Regisdeso to provide, respectively, electricity and running water were denounced. The two-minute report begins with images of rusty electricity cables, outdated electricity transformers and dry water taps, while the voice-over, using street slang, identifies the neighbourhood in which these images are shot. Apparently, the residents of four streets in Kasa-Vubu, one of Kinshasa's districts, were deprived of electricity and water for over two months. Framed in close-ups by the camera, and each in turn, one man and four women explain their situation using street Lingala (also known as kiKinois), Kinshasa's lingua franca. They vent their frustrations in a tone that is at once plaintive, furious and insinuating. The first speaker exhorts the president personally to fix these problems if he wants Kinois to vote for him in the upcoming 2011 elections. The first female interviewee reminds the journalist and viewers that this situation is unworthy of a capital city. 'We are after all living in the capital, but it is as though we live in the bush.' Turning a bit sideways, the female speaker points at an older woman who, accompanied by five small children, has just put down a few water buckets. 'It is shameful for a mother to have to fetch water elsewhere', this speaker continues. Another woman laments that the lack of electricity has created insecurity in the area, darkness giving free reign to youth gangs (*kuluna boys*).[4] The state and the president himself are called upon to intervene immediately, to render life not only more bearable but also safer. After these testimonies, the camera captures images of the neighbourhood, while the voice-over addresses the managers of SNEL and Regideso, reminding them that 'these images do not lie'. 'Where will this end (*Esuka wapi*)?' The voice-over closes the item, thus expressing the lack of a sense of prospects for Kinois.

Other 'proximity topics' include coverage of a fire, lethal road accidents, potholes in the street, conflicts over ownership of a compound, a plague of theft, assaults, and so on. These news reports offer painful visualisations of the state's failure to intervene competently

in the most basic spheres of life, a state of affairs which Kinois have been experiencing for nearly two decades. The state has not been able to provide health services, electricity and water, or to preserve public infrastructure. This has forced Kinois to respond in creative ways. As Trefon (2004: 13) documents, some Kinois hold that 'they live mysteriously'.

This article argues that the proximity account illustrates a new form of political communication, the outcome of global phenomena such as NGO work and Pentecostalism, yet also anchored in local under-standings of leadership and democracy. After explaining my method-ologies and analytical approach, I zoom in on the emergence of the very popular news broadcast *Journal Télévisé en Lingala Facile*, the hallmark of which is the proximity report. I then move on to the aesthetics of suffering (*pasi*) and the moral pressure such proximity accounts lay bare. I draw attention to shifting realms of representation, in particular the political and the sentimental, in the historical context of Congolese political reform. The final part of the article contextualises the proximity report within the relationship between Kabila and the Kinois (and vice versa).

Before moving forward, I would stress that the following analysis gives a strikingly secular image of Kinshasa's society. Whereas the public sphere (including politics) is strongly coloured by discourses about the occult (De Boeck 2004), television news reports do not interpret Kinois life in spiritual terms. This is not to say that the religious is totally excluded from the field of news journalism. Most television editorial boards have pastors in their crews, often begin editorial meetings with prayers, and add announcements for religious gatherings from time to time. Furthermore, backstage, there is a great deal of suspicion and gossip about the occult dealings of successful journalists and politicians. However, television journalists, unlike their colleagues in the written press, do not insert mystical interpretations of the everyday into their news broadcasts.

NEWS AND POLITICAL CULTURE

The proximity account described above literally reads as a detailed accounting in which Kinois record a whole series of values, from the affective, social, economic and political to the moral spheres of life. Local television news production thus occupies a central position in Kinshasa's 'political society' (Chatterjee 1997), in that 'zone of negotiations and mediations between state and population, wherein

the main mediators are movements, political parties, informal networks, and many other channels through which the developmental state and the vast majority of the population interact' (Hansen & Stepputat 2001: 28). Schatzberg (2001: 4) has argued that in Zaïre, as in many other nation-states, news (*sango*) is essential to the flow of speech and power. Methodologically, news reports, as both action in society and reflection upon society, present rich material for ethnographic analysis of the ascription of meaning to political events and experience. Furthermore, news production is embedded in social fantasies about governmentality and statecraft. In Kinshasa, where several politicians now own television stations, radio channels or newspapers, politics and journalism interact in unprecedented ways, generating new media texts, like the proximity report, which could not have been generated prior to the democratic wave that swept over many African societies during the 1990s.

My analysis of the proximity report is informed by scholarship on African state–citizen interactions (Bayart 1989; Callaghy 1984; Chabal 2009; De Boeck 1996; Kaarsholm 2006; Karlström 1996, 2003; Mbembe 1992, 2001; Trefon 2004), insights on communication studies in Africa (Frère 2007; Nyamnjoh 2005) and the anthropology of texts (Barber 2007). In his introduction to *Violence, Political Culture & Development in Africa*, Kaarsholm (2006: 13) argues that 'studies are needed to map out and analyse the ways in which "public cultures" in a broader and more neutral sense function and are structured within different African contexts'. This involves 'investigations of cultural genres and institutions which do not necessarily resemble the civic associations and types of organisation that are most commonly identified with civil society in a European or Western context' (*ibid.*: 13–14). Kaarsholm proposes an analysis of political cultures that engages with the ways in which '"micro-political" debates and contestations are conducted' in order to obtain new perspectives 'on the dynamics and contradictions of political development in Africa' (*ibid.*). As in Kinshasa's other spaces of self-representation, for example paintings (Biaya 1990; Jewsiewicki 2003), television soap operas (Pype 2009) and popular music (White 2008), television news broadcasts can be approached as 'cultural texts' that present a particular view of reality and offer occasions for reflections on unfolding political processes. In addition, as I show below, the proximity report offers space for 'micro-political debates and contestations', and occupies an important position in Kinshasa's complex political culture as it has taken shape at the dawn of Joseph Kabila's 'democratic' reign (from 2006). Following Barber (2007), I take into account the connectedness that texts (written, oral or

mass-mediated) generate between authors/audiences/performers/ other middlemen, and by which they are shaped. As Barber (*ibid.*: 28) reminds us, texts weave ideas, people and places; they bring together expectations, intentions and interpretations. It follows that signification is found at the crossroads of textual forms (materiality and composition), formal and institutional arrangements, and human intentions and strategies.

Journal télévisé en lingala facile

In early 2008 Joseph Kabila contacted Zacharie Bababaswe, one of Kinshasa's leading television hosts. Bababaswe had gained notoriety and authority among Kinois (and especially among the youth) because of his extremely popular weekly television show on local music producers and their fans. In the show *Feu Vert*, which was broadcast on various private television stations, Bababaswe talked about the lives of Congolese in Brussels and Paris. While Bababaswe reached a predominantly youthful audience with *Feu Vert*, he acquired a larger audience with the daily broadcast television news programme *Journal en Hindubill*,[5] created in June 2006. *Journal en Hindubill* only lasted for two and a half months, but, after only one week on air, literally all Kinois had heard about it, and most were watching it. In contrast to the regular news stations, *Journal en Hindubill* used street slang, and was explicitly addressed to Kinois, with the aim of enlightening citizens about elections and democracy. After two and a half months, the broadcast was closed by the national media regulation body (HAM – *Haute Autorité des Médias*, see Pype 2011), because of its vulgar language and insults to leading politicians.[6] With the imposed shutting down of *Journal en Hindubill*, Bababaswe fled to Belgium. This only increased the journalist's popularity among Kinois. Two years later, Joseph Kabila called him back from Belgium, and proposed he restart *Journal en Hindubill* but use more respectful language.[7] The journal would also be a vehicle for documenting visits by the president and first lady. The president's proposition thus combined propaganda and citizens' reactions towards the government in one and the same media show.

Kabila's call to Bababaswe to return to Kinshasa was certainly a strategy to incorporate a strong public and opposing voice. By permitting a news broadcast in street language focusing on individual people's distress, Kabila was thus able to control the space in which any possible critique of his governance could be voiced. One line of analysis might consider how the media are being manipulated by state leaders.

While this is certainly an important direction, to which I will turn later in this article, I first privilege the opposite perspective. Reducing the meaning and significance of the *Journal Télévisé en Lingala Facile* (JTLF) to the leader's strategies to control, diminish and even neutralise the voices of critics means ignoring the agency of journalists and spectators involved in the daily production and consumption of the news broadcasts, especially when they report on difficulties both private and collectively shared. Bababaswe's flexibility allowed for the creation of JTLF, and the journal's strong ties to the president probably explain its success. Most Kinois know about the president's initiative in this broadcast. Many assume that the president has given Bababaswe the financial means to set up JTLF.[8] It is exactly this idea that encourages Kinois to watch the JTLF and to call its journalists.

JTLF is a totally new style of news reporting located at the frontier of more textual genres than formal news, which already includes various sub-genres such as reports about protocol events, praises for politicians, commercials and obituary notices. The Lingala News programme is inspired by popular and everyday genres like reality television, songs, jokes, spoken cartoons and proverbs. Its popularity, however, draws from the proximity report, which has become the hallmark of JTLF. This television news broadcast, which appears daily on five local television stations,[9] including the state channel RTNC, champions *la proximité* topics. These refer to events that are, as the word conveys, close to the life-worlds of the viewers. For a few years now, television news reports broadcast on the state channels and on other political television stations have also included such proximity reports. But in these newscasts, proximity reports are far fewer than coverage of state-related events. JTLF journalists, by contrast, make the proximity report their main topic and aim to insert as many proximity topics as possible.

IMAGES OF SUFFERING

Proximity reports are produced to correct urban sociability and to reaffirm morality. Their producers also address political leaders directly, not least the president himself, who, for many Kinois, is imagined as viewer number one of the news broadcasts. This belief in particular induces Kinois to participate in the production of television news reports. Viewers and state representatives arrive in the *Lingala Facile* studio, either with taped images to be broadcast or with a story, inviting a journalist and/or camera man to accompany them quickly to the scene of the action. These practices do not occur in the newsrooms of the

formal television news broadcasts. Moreover, journalists employed by the state channel or by DigitalCongo (a channel belonging to the president's relatives), for example, hand over particular news items to the JTLF if they consider these to be in need of immediate political intervention. This explains, for instance, why a female journalist working for the RTNC1 appeared in the JTLF news room and exhorted the journal's director to send reporters to her daughter's private school, to film the erosion around the school compound (August 2009). Although this was a public issue (erosion threatens many locations in Kinshasa), this journalist estimated that, unlike state channel broadcasts, a JTLF broadcast would stimulate an immediate reaction on the part of government authorities. A Tetela paramount chief who commissioned a JTLF report also considered JTLF to be the easiest way to communicate with the president (July 2009). For over four years he had been working on a political model for the nation but was never able to get an audience. Since it was taken for granted that the president, or at least the first lady, watched the JTLF broadcasts daily, the Tetela chief wanted to explain his main ideas via the journal. His beliefs were buttressed by the fact that JTLF regularly related the president's actions after one of its reports. For example, the coverage of a fire in Matete (one of Kinshasa's twenty-four districts), which destroyed the machines and textiles of a women's group, was soon followed by a generous gift by the first lady. JTLF journalists filmed the arrival of the new equipment and textiles which she donated (June 2009).

Gifts like those offered by Madame Kabila do not stand alone. Various proximity reports are followed by state responses, which are themselves filmed and then broadcast. For example, on the Congolese Independence Day holiday in 2009 (30 June), I walked with one of the JTLF journalists, John,[10] away from the Boulevard Triumphale where Kinshasa's provincial governor, André Kimbuta, was presiding over a parade of various Congolese army regiments, police groups, members of the government, and civil society associations such as members of the Scouts movement, Kimbanguists, and representatives of various NGOs. John had filmed the march for about half an hour and made arrangements with other television journalists to copy their images in case something spectacular happened in our absence. John had been called by his supervisor to film a road accident only half a kilometre away from the Boulevard. A truck had tried to merge into a bigger road, but the driver had lost control over the steering wheel, and the truck had crashed into the wall of a private compound. Just before arriving at the scene of the accident, where a huge crowd had already gathered, John

told me, with a proud tone, that Avenue Kabinda used to be potholed and rutted, but this had changed because his television journal *Lingala Facile* had made a report about the bad road conditions, which had existed for as long as he could remember (John was born and still lived in that neighbourhood). After the JTLF broadcast, the government reacted immediately and within two weeks Avenue Kabinda was no longer potholed. Indeed, we were able to walk on a nice surface of red hard sand. During and after the repair process, JTLF journalists had been invited by the Ministry of Infrastructure to report on the work.

Proximity reports are popular in Kinshasa because, more than any other media genre, they offer Kinois a chance to speak about politics and everyday struggles, and to be heard. The coverage of individual urban suffering is a relatively recent phenomenon in the history of Kinshasa's news reporting, and relates to political changes in the media world. From the moment new television channels (such as AA and CanalKin) emerged in the early 1990s, Kinois contacted journalists and put forward their own topics. At first, such audience participation was minimal, but the increase in the numbers of television channels led the viewing community to a growing involvement in offering its own news items. Now, more than a decade later, audience participation has taken on multiple forms. People call journalists on their mobile phones, or, if an email address is known, send emails; they stop journalists in the street as they try to get into taxis, or when they are sitting at bar terraces; they sometimes leave messages at their homes or with relatives.

The increased availability of recording technologies to non-professionals has also influenced viewers' participation in the production of news. People not only offer stories to journalists, but film events on DV tapes, with mobile phones or digital photo cameras, and then hand the tapes or the mobile phones over to the journalists. Filming equipment is easily available in Kinshasa: in almost every neighbourhood one can rent a digital hand camera for a few hours, and up to several days. Many Kinois also obtain recording technologies from abroad. After money and mobile phones, digital cameras are among the goods sent most regularly to Kinshasa.

Once images arrive in the television studio, editing transforms them into politically charged documents. In the account describing the inefficiency of state services, with which I opened this article, the exposure of fear and hardship, accompanied by the unsettling tone of the voice-over, and, finally, the insertion of public cries and laments made this document, like most other proximity reports, extremely touching. The articulation of suffering occupies a pivotal role in the

structure of the report; it is followed by silent images and a voice-over offering a moralising vision, often metaphorically expressed in the phrase *Match eza mabe* (literally, 'this is a bad game', meaning: this is bad, things should change). These proximity stories are 'signs of rupture' (Taussig 2006: 92; also Dayan & Katz 1992: 9), testimonial outcomes of transgressive, violent acts. 'They come *after* the event' (Taussig 2006: 94). Through a combination of images and words, proximity reports document a wrong, violence, lack of valid statecraft, and lack of urban normality, thus marking a disturbance. A rift between 'what should be' and 'what is' is produced and framed within a discourse that emphasises the abnormality of such a situation. In typical Hindubill style (street language) – that is, yelling – the voice-over calls the audience to attention, repeating at times: 'Look at this – you will be amazed! Have you ever seen something like this? It is shocking! *Kokamwa!*' The tragedy that this *kokamwa* style evokes is that this abnormality belongs to the normal life of Kinois. So, on a more abstract level, moving images are inserted as moral interpellation aimed at creating political and social normativity.

Apart from the acoustic production of difference, the editing style of the footage is also significant. Proximity stories usually begin with images of scenery, during which the reporter introduces the topic. Then, victims are given voice. Facing the camera, without the journalist visibly asking any questions, victims explain how the evildoer/unwanted situation is affecting their lives. Here, too, the style is highly emotional. Sometimes people are crying, at other times they are showing despair while throwing their hands in the air, or touching their heads with both hands, while lamenting *Maman yee Maman Oh Nzambe* (Oh God). This is a common gesture used to denote mourning. Invariably, the speaking victims address state actors (often the president himself) and call on them for action. Often, the same pressing appeal is echoed by the voice-over at the end of the story.

Through such complaints, formulated in the media, citizens can come out from the invisibility of the non-represented. They allow the filmed person to be fully present as a citizen. The logic is that the politician, to whom the complaint is being addressed, will be touched by the difficulties of the pleader and will take immediate action. As Das (2003) has stressed, repositioning the genre of the testimony in the domain of politics is a powerful tool to engage with the meanings of distress and physical or symbolic violence.

The media performances staged by the proximity reports, which can be summarised as ways of claiming rights and imposing responsibility via

the press, are the result of cultural changes initiated by Pentecostal Christianity and the work of NGOs.

First, the force of Pentecostalism in Kinshasa's public culture has impacted viewers' public articulation of their experiences of suffering in the political realm. In church settings and in the media, former witches and their victims confess to occult dealings, describe in detail the ways they were lured by the Devil, and how their actions impacted the lives of relatives and of others (Pype 2011 forthcoming). Such public testimonies constantly blur the lines between public and private, and have shaped a public culture in which discourses about pain, ill-health and violence have become very common. But not only do the evildoers speak out. All persons in attendance are pressed to produce narratives about personal suffering, and bear witness about God's salvation, especially when becoming a born-again Christian. Such accounts, which were originally produced within the religious sphere, have shaped an atmosphere in which Kinois feel comfortable publicly expressing the frustrations and misery that derive from the lack of a strong and efficient state apparatus.

Second, contacting television journalists signals a new form of social action, ushered by shifts in activist and development strategies. Although Kinois have been suffering the effects of a malfunctioning state for over two decades, human rights agencies and international media broadcasts initially tied Kinshasa residents' desire for social justice to the use of visual media. Especially after 2000, when NGOs returned to DR Congo, various organisations made it their goal to teach people how to take their problems to the government, claim their rights, and thus prove that citizens can make a difference in creating justice and in the better functioning of the state. A leitmotiv driving the actions of civil society NGOs is that Congolese do not yet have the full capacity to represent themselves as rights-bearing citizens, and need to be taught how to think and act as modern citizens through pedagogical projects. In the run-up to the first democratically organised elections in 2006, many democratisation campaigns were explained in pedagogical terms: they aimed to show people what they could claim from their representatives and the government. This process of social mobilisation occurred simultaneously with political reform in DR Congo. Many governance and development functions, once assumed to fall under the responsibility of the state, shifted into the non-governmental sphere in the context of democratic socio-economic reorganisation: what some have called the 'NGOisation of DR Congo' (Giovannoni et al. 2004).[11]

A consequence of these NGO actions is that perception of the role of journalists has changed. They are no longer merely perceived as

mediators of news events taking place *en ville* (in the city centre), but have become, first and foremost, brokers between citizens and politicians, as well as 'fixers', that is those considered capable of enabling the fixing of problems. Journalists now also have become 'representatives of the people'. Mothers with sick babies, people with legal problems, tenants without money and victims of fraud all visit journalists either in the studio or at their homes, seeking various services from them.[12] Some hope not only that their problems will be covered in a news item, but that the journalists themselves will follow up individual cases and bring them to a satisfactory close. The JTLF's legal assistant spends more time listening to people's complaints and directing them to state services than dealing with the legal problems the journalists themselves are facing. Importantly, the myth of the state remains alive, among the help-seekers as among the journalists. As a JTLF journalist (int.) told me,

our task is to distribute information. We are not the social office of the state. The only thing we can do is to send them to the appropriate state officials so that their cases arrive at the right place. However, we are also aware that many people need money to have their cases heard. Most lack the money. But, if they arrive through JTLF at the minister's office, it will open doors. No minister can ignore somebody who has come through us. They fear that we will mention in the news that they neglect the Kinois.

This journalist, like most of his colleagues, acknowledges his power in bringing about political action and feels committed to act responsibly in a way that benefits urban and sometimes even national interests.[13]

Taking into account the influence of NGO campaigns on news coverage, it is not at all surprising that the media testimonies are similar to human rights media in terms of visual style and intentionality. As McLagan (2003) has indicated for human rights media, visual evidence functions by inducing feelings of guilt or shame. There is the belief that publicity can induce compliance with human rights norms on the part of states and other violators. The 'mobilisation of shame' rests on the notion that, by exposing the gap between self-professed norms and actual behaviour, activists can actually 'shame' states into action. Showing the Kinois and the leaders what is wrong pressures offenders to change.

KABILA, THE KINOIS AND THE MEDIA

In this final part, I extend the significance of the proximity item by turning back to my initial questions about political communication in

post-colonial African regimes and local dialectics of power. Joseph Kabila was democratically elected president at the end of 2006, following two election rounds that same year; he thus found democratic means to extend and legitimate the power he had peacefully obtained immediately after the assassination of his father, Laurent Désiré Kabila, in 2001. During the five-year transition period that followed Laurent Kabila's death, Kinshasa's inhabitants disputed Joseph Kabila's leadership. This contestation occasionally took the form of violent riots, but was mostly expressed in private conversations and did not reach the public realm.

The 2006 election results, which indicated that Kinois had massively voted for Kabila's main opponent, Jean-Pierre Bemba, presented Kinshasa as an extremely complex political space. Still, Kinois refrained from overt contestations of Kabila's legitimate leadership. In more private conversations with Kinshasa's residents, however, frustrations about Kabila's leadership were frequently voiced. 'We are hungry' (*Tozoyoka nzala*), I would often hear when asking about evaluations of the current leader. The hunger Kinois experience is the embodied outcome of a malfunctioning government. In discourses about governmentality in Africa, the state ideally appears as a living body through which everyone is interconnected and political desires flow and are exchanged. As Chabal (2009) reminds us, reciprocity is a constitutive norm in African political practices. The metaphors of food distribution, circulation and consumption (Bayart 1989; Schatzberg 2001) structure discourses about allocation and justification of power. 'Food' is a common denominator for material prosperity, and thus extends well beyond the physical domain. Good leaders nurture their subjects like fathers nurture their children.[14] In reflections about the current state, many Kinois like to refer to Mobutu's time, when 'everybody could eat at least three times a day'. 'Governed by a good father, one is never hungry.' While Mobutu skilfully played with the trope of fatherhood, Joseph Kabila seemed to be unable to achieve any kind of moral authority among Kinois. The recurrent public articulation of hunger indicated that the flow of power, food and blood was interrupted. The saying 'We are hungry' appears, therefore, as a strong expression of political discontent.

The dissatisfaction Kinois utter derives not only from the lack of a well-functioning state, but first and foremost from the absence of a connection between Kinois and their leaders. In Kinshasa, there is a strong sense of fissure between residents and Joseph Kabila. Rumours remind Kinois time and again that Joseph Kabila is a foreigner.

According to some, Kabila was born to a Tanzanian mother, while others hold that he has Rwandese roots (Jackson 2006). Given the increasing obsession with autochthony and indigeneity in central Africa (Geschiere 2009), such rumours can have far-reaching consequences. Kabila's lack of proficiency in Lingala, Kinshasa's lingua franca, confirms him as an outsider as well. Furthermore, many Kinois complain about his absence from the city. They interpret this as a sign of his lack of interest in them. These arguments are buttressed by the observations that since his election in 2006, Kabila has celebrated the national Independence Day not in Kinshasa but in other cities (Mbandaka, Kisangani, Kananga and Goma). The exception was the fiftieth anniversary celebration of DR Congo's independence, which most Kinois perceived as a mere charade for the benefit of the international political community.

Such complaints about the president commemorating Independence Day outside the capital are more than mere expressions of the interpretation of lack of interest. They touch the very heart of the perceived failing body politic. As various scholars of African politics have argued (Bayart 2005; Karlström 2003; Mbembe 2001), state aesthetics in post-colonial Africa depend to a large extent on public ceremonies and festivities, which are usually marked by abundant gift exchanges, often of food. Such acts establish enduring relations of reciprocity. Interestingly, in a discussion of state ceremonialism in Uganda, Karlström (2003: 67) demonstrates that such ceremonies also 'set the stage for communicative interaction between rulers and subjects'. Local conflicts and concerns are informally brought to the attention of the visiting dignitary in the margins of the post-ceremonial feast (*ibid.*: 68). 'In return for a properly hospitable local reception and exaltation the guest becomes bound, at least normatively, by a vaguely defined generalised obligation to respond to the needs of the local community' (*ibid.*: 67). According to Karlström, the opportunity for dialogical interactions with state representatives is the main reason why locals participate in such events. Kinois object to the impossibility of communicating with their president. While many people have not forgotten how difficult it was to criticise the state during Mobutu's time, they recurrently tell stories about Mobutu (and also Laurent Kabila) appearing in public spaces and listening to Kinois' grievances and complaints, which Kinois appreciated. Furthermore, *radio-trottoir* has it that Mobutu, in disguise, used public transport and visited bars where he queried Kinois about their opinions, and life in the city in general. During Mobutu's and Laurent Kabila's regimes, there was a general

perception that dialogue was possible, but today many Kinois regret no longer having, with their Swahili-speaking president, an open line of communication with the state. Apart from the omnipresence of the president's portrait in the city's streets, and mass mediated reports about the president's activities, often outside the capital city, Kinois say that they hardly see the president. And, on the rare occasions when he visits certain areas in the city (often when inspecting the progress of the *Cinq Chantiers*[15] programme), he only speaks with journalists, abandons the scene quickly, and takes refuge in his black Jeep Cherokee.

The awareness of the rift between the president and the Kinois is also a concern for the political establishment, as was poignantly expressed during a political rally of the ruling political party (PPRD) in Bumbu, one of Kinshasa's districts known to be anti-Kabila (31 July 2009). On that occasion, Jean-Claude Mashala, a PPRD leader, promised the gathered group that *bokoyoka Kabila* ('you will feel/hear Kabila'). The Lingala verb *koyoka* has multiple meanings. It can be translated as 'to know', but also as 'to feel', 'to see', 'to hear', all meanings denoting somatic perceptions as the basis for knowledge. Because of the strained relationship between President Kabila and Kinois, all translations are valid. Since Joseph Kabila was sworn in as a democratically elected president in 2006, efforts have gradually been made to reconnect Kinois to their leader, open up communication between Kinois and the state, and thus convert Kinshasa's 'community of resentment' into one of sentiment, sharing ideas about public goods and necessary political action.

To that extent, Joseph Kabila and his entourage have invested in a strong media campaign. Since 2009, state radio and television stations and also the written press have been flooded with images of the Visibility campaign, as Kabila's main propaganda programme is called. New print magazines were created, and billboards showing Joseph Kabila and the progress of infrastructure works have been planted all over the city (Pype 2012 forthcoming). Since 2003, a private television station that focuses on Joseph Kabila, called DigitalCongo, has been broadcasting nationwide (and now also via satellite). And, in mid June 2010, a new television station emerged, the Télé du 50enaire, headed by Jean-Marie Kassamba, coordinator of the Office for the Visibility of the *Cinq Chantiers*. While both television channels (DigitalCongo and Télé du 50enaire) are overtly integrated into the president's propaganda programme, other, more subtle, strategies in the media space are used to promote the president among Kinois (and the national public).

The JTLF broadcast contributes in such a way to the propaganda of Joseph Kabila, with recurrent reports about visits by the first lady to hospitals, orphanages and various local community groups.[16] Karlström's discussion (1996) of the role of communication in how Ugandans imagined democracy in the early 1990s is key in helping understand why Kinois continue to contribute to the production of proximity reports in a programme like JTLF. Baganda people identified freedom of speech as one of the most important liberties under democracy. But, in contrast to a Western understanding of freedom of speech, where speech is directed towards a general audience of rulers, Karlström (*ibid.*: 486–7) observed another orientation in the Bagandan understanding of freedom of speech, one uttered by subjects and directed to their ruler. This was more than an assimilation of the concept of democracy to a local ideology of political order, since Karlström notes that in myths about pre-colonial kings legitimate authority in Uganda depended on the willingness of power holders to hear the voices of their subjects. It is exactly in the context of the need for similar open lines of communication, one-directional between subjects and rulers, that the popularity of the proximity account should be understood. Given the lack of any direct, face-to-face communication with the president, Kinshasa citizens use the proximity broadcast as a space in which to express demands and frustrations. Furthermore, by addressing the president in proximity reports, Kabila's otherness is elided. The president is staged as a conversation partner who literally speaks the same language. The acknowledged difference in these reports, then, is based not on linguistic or ethnic belonging, but merely on the hierarchy of power holders: the president is granted possession of the power and authority to change reality.

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Kinshasa's society is often described as being in crisis (Trefon 2004). In the academic literature, Kinois are often represented as people suffering from the whims of incapable and uninterested leaders. While most research has attempted to foreground the ingenious ways in which Kinois try to make ends meet, this article has focused on the communicative interactions between Kinois and the president. The proximity reports show that Kinois journalists and spectators continue to maintain faith in the social contract between citizens and ruler. *Lingala Facile* journalists seek to speak to the specificity of a particular situation (Kinois hardship), within the larger context of African political democratisation

and the mediation of these contexts through images and language. By juxtaposing images of Kinois suffering, and embedding pleas to the government, JTLF attempts to negatively define the ideal political order by indexing particular kinds of social relations. Using a familiar language (easy Lingala), and via the mobilisation of shame, these news items also serve as platforms to recreate urban conviviality, to reaffirm urban morality, and to demand that leaders redress their behaviour in a city where formal appeals are out of reach for many.

The proximity report is a cultural genre with strong political significance, where a malfunctioning state is exposed by citizens. Political contestation takes the form of testimony and complaint to the leader. In the proximity report, cultural styles stemming from Pentecostal Christianity and NGO work merge with local forms of communicating with leaders. That said, I do not wish to downplay the actual violence of the Congolese state. The war in the east of Congo lingers on, press freedom is incomplete, and judicial processes are far from transparent. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, local media are regulated by various censorship committees; media taboos exist; and certain media performances are punished. Yet, the proximity accounts occupy a particular space carved out by the so-called democratisation moment (since the mid 1990s), which has changed local public culture. While during Mobutu's era few complaints about the government could be expressed, this has now changed. Participation in media is one of the various strategies through which Kinois 'make use' of the state and its spaces of self-representation. Whether or not this change in media performance has actually *transformed* governance is a question difficult to answer. Easier to identify are changes in the relationship between Kinois and the president. The proximity accounts offer symbolic spaces in which suffering and complaints about a failing government can be expressed. Kinois spectators, moreover, watch political leaders' (irregular) replies to fellow citizens' complaints. This generates hope and incites Kinois to increase participation in a space that was carved out by the government.

NOTES

1. See Frère (2007: 56–64) for an overview of the ways in which press freedom has been threatened since its inception in 1996.
2. Since 2002, I have been conducting research in Kinshasa's media world. This paper draws on a larger project on political mediation in contemporary Kinshasa. For six months, I have been following television journalists, in particular those working for the state channel (RTNC1), President Kabila's private television station (DigitalCongo), and the *Journal Télévisé en Lingala Facile*, which until

June 2010 was broadcast on five television stations (the state channel RTNC1, and the private television channels CBS, CMB, CouleurTV and TVS). Fieldwork included observing the journalists in the news rooms, attending the editorial meetings, accompanying journalists while reporting, and participating in the editing process and the recording and/or live transmitting of the news broadcasts.

3. In 2009, there were thirty-nine television stations in Kinshasa, most of which produced daily news journals. Kinshasa's mediascape is highly dynamic, new stations are easily added, but many of them die out a few years later, or are temporarily suspended and can only acquire airspace again when complying with state regulations.

4. *Kuluna* are young violent adolescent boys, often trained in the martial arts of *mukumbusu* (Pype 2007), and sowing terror and fear at nightfall in Kinshasa. The name *kuluna* is a creative adoption of the French *colonne* (line, file), used to refer to the lines these young boys form when they march to the place where a fight is about to happen (usually a street that borders on the territory of a rival gang). The encounters often result in bloody clashes between gangs, which are formed territorially.

5. Hindubill is street slang, mainly used by young men. It is characterised by machismo, violence and football metaphors.

6. An example of an insult is the address *mère* (French for 'mother') to a female minister. While this is a very regular way of addressing women in Hindubill, it is perceived as vulgar and derogatory.

7. Interview, Zacharie Bababaswe, 24.6.2009.

8. This is a rumour, and therefore the information is very hard to prove. All responses to my questions concerning the financial background of the JTLF referred to the income generated by politicians paying for commissioned reports, and enterprises paying for so-called public-reportages (advertisements in the guise of news reports). Four expensive cameras were donated by a young Congolese coming back from the United States. It is unclear whether or not the computers, software and small digital hand cameras were paid for by the president. Without a doubt, the JTLF has its (tiny) studio in the building of the state channel (RTNC2) because of the president's commissioning of this broadcast. Yet most material comes from abroad, and journalists are paid by politicians who request reports (*coupage*, remuneration).

9. Between March and June 2010, the journal was taken off the air after the national media review board (HAM) decided that it was unprofessional. On 4.6.2010, the Supreme Court in Kinshasa annulled HAM's decision – a historic judgement for DR Congo's media. Since then, JTLF has been broadcast on RTNC2.

10. Names of journalists are changed for ethical reasons.

11. An example of the activity of NGOs and other international aid agencies in local media space is Radio Okapi, a radio station embedded in the UN programme for DR Congo, and steered by the Swiss–Dutch based NGO *Fondation La Hirondelle*. This radio station was the first to cover the national territory with the same broadcasts; it has produced a Western journalistic style, which hails freedom of speech. Radio Okapi also trains journalists, who then arrive in local broadcast and written press agencies. In addition, NGOs such as FORED and foreign press agencies (e.g. Radio France International) organise workshops in which journalists are taught the criteria of objectivity and autonomy.

12. Still, most Kinois also hold that journalists need to be clients of politicians in order to survive. The spectators have a very realistic approach towards the journalists' embeddedness within local politics. People prefer to contact journalists who are known to be close to particular influential politicians, so as to maximise the possibility that their complaints will be heard by people who actually have power to make a change.

13. The developmental narrative imagination is hegemonic not only among television journalists, but also among a wide swath of other media producers such as the hosts of talk shows, magazines and others. They all seek to teach Kinois how to become healthier, wealthier and more knowledgeable through the use of modern political, social and medical technologies, which are demonstrated on screen and explained by experts.

14. The father metaphor has led to perverse political regimes in the past (cf. Schatzberg 2001).

15. *Cinq Chantiers* or 'The five construction sites' is the title of Joseph Kabila's political programme. The concept was first created during the campaign for the 2006 elections, and continues to summarise Kabila's efforts to modernise education, road infrastructure and access to electricity, accommodation and health issues in DR Congo.

16. I would like to acknowledge Filip De Boeck for pressing on this political, manipulative aspect of the leaders' allowance of proximity reports to be broadcast.

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