

Final Report for:

(Dis)Connected Elders? Interfaces of Cosmologies, Subjectivities and ICTs in the Lifeworlds of Kinshasa's Old Aged (Acronym 252331)

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The Marie Curie Postdoctoral Fellowship for Career Development has allowed Dr Katrien Pype to continue her academic research on media worlds in Kinshasa and to benefit from the teaching and research activities in two outstanding universities (Massachusetts' Institute of Technology and Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium). The following report is limited to the research objectives of the fellowship program.

Research objectives: The project aimed at understanding how Kinshasa's old aged (above 65 years) use and attach meaning to modern information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as the mobile phone, the internet, radio and television. The main premise of this research was that the **sociability of elders in Kinshasa is to a large extent shaped and structured by ICTs**.

The proposed project combined insights from the field of anthropology of ICTs and anthropological research on ageing.

Methods: The methods used are interviews, participant-observation and questionnaires. Questions and observations centered on the triangle of sociality-ICT-old age.

Between February 2011 and February 2014, I made four research visits to Kinshasa (June-Sept 11; Jan-April 12; Jan-March 13; July-Oct 13).

The collection of statistical data and material on population and infrastructure proved to be difficult as not all **institutions or agencies** (Ministry of Health, Ministry of Social Affairs, Ministry of Information, cellular companies) could or wanted to share their data (either the data are lacking or the data are strategically competitive and are only used for internal marketing). I did manage to obtain statistical information on payment of pensions, inhabitants of retirement homes and numbers of old people in Kinshasa. And material on housing conditions of old people and media infrastructure has been collected via observations and interviews. I visited many families and all of Kinshasa's retirement homes. I conducted **formal and informal interviews** with TV producers (private and public stations), radio hosts (private and public stations) and employees of cellular companies (Vodacom, Tigo and Airtel).

Two female **research assistants** from UNIKIN accompanied me on initial visits to old people. 20 key-informants were selected from a pool of 96 respondents of a questionnaire who agreed with qualitative follow-up research. During subsequent field trips, I had to bring in new research informants because others had either travelled or died. During the third field trip, I mainly worked with residents in Kinshasa's **retirement homes**, where I have done series of interviews the residents, and their staff. I also followed a **Congolese NGO** that explicitly addresses the needs of elders in Kinshasa. This NGO co-operating with the **Free University of Kinshasa** to offer a new academic course, gerontology. Finally, I included the leisure culture of Kinshasa's old residents, in particular the highly popular music TV shows that stage old people dancing on "old music". I conducted interviews with the old participants in these shows, the hosts, the media producers, and integrated this topic in the interviews with key-informants.

Main results and conclusions: The findings will be published in 6 research papers/book chapters. There are two main threads in these publications:

1. Radio, television and mobile phones do play an important role in the life worlds of Kinshasa's elderly. These ICT objects are important indexes of social relationships and thus of the elders' social positioning. First, (grand-)children are requested to make phone calls on their behalf, to send text messages or to read these. This form of brokerage needs to be



interpreted against the background of cultural approaches towards grandparents-grandchildren (in Congolese ethnic groups, these are one and the same), and traditions of respect and “big-man-making” (important people are “immobile”: they do not move, they do not speak, yet they have speakers on their behalf, people come to them, etc.). This cultural explanation of “usage by proxy” allows us to gain more understandings on the practice of sharing mobile phones (beyond the economic explanation that not everybody can afford them) and on the observation that SIM card registration is not a valuable means to identify the actual user of mobile phones. Mobile phones have more and more become objects that children give to their greying parents. It has become a central object within contemporary practices of care.

Second, in particular in the living rooms of elderly Kinois, one often notices *paves* (coming from the French *epaves*, wreck, remainders), defective radio and television sets, placed next to new technological apparatus. An old, unusable radio set next to a new one; a small black and white television set next to a more recent screen. ICT commodities, old and new, defective and repaired, are in the very first instance social objects that open up and are embedded in a complex web of practices and expectations which unsettle the taken-for-granted associations between technology and time. The new ICT goods are often valuable dots in social relations, which are based on reciprocity. Holding onto outdated ICT-objects is in a way holding on to the social relationship that a commodity represents. Incomplete radio or television sets, on the other hand, are signs that the inhabitants of that house have found no other recourse than selling small parts in order to gain some money. The dismantled radios and television sets point at social hardship. It shows the impossibility of mobilizing social ties to find money through connections.



2. The participation of Kinshasa’s elderly in local TV shows is related to the emergence of a new category in African societies, that of “urban elders”. What binds all of these elderly people dancing in these music TV shows is that during the 1950s, 60s and 1970s, they belonged to the colonized “youth”. By glorifying the music and culture of Leopoldville, Kinshasa of the 1950s and 1960s, the TV music shows such as *Bana Leo* and *Sentiment Lipopo* propose a return to the beginnings of Kinshasa’s *ambiance culture*, to the origins of Kinshasa’s society as such. The participants of these music TV shows are labeled as experts of Kinshasa of the 1950s and 1960s –the beginning of Congolese modern society – one could argue that there is a “practical nostalgia” going on here (to use a term by Debra Battaglia) –the nostalgia expressed and mobilized here is instrumental in repositioning the “urban elders” in Kinois society. The “urban elders” are reclaiming value and worth within contemporary Kinshasa because of their knowledge about the beginning of the early dance scene which is totally different from the so-called mystical or occult knowledge of the village elders – these village elders constitute the Other in the social and cultural imagination of the urban youth – who dominate Kinshasa’s popular culture. Electronic media provide the “urban elders” with new platforms to be present and visible in the city, and to bring in an alternative image of what it means to grow old in an African city. This TV genre becomes a platform to reposition elderly people within the city’s social and moral worlds.



Potential impact and use; Socio-economic impact: The research brings in a fresh perspective on the life worlds of Kinshasa’s old aged. In the academic milieu, the research is innovative because it is one of the first projects that actually studies old people’s engagements with ICT in the South. As such, it is hoped that it will inspire new research on the intersections of old aged and popular culture. In addition, the research has also allowed me to reflect on concepts such as “**remediation**”, “**media brokerage**”, “**waste**”, “**care**” and “**belonging**” through the angle of technology. On a more socio-economic level, it is hoped that NGOs will use the material to gain a better understanding of the needs, desires and expectations of African elders; that they see the possibility of using ICT as new instruments to communicate their messages; and, within

diasporic contexts, that social workers or policy makers with an interest in the ageing migrant community now take on the various leads to address the elderly and to approach them as human beings in need of communication with relatives, and eager to enjoy fun and pleasure as well – despite their often double marginalized position in society (as migrants; and as elders).