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**»Ville de Yalotcha« . Ship Names, Home Ports, and  
Bureaucratic Mimicry on Congo's Inland Waterways**

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PETER LAMBERTZ

»VILLE DE YALOTCHA«

Ship Names, Home Ports, and Bureaucratic Mimicry  
on Congo's Inland Waterways

Introduction

Jeancy (38) is one of Kisangani's self-made *armateurs* (shipowners), who has gone from being an itinerant small-scale trader to the proud owner of three wooden *baleinières*. Having lost his first investment, the *H. B. Arche de Noé*, in a lethal accident on a stormy night in late 2013, he now runs the *H. B. Grâce à Dieu 02* and her younger sister, the *H. B. Grâce à Dieu 03*, between Kisangani and Isangi, about 150 km downstream. Both ships were crafted by *ingénieur* (ship-builder) Mopepe Mafisango<sup>1</sup>, whose construction activities lie on the Congo River's less densely inhabited *rive gauche*. They are clearly visible from the ports and markets of the town centre on the *rive droite*. Upon my arrival in the city in August 2017, Mafi was finalizing Jeancy's latest boat order: a 40-meter-long wooden *baleinière* entirely made of local materials, crafted only by the hands of Mafi and his two local apprentices. In 2017, this new construction was going to be by far the largest wooden watercraft on the upper river. When I reached the workshop, the hull had just been finished and turned on its back. Jeancy was waiting for me, standing on top of the bow. We exchanged greetings and I expressed my awe at the size of this wooden monster: »Muneneee!« (»Biiiig!«), I exclaimed. While mounting the ship via the slippery wooden plank, my first question was: »Nkombo na ye nani?«<sup>2</sup> (Lingala: What is her name?) – »I. T. B. Kokolo!«, Jeancy replied, and we both burst out laughing while shaking hands.

The »I. T. B. Kokolo« Jeancy was referring to is by far the largest ship currently active in the Congo Basin. Everyone in Kisangani, young and old, knows its name. For several decades, it was the city's lifeline, connecting it to downstream Kinshasa (1736 km). Then came the Congo Wars (1996–2003), which temporarily cut the country in half and caused the parastatal Office National du Transport (ONATRA) to halt its activities. Since its costly renovation between

1 Mopepe Mafisango (\*1967) is not only the son of the legendary inceptor of Congo's *baleinières*, André Mafisango (1925–2015) (aka André *Bibeyi*, meaning »barge« in Lingala, Western Congo's lingua franca) from Nioki in Mai Ndombe Province, but also the first *baleinière* builder (*ingénieur*) of the Nioki builder lineage to have brought the boat-building craft as far upstream as Kisangani. After growing up and being trained by his father at the Nioki wharf (Mfimi River), he spent several years building *baleinières* in Kinkole (Kinshasa), before moving via Isangi to Kisangani, where he has been actively building *baleinières* for various *armateurs* ever since 2013.

2 While KiSwahili is the lingua franca most commonly spoken in Eastern Congo, including parts of Kisangani, ever since the preponderance of the Bobangi river traders in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Lingala has remained the lingua franca on and along the navigable Congo River between Kinshasa and Kisangani (1736 km). On the Bobangi and their trade, see Robert W. HARMS, *River of Wealth, River of Sorrow. The Central Zaire Basin in the Era of the Slave and Ivory Trade, 1500–1891*, New Haven, CT 1981. Although Kisangani is de facto bilingual today, as the river is the main field of my research, Lingala remains its chief language of communication.

2013 and 2015, the *I. T. B. Colonel Kokolo* has been the only state-owned vessel that arrives in Kisangani (though management problems soon reduced the frequency of its trips), bringing with it the memory of the (g)olden Zairian times and the promise that the future, one day, could be similar<sup>3</sup>. Launched first as the *Gouverneur Costermans* in 1949, the ship was later »Zairianised« as the »I. T. B. Colonel Kokolo« after one of Mobutu's preferred military leaders. Today in Kisangani, the ship is a true myth. Here, it is as much an icon of lost and regained connectivity as of size, strength and undaunted power. Even an infamous local nightclub next to Kisangani's Central Prison has been called »I. T. B.«, although here the reference is most probably less the I. T. B. Kokolo than the copulative capabilities of an »Integrated Tow Boat« (I. T. B.). In any case, giving its name to one's wooden *baleinière* sends an unmistakable message: here comes the boss of all *baleinières*!

My disappointment was accordingly great when I returned to the building site two days later, where Mafi and his apprentices were finalizing the painting of the superstructure. The board above the bridge where the name of the *baleinière* is inscribed, read not »I. T. B. Kokolo«, but »H. B. La Princesse«. Mafi explained to me that when Jeancy had gone to the *commissaire fluvial* (waterways commissioner) to register his new *baleinière* in order to get all the papers (*mikanda*), the commissioner had told him that he could not use this name because there was already a ship by that name on the river. Jeancy was obliged to come up with an alternative, and »Princesse«, Mafi explained, is the name of his youngest daughter. On either side of the bow, »Ville de Yalotcha« had been neatly scripted in red letters on the white background. Jeancy later explained to me that Yalotcha was a village close to Isangi, where his parents had grown up and which he had chosen as the »home port« (*port d'attache*) of his *baleinière* when officially registering it.

Identification patterns for ships were first formalized under Belgian colonialism, along with a system of classificatory abbreviations that served to identify the size and capacity of the vessel. Even today, the identification of boats in the DR Congo is governed by rules and conventions. These naming patterns have not only been appropriated and transformed over time; they have also become the sites of popular expression and creativity, without, however, losing touch with the initially introduced rules. Taking inspiration from Africanist and postcolonial scholarship on practices of mimicry, I argue that by repeating certain naming patterns, but also by adding, subverting, and sometimes mocking them and their content, Congo's *baleinières* make use of »bureaucratic mimicry« in order to positively engage with the state and its bureaucratic principles. On a deeper and more tacit level, they thus reprocess and ludically rejuvenate the colonial heritage of river transport governance.

That names are personal identity cards *avant la lettre*, which do not just express, but always simultaneously generate personhood and belonging, has been well understood in the study of African societies and beyond<sup>4</sup>. The use of metonyms and nicknames<sup>5</sup> to govern relationships of

- 3 See Radio Okapi, RDC: le bateau ITB Kokolo a quitté Kinshasa pour Kisangani, 16 April 2015/8 August 2015, URL: <https://www.radiookapi.net/actualite/2015/04/16/rdc-le-bateau-itb-kokolo-quitte-kinshasa-pour-kisangani>; RTBF, RDC: un ancien bateau reprend du service sur la ligne Kinshasa-Kisangani, 9 February 2015, URL: [https://www.rtbf.be/info/economie/detail\\_rdc-un-ancien-bateau-reprend-du-service-sur-la-ligne-kinshasa-kisangani?id=8902981](https://www.rtbf.be/info/economie/detail_rdc-un-ancien-bateau-reprend-du-service-sur-la-ligne-kinshasa-kisangani?id=8902981), last accessed 15 June 2020.
- 4 See James C. SCOTT, John TEHRANIAN, Jeremy MATHIAS, The Production of Legal Identities Proper to States. The Case of the Permanent Family Surname, in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 44, no. 1 (2002), p. 4–44; John THORNTON, Central African Names and African-American Naming Patterns, in: *The William and Mary Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (1993), p. 727–742.
- 5 Marc AYMES, Prêts-Noms: Politique du métonyme, in: *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 60, no. 2 (2013), p. 38–57.

irritating proximity or distance vis-à-vis oppressive others<sup>6</sup> or uncomfortable selves<sup>7</sup> has also been recognised. Similarly, the bureaucratic management of transport vehicles has attracted the interest of scholars of international trade<sup>8</sup>. Ships, however, are a somewhat peculiar category in the realm of vehicles: while the taxis and minibuses in Africa's cities are well-known carriers of fashionable and auspicious names<sup>9</sup>, these names are not part of their official bureaucratic identity. A ship's name, however, is a crucial component of the official registration, imbuing its carrier from the outset with anthropomorphic individuality that emphasizes its agency in ways similar to a draught animal.

In the transportation sector bureaucratic practices are thus neither a diffusion of idealized European bureaucratic models, as modernization theorists have long implied, nor is bureaucracy in Africa necessarily inefficient or underperforming, as the case of creative ship naming shows. Thus, the argument put forward here tunes in with more recent arguments in the sociology and anthropology of Africa, which aim to abandon the notion that bureaucratic governance is inherently extraneous to African societies. Recent works have introduced a number of helpful concepts in this regard, such as »practical norms«<sup>10</sup>, »administrative brokers and intermediaries«<sup>11</sup>, »bureaucratic aesthetics«<sup>12</sup>, and »vernacular bureaucracy«<sup>13</sup>, all of which invite us to consider bureaucratic practices and socio-cultural dynamics within the same analytical frame. The notion of »bureaucratic mimicry« is, I believe, helpful in a similar way, with its emphasis on the implicit historical reflexivity and local, creative agency that are at work in certain bureaucratic practices.

After a first part introducing Congo's *baleinières* and their fluvial context, a second part of this article lays out the history of ship naming patterns in colonial Congo and postcolonial Zaïre. The third and fourth parts present the onomastic patterns and other bureaucratic practical norms relating to *baleinières* today. The last section discusses this data in the light of existing theoretical approaches to mimicry in Africanist scholarship.

My fieldwork was conducted aboard various *baleinières* on and around the Congo River in Kisangani and its downstream ports and markets for five months in 2017, and for two months in 2018, when I was a member of the GHIP-CREPOS research group. In 2019, together with Prof. Victor Yaaya Liagologa and his team from the University of Kisangani Department of

- 6 Osumaka LIKAKA, *Naming Colonialism: History and Collective Memory in the Congo, 1870–1960*, Madison, WI 2009.
- 7 Inge BRINKMAN, *Language, Names, and War: The Case of Angola*, in: *African Studies Review* 47, no. 3 (2004), p. 143–163.
- 8 Joost BEUVING, *Cotonou's Klondike. African Traders and Second-Hand Car Markets in Benin*, in: *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 42 (2004), p. 511–537.
- 9 Uli BEISEL, Tillmann SCHNEIDER, *Provincialising Waste. The Transformation of Ambulance Car 7/83–2 to Tro-Tro Dr. Jesus*, in: *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 30,4 (2012), p. 639–654.
- 10 Thomas BIERSCHEK, Jean-Pierre OLIVIER DE SARDAN (eds.), *States at Work. Dynamics of African Bureaucracies*, Boston, MA 2014; Tom DE HERDT, Jean-Pierre OLIVIER DE SARDAN, *Introduction. The Game of the Rules*, in: IID. (eds.), *Real Governance and Practical Norms in Sub-Saharan Africa. The Game of the Rules*, London 2015, p. 1–16.
- 11 Giorgio BLUNDO, *Dealing with the Local State. The Informal Privatization of Street-Level Bureaucracies in Senegal*, in: *Development and Change* 37, no. 4 (2006), p. 799–819.
- 12 Mirco GÖPFERT, *Bureaucratic aesthetics. Report writing in the Nigérien gendarmerie*, in: *American Ethnologist* 40, no. 2 (2013), p. 324–334.
- 13 Peter LAMBERTZ, *The Vernacular Bureaucracy of Taxi Logistics at the Airport of Dakar*, in: *Africa Today* 65, no. 2 (2018), p. 51–70 (Special issue: »African bus stations«, edited by Sidy CISSOKHO and Michael STASIK).

Sociology, I was able to carry out a census of *baleinières* present in the different ports of Kisangani in the months of October and November<sup>14</sup>.

### Congo's *baleinières*

Congo's wooden *baleinières* are locally developed, handcrafted socio-technical assemblages that are powered by between two and seven single-cylinder Chinese diesel engines<sup>15</sup>. Due to a number of logistical advantages over the much larger, heavier, and more cumbersome tugboats with barges made of steel, *baleinières* have come to account for at least 50 % of all movement of goods and people on the DR Congo's inland waterways. Especially since the advent and propagation in the 2000s of the highly economic Chinese Changfa diesel engine, their number has continued to rise, to such an extent that the owners of large river-tugs have started perceiving them as serious competitors<sup>16</sup>.

Rooted in older boat-building traditions from the Indian Ocean and Belgian colonial carpentry, which were appropriated in Idjwi (Lake Kivu) and Nioki (on the Mfimi River) respectively, and powered today by Changfa diesel engines, *baleinières* combine local traditions of craftsmanship and navigational skill with transnational South-South technology translation »from below«. Their success is historically linked to the economic and political crisis of Zaire, which led to a multiplication of small-scale economic actors, and thus to a growing demand for mobility and transport at a time of intense population growth and accelerated urbanization. At the same time, the transport infrastructure inherited from the colonial era, notably the national fleet of the Office National de Transport (ONATRA), had become obsolete and, in the absence of investment, went unreplaced. *Baleinières* thus grew out of Zaire's, and later the DRC's, particular historical experience. They became successful as a technology of necessity that was financially and technically viable for Congo's impoverished population. Their success relies on the socio-technical entanglement of materials, bodies, and skills that constitute the infrastructural backbone of the country's large-scale informal economy.

DR Congo's *baleinières* thus grew out of, and into, Congo's vast fluvial cosmos. Their crews are often made up of captains and mechanics who were previously fishermen or canoe riders. They were trained to »read the water« (*kotanga mayi*) in the light of knowledge that was passed on to them, not relying upon books with international navigation standards that they would, at best, have encountered at school. In material terms, too, there is continuity with the local river world: *baleinières* are made of *tola* wood, which is soft but very light and buoyant, making it also the preferred wood for the construction of canoes (Li. *bwátu*, Fr. *pirogue*). Owing to the buoyancy of *tola*, *baleinières* have thoroughly reconfigured Congo's transport geography as it was inherited from the (post-)colonial era. As official ports increasingly became hotbeds of harassment, and as the roads linking agricultural production sites to these ports gradually became impracticable due to insufficient maintenance in the context of tropical rainforest climate,

14 This was done with the help of the Gerda Henkel Foundation, to whom I extend my gratitude. I also warmly thank the GHIP-CREPOS program for supporting my research, and my former Dakar-based colleagues for discussing some of its results. I am grateful also to Prof. Victor Yaaya, Emmanuel Makoka and their team in Kisangani for their advice and active support with the *baleinière* census. Sincere thanks also go to Anandita Bajpai, as well as Adam Jones and the participants of his yearly workshop in Polenz, for their critical advice on the present piece.

15 Peter LAMBERTZ, *Longola Marche Arrière! Chinese Diesel Engines on Congo's Inland Waterways*, in: *Critical African Studies*, special issue: »Chinese Goods in Africa«, ed. by Guive KHAN-MOHAMMAD and Antoine KERNEN, 2021 (forthcoming).

16 Interview with rivercraft owner Constantin Mboliaka, Kinshasa, 17 September 2019.

*baleinières* made it possible to open new, unofficial berths, while serving periodic weekly markets, some of which had already existed in pre-colonial times<sup>17</sup>.

If in terms of building materials, navigational skill, and also the nomenclature of the vessel's body parts<sup>18</sup>, *baleinières* are in direct continuity with the millennia-old technology of the *bwátu* (canoe). Bureaucratically speaking, Congo's state agents do all they can to treat them as proper river craft (*maswâ*): they must carry a number of official documents<sup>19</sup>; they have to undergo technical inspections by the waterways commissioner (*commissaire fluvial*); the national migration agency (Direction Générale de la Migration, DGM) monitors their movements and registers the goods and passengers for each trip; their owners are required to pay official taxes; captains/conductors must hold a driving license; each journey has to be authorized through a written letter by the fluvial authorities; and they are expected to have both an officially enrolled and visible name, as well as their »home port« inscribed on their bow. Although this rule does not officially apply to »small vessels« (*menues embarcations*), the DRC's transnational Code de la Navigation Intérieure of 1999 emphasises that »The name of the home port or place of registration shall be inscribed on both sides of the vessel, or on its bow, and shall be followed by the letter or letters indicating the country where that home port or place of registration is located«<sup>20</sup>.

### Colonial ship names and their Zairianization

Just like cities, skyscrapers, and bridges, from the outset the Belgian colony would also celebrate its steamers, and later pushboats, as icons of progress and technological superiority. While various ships that served in the early phase of colonial exploration of the Congo Basin before and during the Congo Free State (1885–1908) had been given names that indicated the international context of colonial times<sup>21</sup>, many steamers were officially named after a Belgian city, following a more widespread naming pattern across 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe, and indicating a tendency toward onomastic internationalism.

The list of state-owned river craft used in the decades of the Belgian state colony after 1908 reveals that the pattern of naming ships after a Belgian city persisted through this period. Alternatively, as in the case of cities such as Léopoldville, Stanleyville, and Coquilhatville (the future Kinshasa, Kisangani, and Mbandaka), certain ships were named after an illustrious public figure linked to the oeuvre of colonization. This was especially the case for the larger courier

17 See Shingo TAKAMURA, Reorganizing the Distribution System in Post-Conflict Society. A Study on Orientale Province, the Democratic Republic of Congo, in: African study monographs, Supplementary issue 51 (2015), p. 77–91.

18 Like the locally omnipresent *bwátu* canoes, *baleinières* have a head (*mútu*), ribs/walls (*mipánzi*), a back (*mukóngo*), a belly (*libúmu*) – and »buttocks« (*masóko*), pointing to their feminine powers, which the male crew has to master.

19 The on-board documents any watercraft is supposed to carry when arriving in a port are: valid certificate of travelworthiness (*certificat de navigabilité*); driver's license for the helmsman, and duly completed service book for the other crew members; completed logbook; crew list (*rôle d'équipage*); registration certificate; *album de la navigation* (Congo River map); proof of insurance.

20 Art. 19, §2, translation by the author. See <https://www.cicos.int/wp-content/uploads/1-Code-de-navigation-int%c3%a9rieure-CEMACRDC.pdf>. The Code de la Navigation Intérieure was jointly ratified by the members of the Communauté Économique et Monétaire de l'Afrique Centrale (CEMAC) and the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1999.

21 For example, the missionary Grenfell's *Peace*, the *En Avant*, or the *Roi des Belges*, on which Joseph Conrad once travelled up the river. Other ship names of this period include the *Belgique*, the *Espérant*, Stanley's *AIA* (Association Internationale Africaine), the *Florida*, the *New York*, and the *Princesse Clémentine*.

boats such as the *Gouverneur Costermans* (later the *I. T. B. Colonel Kokolo*), or the *Baron Liebrechts*, which connected Léopoldville (Kinshasa) to Stanleyville (Kisangani, on the Congo River) and Port Francqui (Ilebo on the Kasai River).

Additionally, a naming system was introduced that served to indicate a vessel's working category and capacity (courier, tugboat, small tugboat, dredger, etc.) by the first letter of its name: ships of the category G, for instance, such as the *Gembloux*, the *Gent*, or the *Ganshoren*, were smaller courier boats for the Congo River's tributaries, while the initial letter E, as in the *Eupen* or the *Elsenborn*, indicated small tugboats of the »terminus« category, which could reach furthest upstream on shallow waters<sup>22</sup>.

In 1971, President Mobutu Sese Seko started his ambitious Zairianisation programme, aimed at »Africanizing« Zairian public life. Not just city names were changed but also those of the ships belonging to the national fleet. The abovementioned courier vessels *Gouverneur Costermans* and *Baron Liebrechts*, for instance, became the *I. T. B. Colonel Kokolo* (see above) and the *I. T. B. Colonel Ebeya*. The latter names were an euergetic tribute to Mobutu's favourite army chiefs. Other boats, such as the abovementioned *Gembloux*, *Gent*, and *Ganshoren*, became *Yangambi*, *Yanonge*, and *Yakusu*, while the shallow-water tugs *Eupen* and *Elsenborn* of the E-series became *Ezeze* and *Euli*, to name some exemplary cases. The attempt to decolonize did indeed »Africanize« these ships' names, but it stuck to the colonial letter-based norm of categorization and naming.

## Ville de Yalotcha

Although certain continuities from the colonial period persist, an analysis of the names of *baleinières* that moored in Kisangani during the months of October and November 2019 reveals also striking differences. While all *baleinières* claim to be of the outboard engine category (all carry the prefix »H. B.« for *Hors-Bord*), the vast majority of the 81 vessels that we identified carry names from the Biblical or the Christian religious spectrum. Examples include *H. B. Matthieu 7:7*, *H. B. Grâce à Dieu 02*, or *H. B. Koiya Kaka Yesu*<sup>23</sup>. The choice of personal and religious expressions over national symbols such as cities speaks for itself: Congolese tend to place more trust in their faith in God than in the verbose promises of modernization by the representatives of their nation-state. Protective or auspicious naming is a well-known constant in the history of naval onomastics, especially in Catholic contexts, where saints can be invoked as protective agents<sup>24</sup>. The Protestant/Pentecostal tendency to demonize protective charms as too

22 The following categories were common: *courriers* (courier boats, named after illustrious persons or Belgian place names with letter H), *remorqueurs de ligne* (line tugs: letter O), *remorqueurs de rade* (harbor tugs: letter M), *courriers d'affluent* (courier boats for tributaries: letter G), *remorqueurs d'affluent* (tugboats for tributaries: letter C), *petits remorqueurs d'affluent* (small tugs for tributaries: letter B), *remorqueurs type »terminus«* (»terminus« tugs for shallow waters: letter E). See André LEDERER, *L'exploitation des affluents du Zaïre et des ports de l'intérieur, 1960–1971*, Bruxelles 1973 (Académie Royale des Sciences d'Outre-Mer: Classe des Sciences Techniques, XVII-6), p. 119–129.

23 Koiya is the name of the owner's grand-mother. *Kaka Yesu* (only Jesus) is a locally well-known expression of faith in Eastern Congo, where it is remembered as the last words the Congolese Blessed Anuarite Nengepeta pronounced before she died as a martyr during the Simba Rebellion in 1964.

24 See Malcolm JONES, *The Names Given to Ships in Fourteenth- and Fifteenth-Century England*, in: *Nomina* 23 (2000), p. 23–36. An analysis of about 350 English ships' names from a listing made in 1338 shows the motivation behind naming to be overwhelmingly religious. See Malcolm JONES, *Ship Names*, in: Carole HOUGH (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Names and Naming*, Oxford 2016, p. 655–661.

material and therefore demonic<sup>25</sup> encourages boat owners to use portable spiritual protection only in its symbolic, written form<sup>26</sup>. Another discernible pattern is personal referencing, which either responds to an owner's personal motivation or experience (as in *H. B. La Patience*, because the construction process took so long), or his/her family (as in *H. B. Koïya kaka Yesu*, see note no. 23).

A very systematic pattern is the geographical referencing of the owner's home town or village, either in the *baleinière's* name itself, or as an inscription on both sides of the hull. This is done either by referring to one's religious home community (as in the *H. B. Assemblée Chrétienne de Binga*), or by calling one's *baleinière*, or its home port, »Ville de« + village name, as in the case of the *H. B. Super Ville de Bandu* (see Figure 1). This symbolic elevation of the insignificant village of Bandu<sup>27</sup> to the status of a city implicitly recycles the colonial and Zairian pattern of naming one's ship after a city. The same holds true for the abovementioned »Ville de Yalotcha«.

Such geographical referencing is more systematic when it comes to indicating the *baleinière's* place of registration or home port on the *baleinière's* hull. As indicated above, this is compulsory and is done in the same way by all *baleinières* alike. As in the case of Jeancy's *H. B. La Princesse*, whose home port is the »Ville de Yalotcha«, owners systematically choose their home town or village, or a riverine place they understand to be linked to the origins of their clan. Importantly, this locality is always preceded by the attribute »Ville de«, so as to symbolically upscale one's village to the status of a city, to whom the *baleinière* (and through it, its owner) becomes a translocal representative and ambassador. In many cases, the »home port« also indicates the *baleinière's* commercial destination, and that a new line (*ligne*) has been opened up that establishes a regular connection between the city of Kisangani and the »home port« village, where the *armateur* has the advantage of social capital.

## FC Barcelona

For many riverine localities, *baleinières* have thus become new lifelines, entailing social and economic *désenclavement* (opening up to the outside world). For the state and its bureaucracy, this entails new means of income, but also new governance challenges, as the population expects the authorities to ensure the safety of the vessel and its passengers. This is the reason why the *commissaire fluvial* of Isangi, at the confluence of the Congo and Lomami Rivers, launched a weekly radio program called *L'Écho de la Navigation* on the local Catholic radio station (RTBI: Radio Télévision Boboto d'Isangi)<sup>28</sup>, which he moderates, to raise awareness about the new challenges posed by *baleinières*. On 29 October 2017 I recorded the following anecdote:

25 Matthew ENGELKE, Material religion, in: Robert A. ORSI (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, Cambridge 2011 (Cambridge Companions to Religion), p. 209–229; Peter LAMBERTZ, *Seekers and Things. Spiritual Movements and Aesthetic Difference in Kinshasa*, New York, Oxford 2018. Birgit MEYER, *Translating the Devil. Religion and Modernity among the Ewe in Ghana*, Edinburgh 1999.

26 The use of protective magic as a risk-reducing device was first documented by Bronislaw Malinowski in his study of canoes on the Trobriand islands. See Bronislaw MALINOWSKI, *Coral Gardens and their Magic. A Study of Tilling the Soil and of Agricultural Rites in the Trobriand Islands*, New York 1935. It can also clearly be seen in the context of seafaring *pirogues* in Senegal and West-Africa more generally (personal observation, Dakar).

27 The village of Bandu is located approximately 5 km upstream of Lokutu on the *rive gauche*, about 190 km downstream of Kisangani.

28 *Boboto*: Lingala for tenderness, kindness, affectionate care, love. The concept is a keyword in Catholic liturgy.



»One of these days I was in the village of Yalikombo. One of our brothers there approached me, saying: »Ndeko (brother) commissioner, quite frequently here, at the place where the driver is sitting, instead of putting the national flag, they tie the flag of their favourite football team, for example Barcelona, Real [Madrid], Malekesa or Nika [from Kisangani], or T.P. Mazembe [from Lubumbashi]. They attach it to the place where the driver is sitting, i.e. behind, where the engine is located. They simply replace the flag of our country with this one. They could just add it as a second flag, at the front, but no, they replace the national flag. What do you think about this?«

I answered »Ndeko [Li.: brother], I know this problem you just told me about. I have, in fact, just arrested two shipowners because of it. And I punished them severely. I think that the law is clear about this: the place where the driver sits must be marked with the national flag.« Why is that? Because the driver is the commander. On the water, he is the representative of the Head of State. It's like in the case of a group leader, or another representative of the state: a commander's job is to serve and help (Li.: *kosunga*) his country. So the flag indicates that he is serving the country.

Why is that? He's the one responsible for all the activities that take place [aboard the *baleinière*]. So the place where he is sitting is not a playground (Li. *esika na lisano*). It's a place full of important responsibility which he bears for people's lives. It is therefore important that there cannot be any other flag where the driver or captain is.«

Just as in the case of the name Jeancy had chosen for his new *baleinière*, Congo's fluvial authorities endeavour to integrate *baleinières* and their personnel into the standards of the code of navigation, which requires any river craft larger than 30 meters to have a unique name, to indicate its home port, and to fly the national flag at its stern<sup>29</sup>.

### Bureaucratic mimicry

A number of scholars have attempted to untangle the complexities of mimetic performance and behaviour in African post-colonial settings, with diverging theoretical interpretations. These can roughly be classified into four non-exclusive tendencies: first, Clyde Mitchell and A. L. Epstein<sup>30</sup> of the Manchester school interpreted the emulation of »white cultural forms« by young African urbanites as a quest for status within their local vicinity, in which whites served as a reference group against which Black status was measured<sup>31</sup>. Secondly, Frantz Fanon<sup>32</sup> saw in mimetic emulation a process of unconscious aping, originating from a deeply rooted inferiority complex. Thirdly, Fritz Kramer's study of West African *colon* carvings depicting colonial policemen<sup>33</sup> ties in with Michael Taussig's<sup>34</sup> argument about the mimetic crafting of statues as an act of remote mastery by proxy. Taussig emphasizes the acquisition and securing of the craftsman's agency in the moment of materially externalizing, and externally materializing, poten-

29 Article 19 of the CEMAC/DRC Code de Navigation Intérieure, adopted in 1999 (as in n. 20), reads: »By day, all vessels, except small craft [*menues embarcations*: boats shorter than 30 meters], must carry the national flag at the stern.«

30 J. Clyde MITCHELL, Alfred L. EPSTEIN, Occupational Prestige and Social Status among Urban Africans in Northern Rhodesia, in: *Africa* 29, no. 1 (1959), p. 22–40.

31 See James G. FERGUSON, Of Mimicry and Membership. Africans and the »New World Society«, in: *Cultural Anthropology* 17, no. 4 (2002), p. 559–569, 552.

32 Frantz FANON, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Paris 1975.

33 Fritz W. KRAMER, *Der rote Fes – Über Besessenheit und Kunst in Afrika*, Frankfurt a. M. 1987.

34 Michael TAUSSIG, *Mimesis and Alterity. A Particular History of the Senses*, New York 1993.

tially overpowering models. Paul Stoller's<sup>35</sup> anthropological and Jean Rouch's<sup>36</sup> ethno-filmic engagement with the Hauka possessive cult in West Africa follow a similar line of interpretation. All lend powerful ethnographic proof to Homi Bhabha's influential argument that mimicry is a form of resistance to domination, an »ironic compromise«<sup>37</sup> with the goal of regaining and asserting power. Lastly, James Ferguson's<sup>38</sup> latest addition to the debate cuts across these three lines of argumentation, arguing that mimicry is also about the expression of a right to »membership in a new global society«, which is an upscaling of Henri Lefebvre's »right to the city«.

That bureaucracy can also give rise to mimetic practices has been pointed out by Jacques Bugnicourt<sup>39</sup>, who sees in the imitation of the institutions and administrative practices inherited from former colonial powers a major obstacle to development. Written in a period when modernization theory was paradigmatic, his Fanonian pessimism and reduction of bureaucratic mimesis to administrative inefficiency overlooks an important role that mimicry always also plays: namely, the inevitable, often complicated reconciliation of self and other in spaces that are charged with the memory of traumatic encounters. Anne Rademacher, in her study of river governance in Kathmandu<sup>40</sup>, attributes a much more positive role to bureaucratic mimicry, stressing its ability to empower grassroots actors to positively engage with the state instead of avoiding it. In agreement with Rademacher, I see bureaucratic mimicry as a way to positively engage with rules, the state and also its colonial past, in such a playful and creative way as to generate and safeguard the agency of those who, in this way, manage to evade the violence of being subordinated by a superimposed bureaucratic power.

I have examined a number of occurrences in which *baleinières* mimic the bureaucratic norms that govern them: naming a *baleinière* after Congo's largest river craft (the *I. T. B. Kokolo*); flying the flag of a football team instead of the national one; ascribing one's home village the status of »ville« to make it a »home port« and/or respond to inherited naming conventions. All of these instances creatively engage with bureaucratic requirements, while recycling and re-appropriating patterns of naval identification inherited from the (post-)colonial past<sup>41</sup>.

Homi Bhabha's insights into the psyche of post-colonial mimicry suggest that, for mimicry to work, it always needs to reveal and indicate its presence, if only in subtle ways. This is mostly done by maintaining an ambivalence between the model and its imitation, which is achieved by means of amplification, exaggeration, and subtle or sometimes flagrant over-intensification<sup>42</sup>. The upscaling of a village to the level of a city, as in »Ville de Yalotcha«, is in

35 Paul STOLLER, *Embodying Colonial Memories. Spirit Possession, Power and the Hauka in West Africa*, New York 1995.

36 Jean ROUCH, *Les maîtres fous*, ethnographic film, 36 min., 16 mm, colour film, France 1955; see also Kien LIM, *Of Mimicry and White Man. A Psychoanalysis of Jean Rouch's Les Maîtres Fous*, in: *Cultural Critique* 51 (2002), p. 40–73.

37 Homi BHABHA, *Of Mimicry and Man. The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse*, in: ID., *The Location of Culture*, London 1994, p. 86.

38 James G. FERGUSON, *Of Mimicry and Membership* (as in n. 31).

39 Jacques BUGNICOURT, *Le mimétisme administratif en Afrique. Obstacle majeur au développement*, in: *Revue française de science politique* 23, no. 6 (1973), p. 1239–1267.

40 Anne RADEMACHER, *Reigning the River. Urban Ecologies and Political Transformation in Kathmandu*, Durham, NC 2011.

41 Other striking examples of mimicry can be found at the level of ship design and decoration, which deserves an in-depth exploration in its own right.

42 Homi Bhabha writes: »[T]he discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference.« BHABHA, *Of Mimicry and Man* (as in n. 37), p. 86.

itself such an exaggeration. In the case of Bandu (see Figure 1), the *baleinière*'s name is not just »H. B. Ville de Bandu«, but »H. B. Super Ville de Bandu«.

Congo, and especially Kinshasa, are well-known hotspots of postcolonial mimicry and mockery, with overdressed members of the Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes (SAPE), regularly performing their fashionable amplifications of the colonial évolué dress code at public events across the city<sup>43</sup>. Those who have visited Kinshasa know that *sapeurs* and their *sapologie* are but the cherry on the icing, the tip of the iceberg of a magma of mimicry that governs the Kinshasa popular imagination. It is not surprising, therefore, that the bureaucratic mimicry performed by *baleinières*' and their names get gradually more mocking with travel downstream to Kinshasa. Here, the traveller can encounter *baleinières* with names such as the »H. B. Qui Vivra Verra« (those who live shall see) or »H. B. Petite ya Quartier« (after a small beer bottle popularly called »cutie from the hood«).

For the *baleinières* that circulate on the more remote waters around upstream Kisangani, however, the priority is to tackle remoteness by generating connectivity. The symbolic upscaling of one's home village coincides with its transformation into a new, portable, location, and into, quite literally, a »floating signifier« which pulls the stagnant universe of the village out into a world of connectivity. It is an ingenious attempt to alter the vantage point, and thus the *Tiefenschärfe* (depth of field) that qualifies one's existence. Because this witty game of scales is based on the mimicry of older conventions, it maintains an ambivalent distance between the suggestive and the real – making them »almost the same – but not quite«<sup>44</sup> – thus ludically bridging the gulf between the city and the village. The village thus becomes visible and present in the real city (Kisangani), with the *baleinière* both assuring and performing its connectivity. This tunes in with Ferguson's argument about mimicry as a means to generate membership in a larger, global society, in which the *baleinière* acts as the village's itinerant ambassador.

While the Pentecostal register invoked in many names can also be seen as a symbolic form of cosmopolitan insertion, the name of the *H. B. Ville Habitable* (inhabitable city) calls for special scrutiny (see Figure 2). By pointing to the fact that *baleinières* also serve as habitats for a crew that is persistently on the move, this name takes the city-boat connection even further. It is a celebration of the floating life aboard *baleinières* as something urban, and therefore disconnected from the coercive, and at times threatening, sociality of the village. Indeed, the *baleinière*'s particular form of work-related cohabitation and mobility produces particular forms of sociality, intimacy, and patterns of authority, which are reminiscent of the precarious yet hyper-creative and youth-driven setting of Congolese urbanity<sup>45</sup>.

## Conclusion

In distinction to buses, ships bear a unique, individual, and officially registered name. Studying naming practices around *baleinières* in the area of Kisangani has shown that their navigation takes place not only on the waterways of the Congo River and its tributaries, but on a grid of navigation standards and bureaucratic rules too. The latter include systems of ship identifica-

43 See Justin-Daniel GANDOULOU, *Au cœur de la Sape. Mœurs et aventures de Congolais à Paris*, Paris 1989; Daniel TÖDT, *Elitenbildung und Dekolonisierung. Die Évolués in Belgisch-Kongo 1944–1960*, Göttingen 2018. For similar developments in Abidjan, see Sasha NEWELL, *Brands as masks. Public Secrecy and the Counterfeit in Côte d'Ivoire*, in: *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19, no. 1 (2013), p. 138–154. For the évolués see also Kelma Manatouma's article in this volume (p. 505–513).

44 ВНАВНА, *Of Mimicry and Man* (as in n. 37), p. 86.

45 See Filip DE BOECK, Marie-Françoise PLISSART, *Kinshasa. Tales of the Invisible City*, Ghent, Amsterdam 2004.

tion, which are inherited from the times of Belgian colonialism and have given rise, over time, to local practical norms of naming. Thus contemporary naming practices for Congo's wooden *baleinières* show how legal standards are continually appropriated in a process of bureaucratic mimicry. This enables the owners and crew members of *baleinières* to positively engage with the state's rules and their colonial origins in creative rather than reluctant ways, safeguarding their agency and affirming their pride.





Figure 1: H. B. *Super Ville de Bandu*, Congo River, September 2019, photo by the author. Like Yalotcha, Bandu is not just the name of a small village on the Congo River. It is also the name of one of Congo's currently largest wooden *baleinières*, while simultaneously indicating its »home port«. For this purpose, the home village of the ship owner has been symbolically upscaled to a »ville« (city), inscribing it into a larger, and older, naval onomastic pattern, while mimicking a bureaucratic standard inherited from the colonial past.



Figure 2: The author aboard the H.B. *Ville Habitable* with the national flag of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Congo River, February 2015, photo by Steward Augustin Alembi.