

## Becoming a *Diplômé* in Kinshasa. Education at the Intersection of Politics and Urban Livelihoods

## Devenir un diplômé à Kinshasa. L'éducation à l'intersection de la politique et de l'économie urbaine

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### Résumé de l'article

Comme dans toutes les villes où le baccalauréat (ou son équivalent) est organisé par l'État, à Kinshasa la distinction sociale et les modalités de la vie urbaine sont intimement connectées. Néanmoins, malgré l'idée selon laquelle les diplômés maîtrisent des connaissances livresques, des changements récents dans la pratique de l'examen d'État à Kinshasa ont transformé la valeur sociale du diplômé. Aujourd'hui, un diplômé est plutôt considéré comme un « yankee », soit quelqu'un qui a fait l'école de la rue, qui se débrouille dans l'économie informelle et parfois aussi criminelle. Ainsi, l'étiquette de diplômé est devenue un signifiant inverse du signifié habituel. La société kinoise acclame publiquement le capital social et culturel associé au diplôme d'État ; toutefois, la plupart des diplômés récents ont réussi grâce à la fraude et à la tricherie organisée.

# Becoming a *Diplômé* in Kinshasa Education at the Intersection of Politics and Urban Livelihoods

Devenir un diplômé à Kinshasa  
L'éducation à l'intersection de la politique et de  
l'économie urbaine

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**ABSTRACT** ■ Like other cities around the globe where the state organizes exams, Kinshasa's *exétat* shows the degree to which social difference and urban livelihood are intimately connected. However, despite the assumption that *diplômés* master book knowledge, recent changes in the practice of the *exétat* have transformed the meaning of a *diplômé*, turning that figure into a *yankee*, i.e., someone who possesses street knowledge that comes from experience with the informal and the illegal. More abstractly, the identity of a *diplômé* has become a signifier for the opposite of its taken-for-granted signified. Kinshasa society publicly acclaims the social and cultural capital attached to school degrees; however, most recent *diplômés* have obtained their degree through bribes and organized cheating.

**RÉSUMÉ** ■ Comme dans toutes les villes où le baccalauréat (ou son équivalent) est organisé par l'État, à Kinshasa la distinction sociale et les modalités de la vie urbaine sont intimement connectées. Néanmoins, malgré l'idée selon laquelle les diplômés maîtrisent des connaissances livresques, des changements récents dans la pratique de l'examen d'État à Kinshasa ont transformé la valeur sociale du diplômé. Aujourd'hui, un diplômé est plutôt considéré comme un «yankee», soit quelqu'un qui a fait l'école de la rue, qui se débrouille dans l'économie informelle et parfois aussi criminelle. Ainsi, l'étiquette de diplômé est devenue un signifiant inverse du signifié habituel. La société kinoise acclame publiquement le capital social et culturel associé au diplôme d'État; toutefois, la plupart des diplômés récents ont réussi grâce à la fraude et à la tricherie organisée.

**KEYWORDS** ■ Diplômé, Kinshasa, social stratification, social distinction, urban life-ways.

**MOTS CLÉS** ■ Diplômé, Kinshasa, stratification sociale, distinction sociale, modes de vie urbains.

## Introduction

Mid-July 2014. At around 10 a.m., I was walking towards the market near Lemba's town hall (Lemba is one of the 24 municipalities of Kinshasa) when suddenly scores of boys and girls ran away from Lemba Super, a crowded roundabout surrounded by open-air bars, nightclubs, and shops. After a while, it transpired that policemen had been aggressively dispersing the more than one hundred boys and girls who had gathered on the roundabout and in the bars nearby since early that morning. The day before, Vodacom, one of the local cellular companies, had started to announce the results of some sections of the state exams (French *examen d'État, exétat*, or *D6 – diplôme de sixième*) via text messaging. The pupils of the *Mokengeli* secondary school, located about 50 meters from the roundabout, learned that fewer than half of its *finalistes* (final year's pupils) had succeeded. Frustrated because of the amount of money they had spent on fees (school fees can vary between 150 US \$ and 1000 US \$), the registration for the state exam (approximately 16 US \$ in 2014) and on various forms of corruption (see below) to ensure a good exam result, and disappointed that the *préfet* (director of the school) apparently had not been able to bribe the inspectors, groups of disappointed youth broke down one of the compound walls of the school. Doors, tables, and chairs inside the classrooms were destroyed as well. The *préfet* was hiding, and teachers did not dare show themselves during that week. During the following days, the mayor of Lemba ordered military surveillance for the school compound.

This incident, not an isolated case in the school's history or in Kinshasa's history of education, shows the frustrations and anxieties connected to state examinations. For many Kinshasans (inhabitants of Kinshasa), the *exétat* constitutes an evident challenge (*défi*) in the trajectory of becoming a successful and respected adult (*considéré*). The annual state exams can easily be considered as important moments of political and societal becoming for Kinshasa's youth<sup>1</sup> not unlike other types of rites of passage towards adulthood classically described in ethnographies of ethnic groups (Van Gennep 1909). Different times require different rites of passage. Organized by the postcolonial state, the state exams are moments when

the government blocks or opens up avenues for its youth. Thus, failure or success in these exams determines the possibility for a better future, influences relationships with relatives, friends, and strangers, and determines pride (Lingala *lupemba*) or shame (*soni*) for the individual and his surroundings.

The main argument of this article is that in order to deepen our knowledge about contemporary practices of social growth and mobility for youth in urban Africa – with their moments of distress and uncertainties, but also desire and joy, we need to take into account the space of formal education. In the Kinshasa context, just as in any other city around the globe where the state organizes exams, the *exétat* shows how social difference and urban livelihood are intimately connected. In contradiction with the abstract idea that the *exétat* produces a national cohort of Congolese *diplômés*, the *exétat* actually generates novel types of differences among its youth. As such, a differentiated image of Kinshasa's youth will emerge. Some succeed and become *diplômé*; others fail (*kobuka bic*, “to break the pen”) and struggle hard to enter into the competition the following year(s). Others have to postpone or even abandon their goal of becoming *diplômés* for economic reasons. However, and this may be peculiar to the Kinshasa context, becoming a *diplômé* in contemporary Kinshasa does not signify that one is smart or wise but rather sharp, cunning, and sly. These are qualities attributed to the streetwise individual who is able to negotiate his way up and is not afraid of using intimidation, fraud, and violence to achieve his goals (see also Petit and Mutambwa 2005). The following analysis will show that participation in the national tests is fully embedded within the socio-economic possibilities of pupils' families, exposing Kinshasa's teenagers to the ideal of the *yankee*, the urban savvy (Pype 2007), rather than preparing them for the life of an intellectual (*éduqué*). The *yankee* is constantly *na boule*, a slang idiom to indicate the plotting of schemes to find money. In contrast to book knowledge, *boulisme* is street knowledge that comes from experience in the informal and illegal. On a more abstract level, I argue that the identity of a *diplômé* has become a signifier for the opposite of its taken-for-granted signified. Kinshasa society publicly acclaims the social and cultural capital attached to school degrees; however, most recent *diplômés* have obtained their degree through bribes and organized cheating.

This article is thus embedded in anthropological analyses of the life-worlds of youth in urban Africa. Concurring with Hansen's (2008: 4) argument that “the combination of youth and the city enables us to analyze the double dynamic of freedom and constraints, inclusion and exclusion, that is at the heart of youths' urban experiences,” I attempt to highlight some dynamics of inclusion and exclusion by analyzing of the

social context of state examinations in contemporary Kinshasa. While Bourdieu's theories on education (1977, 1974, 1967), stratification, and social reproduction have inspired a vast body of scholarship on the cultural capital of schooling, anthropologists analyzing the lifeworlds of youth in African cities have rarely taken formal schooling as an entry point in the analysis of social dynamics on the continent. Instead, much recent research on youth in Africa focuses on children and youth in relation to other generations (e.g. Erdmute *et al.* 2008; Gomez-Perez and LeBlanc 2012), and often also on those *excluded* from schooling – for economic or political reasons, such as financial marginality, race, ethnicity, gender, war, and conflict (among others Cole 2010; Honwana and De Boeck 2005; Mains 2011; Weiss 2009). In the case of ethnographic research on the lifeworlds of children and youth who do spend time in school, the focus is placed on practices of meaning production in sites *outside* of the space of the school: the family, the compound, the street, the youth group, the church group etc. In all these writings, the school does not appear as a relevant space of belonging, subjectivity, and social meaning for the understanding of Africa's youth. However, schooling is a reality for most children in African urban centers. Also Kinshasa's children and youth generally spend long hours in schools and universities, and participate in social circles in and around school through which they enter into economic, emotional, and other relationships.

While the anthropology of education (Stambach and Ngwane 2011) has taken off, the main research foci are often on schools as ambiguous sites, as “colonial” and “modern institutions” producing “modern subjects” (Peterson 2011; Simpson 2003) but also as spaces for re-inventing “tradition” (Coe 2005); and as spaces for development and empowerment (Ngwane 2002; Stambach and Ngwane 2011). Recently, anthropological research has situated African schools in global and transnational networks (Peterson 2011; Simpson 2003; Stambach and Malekela 2006). Ethnographies of school cultures in African postcolonial societies remain rare, however. This article seeks to bring formal education back into the conversation about youth and urban livelihoods in Africa.

The data derive from ethnographic fieldwork in Kinshasa. Since 2003, when I started conducting research in the city, I have observed and participated in the preparation of friends' children for the state exams, in the celebrations afterward when the children succeeded, and in moments of consolation when *finalistes* had failed. During fieldwork, the compound where I usually stay when living in Kinshasa, has been the home of *maquisards*, students working in groups to prepare together (in *maquis*, seclusion) for the state exams. These observations have been complemented with informal interviews since 2003. More formal, semi-

structured, interviews were carried out in the summer of 2014: I had conversations with 32 *finalistes* of 2014 of whom 18 had failed and 14 had passed. I also met with inspectors who composed the exams, policemen who invigilate at the exam centers, people who smuggle answers into the exam rooms, and relatives of pupils.<sup>2</sup> I made inquiries through informal interviews with students' friends and relatives about their own experiences of preparing for state exams, so as to obtain greater historical perspective. All the names of my interlocutors have been changed for their protection.

The article is structured in the following way: I begin with an exploration into the ambiguities of formal schooling. It will become clear that the state degree is at once a much coveted document, though its efficiency for obtaining a good life in contemporary urban Africa is unclear for many, and not only in Kinshasa. In the second part of this article I attempt to describe the *exétat* as a social institution with personal and national meanings. This will be followed by an examination of the social consequences of failure and of the influence of the city's socio-economic stratification on the exam results. The final part is devoted to a description of the various corruption practices involved in the *exétat* in order to show how students, teachers, and school directors collude in cheating and fraud. When situating Kinshasa's educational system within the urban economy, it becomes clear that both students and school boards have everything to gain from there being a high number of *diplômés*.

### The Paradox of Formal Schooling in Urban Africa

Since my first visit to Kinshasa in 2003, young and old Kinois have been emphasizing the importance of succeeding in the state exam (*décrocher le diplôme d'État*). People would immediately add that failure seriously jeopardizes one's options for a good future. "Without the state degree, you cannot even think of going to university,"<sup>3</sup> some very ambitious pupils told me. Others, who were following vocational training, also argued that this degree would increase their chances of finding a job. "Even a garage owner or a factory prefers to recruit des diplômés [d'État] (people who have successfully passed the state exam)," they argued.

Yet, there is a paradox in Kinois society as regards the possible futures for Kinois youth. The economic crisis is deeply felt, and landing a good job is extremely difficult. This is not only hard for *diplômés* but also for people with academic degrees (*universitaires*). Still, obtaining the state degree remains of utmost importance both for the aspiring pupils and for their social environment. The paradox becomes even harder to understand if we take into account the breakdown of the educational system in

the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) at large, and the general perception that the quality of schooling has been in decline for a long time.

A lack of trust in education as the symbol of a better economic future has been observed in many African societies, where alternative figures of success such as “the sportsman,” “the musician,” “the trader,” “the religious actor,” “people from the diaspora,” and *débrouillards* (people who fend for themselves, often occupying the interstices of illegality and criminality),<sup>4</sup> have emerged since the 1980s-1990s (Banégas and Warnier 2001: 7, author’s translation). These have become more important than the *intellectuel*, the *évolué* and the *éduqué* who have been “archetypical figures” in many African societies from the end of the colonial era through the first decades of independence.<sup>5</sup> Until the late 1970s, as Banégas and Warnier explain, when many African states went into decline, and local economies began to crumble, the idea of becoming an intellectual with a degree appealed to youth because it brought recruitment to public administration almost automatically. This increased nepotism, clientelism and a patronage system where emphasis is placed on obligations, loyalty, and dependency (Nzongola-Ntalaja 1986; Schatzberg 1991). With the informalization of the economy (MacGaffey 1991), Zaire/Congo’s inhabitants learned how to play with the boundaries of the legal and illegal, and sometimes the illicit, in order to survive. This had devastating effects on the prospects for the young, on the perception of education, and on the performance of teachers and university professors. The necessity to fend for oneself became of utmost importance. Teachers and professors just like other *fonctionnaires* or state agents began engaging increasingly in illicit schemes.<sup>6</sup> According to Munikengi and Sangol (2004: 95), since the early 1980s, Kinshasa’s largest university, UNIKIN, could best be described as a “bargaining arena,” where students, teaching assistants, and professors juggle and negotiate financially in order to survive (professors and assistants), and to obtain their academic degree (students). As for secondary schools in the DRC, many scholars (De Herdt *et al.* 2008; Mrsic-Garac 2009; Titeca and De Herdt 2011) show that grades are bought; teachers engage in other activities on the side to complement their salaries, thus jeopardizing the quality of their teaching, and parents need to *motivate* children’s teachers. Refusing to do so usually leads to a guaranteed failure for their child. Various types of illicit and informal payments are now part of the day-to-day functioning of secondary schools.

Cole (2010) analyzing the lifeworlds of urban youth in Tamatave, Madagascar, indicates that young people aspiring to a “modern,” cosmopolitan, and youthful lifestyle characterized by fashionable dress and participation in the consumer world “make fun of schooling or of those

who invest too much time in schooling, even when they sometimes continue their own studies” (Cole 2010: 106). In Tamatave, youth who have gone to school are not respected, rather, “you are mocked because you have wasted both time and money,” said a teenager to Cole (*ibid.*: 107). By contrast, many Kinois youths are keen to say that they have attended school, and they mobilize school education in attempts to emancipate themselves from the grip of gerontocracy.<sup>7</sup> While the overwhelming majority of Kinshasa’s teenagers also agree that connections through relatives, neighbors or lovers are probably more helpful in securing a better future, many of Kinshasa’s *finalistes* invest a great deal of time and money in the preparations for the state exams. They are well aware of the fact that education does not necessarily lead to economic stability or social empowerment – yet, pride and a sense of obligation or duty towards relatives and the nation push them to mobilize various strategies to succeed, which vary from studying, taking extra classes, bribing supervisors, and looking for spiritual assistance from marabouts, pastors, prayer, and magic pens.

### The Congolese State and Its Youth

The *exétat* is probably the most feared type of examination a Congolese pupil or student can experience. Established in 1967, the state exam is a postcolonial invention. Following the French model of the *baccalauréat*, then-president Mobutu installed the system in order to put an end to rivalries between the Catholic and private school institutions.<sup>8</sup> Since then, every year, at the end of June, pupils who are finishing secondary school all over the national territory participate in the same exams.<sup>9</sup> All of Kinshasa’s teenagers are thus confronted with the social institution of the *exétat* – whether they find the funds to enroll or not.<sup>10</sup> In 2012, 64,817 were enrolled.<sup>11</sup> In 2014, 42,148 Kinois took the state exams. Participation is only allowed after the payment of a fee, which varies annually but hovers between 12,000 and 16,000 FC (approx. 15 to 18 US \$).<sup>12</sup> In its most restricted sense, the *exétat* refers to the series of tests that final year secondary school pupils in Kinshasa need to pass if they want to move on to higher education. The exams are a series of written and practical tests. Written multiple choice tests are usually taken in June. Vocational trainings such as hairdressing, mechanics, and electricity have practical tests around April or May. Around the same time, the *finalistes* write a dissertation, a two-page essay based on a proposed theme according to their section. The four-day session, also known as *E13* and held in June, is organized after the regular exams are taken at each individual school. In a broader, more social sense, the concept of *exétat* is a package word



that not only includes the actual examination but also contains the whole range of intellectual, spiritual, and financial preparation for participating in the tests, as well as public celebration or consolation after the results are published. The results are announced publicly by communicating lists of names with percentages in newspapers, on radio and television, and on the Internet. This public sharing of individuals' exam results suggests the collective interest in the academic performance of Congolese youth.

The state exam is, as the term conveys, an examination organized by the Congolese state. This suggests that participation in the *exétat* is a civic performance. Congolese nationals living abroad can, in the same way that other countries hold national elections for their expatriate citizens, participate abroad in the same exam sessions.<sup>13</sup> *Items* (questionnaires) are sent through embassies, and the names of expatriate Congolese *finalistes* are also publicly listed.

While Belgian colonialism has heavily influenced the culture of education in the DRC, the *exétat* is inspired by the French educational system. Most secondary schools use French as the language of instruction, though various recently established private schools allow their teachers to teach in Lingala. Pupils from the latter schools have complained that the questions on the *exétat* are in French, and that they are expected to formulate their answers in that same language.

During the four days of the *exétat*, all around the country, school compounds are transformed into exam centers where students of various schools congregate. These centers are heavily guarded by policemen and secret service agents, whose presence reminds the pupils that the *exétat* is a state-led practice. Any deviation from correct behavior during these moments can be considered a crime. Interviewees would often remind me that being caught for cribbing names on the body, or for having a mobile phone hidden in one's clothes, or for speaking to fellow pupils might lead to imprisonment – thus firmly embedding the state examinations within the state's governance (Foucault 1977).

Significantly, not only does the state stage the examinations as a spectacle, but many teenagers also approach the tests as moments when they can shine in a very literal way. It is often said that during the written exams, one needs to be dressed his best. This means: purchasing a new uniform (blue-white), new shoes (especially basketball/sneaker shoes for boys), and even wearing new underwear for the occasion. Boys also visit hairdressers in the week before the state exams. And many girls get their hair braided according to the latest fashion. This new apparel, which demands significant financial sacrifices, likewise manifests the social importance attributed to the state exams. Ambulant photographers dwelling around the exam centers are said to make much money during

these days. Most Kinois have pictures in their albums of themselves in their new uniforms at exam centers, next to pictures from occasions such as birthdays, baptisms, and wedding parties – thus materially and visually marking these exams as significant events in their life. The *exétat* thus becomes the zenith and endpoint of their identities as pupils.

The social institution of the *exétat* (like state exams in other countries) could be perceived as a rite of passage in that knowledge transfer, tests and sacrifice, change of identity, and temporary withdrawal from society and collective interest are its constitutive elements.<sup>14</sup> Alpha, who failed the exam sessions of 2014, argued that the *exétat* is at once a responsibility and a challenge. “*It is a challenge we need to succeed in. It is a personal test, which one has to take for oneself, and also for your parents.*” One of the successful boys told me that succeeding in the state exam “*was the best gift he ever gave to his parents*”; while Alpha declared that failing for the state exam had “*hurt his father more than the death of his own parents.*” When reflecting on the fact that in 2012 a large proportion of Congolese pupils had failed, Alpha argued that this was a “*deuil national*,” a national mourning. In recent years, the success rate for Kinshasa’s *finalistes* has seriously declined. When in 2011, 69% of Kinshasa’s *finalistes* succeeded, this number suddenly dropped in 2012 to 62%, with a further fall to 52% in 2013, and 58% in 2014. These numbers shocked many Kinois, who pointed to the youth’s lack of dedication and the urban culture of *ambiance*. Questions were raised about the future of the nation, thus transposing young people’s achievements to a wider, national scale.

### The Value of a *Diplômé*

Being successful in the *exétat* brings about a change of status in society: one transforms from a pupil into a *diplômé*, someone with a degree. For many Kinois, formal schooling is understood to be the basis of social success. Most female interviewees argued that not only did they prefer to marry a *diplômé*; but also that sharing a life with someone who has not obtained the state degree would be more difficult financially. “*Unless you are a talented sportif, or musician, or trader, then maybe you can succeed. But it is rare,*” mused Fabian when asking what options are available for people who never become a *diplômé*. Fabian’s words summed up the main new figures of success as described by Banégas and Warnier (2001; see above). Despite the fact that sportsmen, *commerçants*, and celebrities have become successful in the accumulation of wealth, enjoy international travel, and are able to gather a fan base, these professional milieus are plagued by their own stigmas, and most of my interlocutors assume that more durable and honest opportunities are available for *diplômés*.

Fears of pupils failing in the *exétat* because to witchcraft add another dimension to the social value of the *diplôme d'État*. Rumors about relatives sacrificing their nephew or niece's *diplôme*, or of classmates bewitching their colleagues so that they either have black-outs, fall ill during the exam, or run out of ink in their pens, indicate that the *diplôme d'État* has also currency in the spiritual world. The degree, as a marker of success, becomes a commodity that can be exchanged for success and other forms of social distinction.<sup>15</sup>

However, collective praise for the *diplômés* is perhaps most manifest in the public celebration after results are announced. Young and old gather on the streets and in bars to celebrate those who have successfully obtained their *diplôme d'État*. The first names of pupils as well as their percentages are marked on compound walls, as well as on the arms, legs, and clothes of the newly *diplômés*. People blow whistles, and throw white baby powder or manioc flour on one another to imitate the grey hair of the "wise elderly." In addition, the prime minister congratulates the *lauréats* (those with more than 90%) in his office, with wide media coverage. The names and faces of the city's brightest and most promising are thus presented to urban and national audiences. In previous years, the *lauréats* also received scholarships to study abroad, either from the state or from private enterprises (e.g. Vodacom in the early 2000s). Nowadays, with the economy in decline, this happens less and less.

The announcement of the exam results produces a huge amount of stress and anxiety for the *finalistes*. In that moment, possible futures for the youths are being defined: those who have succeeded can continue onto higher education, have better chances on the formal job market, and even better prospects for finding a good marriage partner. Both marriage and financial security are important markers of social adulthood. Those who have failed can either decide to start the whole process all over the following year – if they find the requisite funds – or they have to think about other futures. Some of those who fail travel to Angola or Congo-Brazzaville; others go back to the village, or delve into the informal economy where many have worked during their schooling.

According to local media reports (Radio Okapi 2013), 58% of Kinshasa's final year pupils succeeded in the state exams in 2014. This meant an increase with 4% compared with 2013. However, 42% of the city's *finalistes* had failed. Failure on the state exam often also means personal drama. This was most poignantly expressed in my first encounter with Grace, whom I met three weeks after she had learned that she had failed her state exam in the needlework section. To express her disappointment, Grace had shaved her hair; a drastic act in a society where female beauty depends on grooming the hair, experimenting with Brazilian or Indian

hair extensions, and adorning plaited hair with beads. It is also a sign of mourning.

Grace was living in her maternal uncle's compound, where she has been staying since her father had set up a household elsewhere in the city. Her mother, a psychiatric patient, often spends weeks in a medical facility – thus leaving Grace's maternal uncle to be her main guardian. It was one of the first days that Grace had started eating and drinking again, she said. Fasting out of disappointment was a frequent occurrence in the narratives I collected in the immediate aftermath of the public announcement of the exam results. The *malheureux* would lose all appetite, lock themselves in the house, and cry for days on end.

Grace's radical act to transform her appearance reflects in an embodied way the "urban wounds" (Schneider and Susser 2003) of life in an African city. Kinshasa society has been wounded by decades of economic crises, political instability, corrupt government, and the consequences of an uneven, capitalist globalization. As Hansen (2008: 120) describes in general for cities in the South, "urban wounds" also refers to the fact that collective well-being in cities in the South is not self-evident, but rather needs to be negotiated. Failing in the state exam leaves deep wounds on Kinshasa's youth. Failed *finalistes* mentioned experiencing a deep sense of humiliation and disappointment. Although suicide is very rarely spoken about in public spaces, it is a recurrent topic in the aftermath of the publication of the results of the *exétat*. Yet, Hansen (*ibid.*: 15) also points to the productive vision of the concept of "urban wounds": healing is possible. Just like Grace's hair will grow again, recovery will happen as well. Grace did not have any suicidal thoughts, and already early August she had started reading her notes in order to prepare herself for another attempt the following school year.

Grace's story brings in notions of shame (*soni*) and exclusion. As in the classical analysis of rites of passage, the *exétat* brings about a new identity for those who have successfully finished the tests. Grace complained that her friends had abandoned her. None of the 7 other girls that she had hosted in her uncle's house during the weeks before the state exams had called her or visited her since she had learned of her failure. Grace was certainly not the only one of my interviewees who suddenly felt abandoned by fellow pupils, with whom she had been sharing food, clothes, beds, dreams, and fears a few weeks before. Many other *malheureux* also felt as if they had lost their friends. Except for getting together with a few friends living in the same street, or with members of one's extended family, it seems impossible for those who have succeeded to maintain close ties with those who have failed. While obviously this sudden rupture is difficult to actualize on a daily basis in an urban context, as people run

into one another in the street, at parties, or in shops, and social networks overlap; nevertheless the fact of having passed or not sets up a social and symbolic distance among the young. The breach – experienced by some as abrupt, harsh, and troubling – goes with the transition that the *diplôme d'État* signifies. A successful pupil moves from being a *bleu-blanc*, as pupils are popularly called after the colors of the school uniform, to a *diplômé*, who has progressed towards new routes for the future: he or she might either go to university or start working somewhere. Both successful *finalistes* and *malheureux* stressed that ‘*diplômés* and *bleu-blancs* do not hang out together.’ Even when they attend the same church or écurie with students with whom they attended classes the year before, the primary circle of friends and conversation partners will have changed, thus reflecting the immediate performative power of the *diplôme d'État* in the lifeworld of Kinshasa’s youth. The institution of the *exétat* shapes urban sociality by installing new boundaries and hierarchies.

### **Exétat and Social Stratification**

While Grace decided to retake the state exam, she was still indecisive about whether she would attend classes in the same institution as she had the year before. Usually, failed pupils do not return to the same school for various reasons. First, her previous school obviously did not prepare her that well. Thus a better strategy would be to enroll in another institution with a higher success rate for the state exams; second, given the rivalry and competition between 5<sup>th</sup> graders (*les petits*) and 6<sup>th</sup> graders (*les grands*), most pupils dread sharing the same class or year with those who they have taunted the year before. Third, most *malheureux* decide to redo their final year in another institution for financial reasons. They might have a debt at their previous institution, and enrolling in a new school would enable them to avoid paying these debts. Such calculations suggest that Kinshasa’s pupils must negotiate money and esteem in their search for a future as a *diplômé*.

The following part of my analysis will zoom in on the interlinkages between the urban economy and education, as social difference is not only an outcome of the *exétat*, rather social stratification also shapes the possibility of success or failure (see Bourdieu 1974). Apart from gender, religion, and ethnic background, economic resources splinter the idea of “Kinshasa’s youth.” The city itself is divided into more residential, posh areas, occupied by contemporary elite and expats (Gombe, Ngaliema, Limete); and poorer areas. Differences in economic capacities translate to children’s school attendance and performance rates. Just as in many other parts of the world, the educational system in Kinshasa is not only

embedded within socio-political stratification, it also contributes to the reproduction of social distinction. Kinshasa's economy, dominated by an informal economy in which youth and children are important players (De Boeck 2005; McGaffey 1991), influences a teenager's chances of succeeding in the state exam. Children from well-off families obtain better results. "They speak French at home; their parents make them do their homework; and they go to class everyday," said Fiston, a thirty-year old with a university degree in political science but living on *coops* (indicating a lucrative deal usually with criminal connotations, Nzeza 2004: 34-35).

Many teenagers in Kinshasa must bring money home by either selling commodities on the streets or engaging in criminal or semi-legal activities. These pursuits keep them away from class. Sometimes pupils need to find the money for the school fees themselves. All these obligations lure teenagers into the streets, on the markets, or into the city's nightlife, as there are immediate economic possibilities at hand there.

Trésor's narrative illustrates the distress that teenagers in Kinshasa encounter due to socio-economic stratification. Trésor, a young man in his early twenties, could finally celebrate in July 2014. Five years before, when he was a 6<sup>th</sup> grader, Trésor's mother suddenly died. With her passing, Trésor was sent to live with his old grandmother, who herself relied on money coming in from her children living outside of Kinshasa. Some of them lived abroad, but they hardly sent any remittances. That same year, Trésor could not pay the necessary fees to enroll in the state exam and felt he needed to help his grandmother financially rather than being a burden. He negotiated a spot on a market in Lemba, one of Kinshasa's communities, where he was allowed to set up a public phone boot using his own mobile phone, a modest Nokia 33. Trésor aspired to earn enough money to be able to enroll in the state exam the following year. He did, but, unfortunately, he failed. Trésor became dispirited and even thought of killing himself. He abandoned the idea of becoming a *diplômé*, as participating in the *exétat* had cost him more than 230 US \$ (all fees and bribes included). Two years ago, he was finally able to save enough money again, but failed again because he fell ill during one of the exam days, which his friends and grandmother suspected to be due to witchcraft. Following their advice, Trésor joined a Pentecostal church. One of the women in church visited Trésor on the market. She not only encouraged him not to give up his hopes of passing the state exam, but, when the time came for the *finalistes* to register for the state exam, she gave him the money he needed. With her donation, Trésor was able to buy time off from his work on the market, and join a *maquis* group.<sup>16</sup>

Besides being a kind of contemporary Cinderella story, Trésor's experience shows how the uncertainties of life in an African city disrupt one's

opportunities for a better life. Trésor's sudden shift from being comfortable to living in precarity, the importance of a support group outside of the family sphere, and his chance encounter with a wealthier "stranger" allowed Trésor's ascent to a new, valued identity: that of the *diplômé*. The next section will delve deeper into the kinds of negotiations that Trésor and other *finalistes* must perform once inside the exam rooms.

### Corruption in the State Exams: Initiation into the Economy

Following the widespread practice of "buying a bulletin," many failed youth, who cannot afford to lose a year by sitting in class, just take a short cut by purchasing school reports and participating in the bribery of the *exéat*.<sup>17</sup> Bijou, a teenager who became a *diplômé* in 2014 with a score of 78%, was acutely aware that being intelligent (*kozala na mayele*) was not a determining factor in succeeding, but that having money was (*kozala na mbongo*). So,

*[e]very morning, I brought 5,000 FC [about 6 US \$] with me. You never know who you might have to corrupt. The supervisor, for sure. We usually had to pay 2,000 FC [approximately 2,5 US \$] each. But then, a police officer can pick you out of the crowd before you enter the exam room. You might give him another 3,000 FC to allow you to bring your mobile phone inside.*

Once in the exam room, pupils take on a decorum of discipline and industry by reading the exam questions and trying to figure out the right answers. However, they all wait to actually tick the boxes (as the exams in June are multiple choice questions) until "*leaks (bafuite) come in.*" "Leaks" refer not so much to the questions but to the circulation of answers. As soon as the leaks have arrived (*bafuite ekoti*), pupils check whether the answers are correct; because "*one should never totally trust the leaks.*"

Most pupils rely on the "*cheftaine*" or the "*chef*," class leaders who have been selected at the beginning of the school year by their classmates because of their audacity and networking skills. From September onwards, classmates collect money with which the *chef* pays teachers to give extra classes, assists the *préfet*, who also asks for money to bribe the inspectors, and hires the best available "*mercenaires*" and "*transporteurs*." The latter are two categories of adults, all *diplômés* themselves, who gain access to the questionnaires and smuggle the answers in the exam centers. *Transporteurs* sit in a *laboratoire* close by the exam room – often in a school nearby. As soon as the *items* (exam series) are distributed, the *chef* brings a copy of these questions to the toilet, where it will be picked up by a *transporteur*. In the *laboratoire*, some *transporteurs* will be doctoring

the answers, during which time the *finalistes* negotiate with the supervisor to be allowed to speak and walk around once the *leaks have entered*. Some of the *transporteurs* scribble the answers (e.g. 1.A; 2.A; 3.C; etc.) on the inside of a matchbox and drop this in the toilets; others communicate via mobile phones (which are hidden in the pupils' underwear). It is the *chefs*' task to leave the classroom and go into the toilet to quickly copy the answers (e.g. 1.A; 2.C; 3.A; etc.) on a few pieces of paper, which are then circulated in the exam room. In recent years, *chefs* and *cheftaines* have begun buying cheap mobile phones and SIM-cards that are disposed of once the *exétat* is finished. Usually things go well, and the *finalistes* succeed. In a few instances, the answers arrive either too late or not at all, thus seriously jeopardizing the class's chances of passing. *Mercenaires*<sup>18</sup> are older youth, male and female, and most often teachers in their twenties, wear a blue white uniform (paid for by the pupils hiring their service), enter with a fake ID card, complete the exam forms and share the right responses. The names of these *mercenaires* and *transporteurs* travel among the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders, who are very secretive about their identities.<sup>19</sup> In most instances, the pupils do not know these cheats' real names either. Both pupils and generations of *diplômés* protect the *mercenaires* and *transporteurs*, who are mostly known by dramatic pseudonyms with an Angolan flavour (Don Marco, Don Ricardo, etc.).

While some *mercenaires* might have been hired by the *préfet* himself, other *mercenaires* are contacted without the school board's knowledge. Headmasters of private schools are known to either appoint the *mercenaires* themselves or help the *transporteurs* by allowing them a space in which to work out the questions. Their goal is to have a maximum number of pupils succeeding as this is the best marketing strategy for their school.<sup>20</sup> Here it is important to mention that the above-mentioned practices of corruption are strongly condemned by Catholic Church-run schools. However, the Catholic school directors do not fully control the practices of their pupils, and interviewees confirmed that these pupils too take risks, albeit in a less overt form.

A whole economy has emerged around this type of exam fraud, which is mainly defined by my interlocutors as *corruption*. *La corruption* in the context of the *exétat* thus involves various practices, ranging from communicating questions and answers to others, cheating, bribing supervisors, to outsiders dressed up as pupils completing the questionnaires. *Mercenaires* and *transporteurs* usually require 500 US \$ for their work, as they are taking serious risks. Being caught means being sent to prison; the whole class also fails.

The corruption performed during the *exétat* is embedded within the informal economy, which thrives in Congolese cities. Corruption is one



of the major characteristics of urban life in DR Congo, and a whole vocabulary has developed illustrating the importance of knowing how, who, and when to corrupt. Transparency International, the global coalition against corruption, which produces an annual index of the degree of corruption around the world, placed DR Congo in 2014 at number 154 out of 179 countries.<sup>21</sup>

For the *mercenaires* and *transporteurs*, June is a month of *coops*. As Petit and Mutambwa (2005: 481) have indicated for the urban economy in Lubumbashi, much fraud against the state is explained by the state's alienation: "the state appears as estranged from its citizens with whom it does not share, and so one can profit from it without compunction." This should not be understood as acts of resistance but "as performative statements legitimizing one's behaviour, not as political critiques issued by a 'civil society' resisting the regime's domination." While this fraud is to a great extent the outcome of the Congolese state's inefficiency in the education sector (Titeca and De Herdt 2011),<sup>22</sup> I also argue that we should relate these practices to the modalities of urban life in a precarious society. In Kinshasa, the concepts of *yuma* and *yankee* suggest the two opposite ideal types of city dwellers: *bayuma* do not possess the necessary skills and strategies to survive in African cities; while *bayankees* are streetwise, cunning, and dare to transgress social and moral codes to obtain money, a partner, or success (Pype 2007).<sup>23</sup> Kinshasa's school directors, teachers, and pupils participate in this urban economy where one has to fend for oneself, where engaging in criminal behavior is not publicly condoned yet is embedded in the urban ideal of "the little man who manages to beat the system" (Petit and Mutambwa 2005: 481). *Transporteurs* and *mercenaires* are probably the toughest *yankees* of the social configuration that makes the *exétat* happen. School directors and teachers also constitute a particular type of *yankee*: the *bakuluna ya cravate*, "white collar criminals" (literally "violent street boys wearing a tie"). This subcategory of *yankee* refers to state agents and politicians, who in the moral scheme of urban life are engaging in similar transgressive and immoral behavior to street boys but occupy high positions in society. The classroom temporarily transforms into a political space, where active Congolese citizenship is performed, but simultaneously becomes a locus of perversion of the "public good" and the future of the nation-state. While the ideal of the intellectual committed to national progress and pride is maintained through the wearing of uniforms, the presence of state agents, and the appearance of supervision, the classroom resembles the moral economy of the street, which opposes "all hegemonic projects of the state" (Biaya 2000: 15, author's translation) where *finalistes* need to perform their negotiating skills with the supervisor, who needs to be bribed in

order to allow the pupils to speak with one another, to walk around, and to sit together and help one another.

Given the high degree of corruption in the pupils' preparations for these state exams, one could argue that the state exam deeply initiates Congolese youth into the culture of corruption. The combination of the social significance of the *exétat* and bribery orient the *finalistes* to socially permitted strategies of getting by, even within the space of the state. As a consequence, this economy of corruption has transformed the meaning of a *diplômé*. While it indicates an individual who has successfully passed secondary school state examinations, it does not necessarily entail that this individual possesses the knowledge and skills stipulated in the reports of the Ministry of Education; Instead, nowadays, one agrees that recent *diplômés* have been so cunning and skillful in bribing the supervisors and deceiving state agents that they have not been caught. Thus Kinshasa's recent *diplômés* are far removed from the *intellectuel*, but are closer to *yankees* who "prosper in the interstices of the economic crisis and illegality" (Banégas and Warnier 2001: 8, author's translation), while participating in a "genuine moral economy of list, lifting scamming to a way of life" (*ibid.*: 12, author's translation). The vocabulary of the classic success figure, the *intellectuel*, has endured, although the practices of becoming that ideal have been perverted, even subverted.

### The Chance of a *Diplômé*

It is only at the moment when one's name is published in the newspapers, or when Vodacom sends a text message with one's exam results, that Kinshasa's *finalistes* know that they have become *diplômés*. Up until that moment, they are consumed by uncertainty. Failure can be due to numerous causes beyond the pupil's control: one's results can be mixed up with those of someone else; one's exam documents can have fallen out of the stack at various moments; the relationship between the *préfet* and the inspector can have turned sour, thus leaving the inspector unmotivated to change the end results of one's school; etc. Such excuses were mentioned by *malheureux* who tried to justify why their names had not appeared in the public listings of the *diplômés*. None accused themselves of not having studied enough. Rather, time and again, *chance* was indicated as the major force behind one's results. *Chance* can be lent a hand: God can increase one's chances that one's paper does *not* fall out of the stack; that the supervisor is willing to be bribed; that the leaks provide the right answers. Therefore, pupils pray to their god, consult *pastors* and *marabouts* in the weeks before the exams, and have recourse to magical pens, which have been infused with invisible powers.

*Chance* – a feature of economic and social precariousness – is an important element to manipulate in the context of the *exétat* because the meaning and significance of the *diplôme d'État* transcend the individual's identity. Youth are closely interlinked with others, in the first instance their guardians, who have often paid enormous amounts of money for their children to have the opportunity of participating in the *exétat*, but also with the whole nation. These exams thus touch the whole social fabric, from the family to the city, to the whole Congolese nation. Through the various activities that surround the *exétat*, Kinshasa's society significantly invests in the future of its youth. These investments are financial (as in helping the youth to pay the bribes, school fees, and fees to take part in the exams), spiritual (as in organizing prayer wakes), and emotional (comforting, and the psychological help previous generations and relatives offer). This is an important story to tell, as it counters the detrimental narratives about abandoned youth, or youth without any hope. Kinshasa's society as a whole expects much of its youth, and parents, guardians, and even strangers – as in Trésor's case of – all attempt to contribute to its success in order for the nation to prosper and envisage viable futures.

This analysis has thus brought together different kinds of statuses (*finaliste, diplômé, malheureux*) and forms of sociality generated by the ritual of the state exam; it has examined the ambiguities of various social groups, including the state, when corruption is brought into the narrative; and attention has been drawn to the unpredictable futures of *diplômé* and non-*diplômé* in light of the shifting possibilities offered by failing and corrupt economies. Further, it must be emphasized that youth trajectories mirror the work of social reproduction by society and the state, as well as its own strengths and weaknesses: success is celebrated by all and failure is socially sanctioned, while the idea that a pool of intellectuals is required to make things work continues to be articulated.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, what does this mean for the political subjectivities of these *diplômés*? The social configuration that emerges around the *exétat* is not opposed to the state or the idea of the nation. As I mentioned previously, most *finalistes* perceived that the *exétat* is a duty to the nation-state, a patriotic act, which requires the participation of all citizens. What happens during the corruption in the exam room is the effective mobilization of the representational space made available by the state to obtain the identity of a "good citizen," to be recognized as having value for society. The symbolic capital acquired in becoming a *diplômé* remains intact for the youth; however, it becomes more and more contested by parents and in the media.

The tragedy of the *exétat* starts of course when the party has ended and the young *diplômés* need to enroll in university or find a job. Here,

further difficulties of collecting funds emerge. On the other hand, these state exams have initiated the pupils into the practices of corruption and bribing; they have thus gained some experience in the corruptibility of the state and teachers, two figures of authority (the one more abstract than the other) who are supposed to steer the exams in the right direction. For many *finalistes*, the *exétat* is a deep initiation into the culture of fraud and corruption.

## Notes

1. I am using the concept “youth” here in its social sense, referring to people who have not yet achieved social adulthood. In Kinshasa, social adulthood is mainly reached upon marriage. The semantic field of children and youth in Lingala is complex (including *bana* – children; *petits* – ‘small ones’; *jeunes* – people who display a youthful lifestyle; *bolenge* – male adolescence) and falls beyond the scope of this article. See De Boeck (2005, 2004) and Pype (2012: 197-231) for a discussion of societal changes in Kinshasa society regarding approaches towards childhood and youth.
2. Most interviews were semi-structured and contained open-ended thematic questions concentrated on personal schooling biographies, economic possibilities, housing conditions (including the responsibilities in the household), friendship circles, religious networks, and aspirations for the future.
3. Kinshasa’s toddlers are socialized in the importance of an academic degree by participating in end of year parties at the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year of kindergarten, where they are dressed up in a blue white toga with a square academic cap in the same colors.
4. A rich vocabulary of vernacular *débrouillard* types has developed in African cities: e.g. *feyman* (“fake person,” cheat, in particular in a Cameroonian context) or the *tcheb-tchab* (a person who fends for oneself, especially in the Mauritanian context) (see Banégas and Warnier 2001: 7); but also the *yankee* in Kinshasa (De Boeck 1998) or the *yere* in Abidjan (Newell 2012).
5. The three figures of success, the *éduqué*, the *évolué* and the *intellectuel*, have their own genealogies in various African countries.
6. I wish to thank one of the reviewers to draw my attention to this important point.
7. As I describe elsewhere (Pype 2012: 205), many youth claim to possess “other” or “modern knowledge” (*mayele ya sika*, “new knowledge”), derived from Western institutions and acquired through schooling and electronic media (such as the Internet and television). This gives them the right to speak.
8. In 1966, the Congolese government began the “examination of maturity” which nowadays is not carried out anymore. Successful teenagers would receive a fellowship to study at the university (Sabakinu 2012: 19). The dissertation, one of the various tests of the contemporary *exétat*, has taken over the role of the “examination of maturity.”
9. A historical analysis of the state examinations is in order to understand the various meanings that the state degree has achieved throughout the postcolonial era, though this falls beyond the scope of this article.
10. It is unclear how many inhabitants exactly live in Kinshasa. The results of the national census taken in 2006 have never been published. Commonly, people agree that nowadays there must be about eleven million inhabitants.

11. As announced on the website of the Ministry of Primary, Secondary and Vocational Education: <http://www.eduquepsp.cd/Actualit%C3%A9s/annonce-de-la-publication-des-resultats-de-lexetat-pour-la-ville-de-kinshasa-scene-de-liesse-et-grincement-des-dents-parmi-les-finalistes.html> [accessed 8 March 2015].
12. These fares are valid for Kinshasa. It is highly plausible that there is regional variation.
13. More research is needed on the diaspora's participation in the state exams. An agent of the Ministry of Primary, Secondary and Vocational Education indicated that most *finalistes* taking part in the *exétat* abroad are residing on the African continent.
14. Most Kinois *finalistes* withdraw with classmates to a house in the vicinity of the exam center during the weeks before the state exams in June. This withdrawal, commonly called *maquis*, is the topic of another article (Pype, in preparation).
15. Lewandowski (2007: 107) describes a similar role of the *baccalauréat* among Gurmantche in Burkina Faso.
16. "Maquis" refers here to a group of *finalistes* who share a room or a house in the weeks before the state exams in June. There is a strong militaristic vocabulary in the language about the *exétat*, which derives from the late colonial-early postcolonial masculine youth culture in Kinshasa, where westerns and war films dominated youth subjectivities (Gondola 2013).
17. The practice of skipping a school year or more to end up with an *E13* and the state degree is called *pont aérien* (air bridge).
18. Here again, we encounter militaristic language.
19. It was difficult to find *mercenaires* who agreed to be interviewed. After weeks of trying, I met with 5 *mercenaires*. These interviews were organized by intermediaries, who set up meetings in the locations chosen by the *mercenaires*. They also refused to disclose their real names or phone numbers, and some refused to give their personal details to the brokers.
20. School directors hire brass bands to walk around the city announcing the high success rate of their *finalistes*. Others order banners that are hung at the most important intersections of town. These marks are the best arguments in the competitive education market in Kinshasa.
21. See [transparency.org](http://transparency.org) [accessed 21 October 2015].
22. Titeca and De Herdt (2011: 224) rightfully describe that "inspectors lack the financial resources to visit schools and educational authorities lack the coercive means to implement their measures."
23. The opposition of *yuma* and *yankee* is very close to the *gaou* and *yere* inhabiting Abidjan's moral economy (Newell 2012).
24. I thank one of the reviewers for pointing my attention to this final point.

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