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**Negotiating Public Services in the Congo**

State, Society and Governance

Edited by Tom De Herdt and Kristof Titeca

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“Mboka Ebebi”: State absences

In Kinshasa, “Mboka ebebi” (“the country is spoiled” in Lingala) is often heard among Congolese of all social backgrounds - the low-level civil servant, the well-heeled businessman, the taxi driver, the local barber, the marginalized widow, the middle-class lawyer, the politician, the military officer. As they go about their daily life, most refer to the Congolese state’s many ailments; from inefficient bureaucratic services to routinized corruption and rampant insecurity. Sharing a morning tea in a blue plastic cup with fellow street-level bureaucrats at the district office’s malewa, state officials and ordinary citizens alike criticize state governance, waving their arms in protest. “Ah! If only the state provided us with the resources to work!” an old civil servant awaiting retirement lamented to me. Acute poverty and material scarcity are striking in the poorest districts of Goma, Kinshasa and Lubumbashi, where I conducted fieldwork for seven months. A few newly built or remodelled high-level political offices may catch the eye, mainly in Kinshasa, where the government has indeed sought to “rewrite the mythologies of power” (Mbembe, 2001, p. 108). By contrast, the sites of “lower politics” (Bayart, Mbembe & Toulour, 2008) and the realms of interpersonal relations often display the signs of decades of government neglect, societal conflict and war. That is to say, whether in streets, homes, local markets, malewa, police posts or local state offices, services and infrastructure such as street lights, tarred roads, efficient sewage systems, and trash collection are all absent. In addition, the absence of digital and electronic technologies, appropriate furniture, and basic office stationery in most administrative offices often convey a sense of abandonment. Sometimes seemingly frozen in their old colonial guise, some present the image of “the ruins of modernity” (Hell & Schönle, 2010). Decaying infrastructure and
equipment are not the only instances of state absences. Illustrating the discrepancies between the neat image and messy practices of the state, Congolese state agents seem at a loss for meaningful professional activity adhering to a coherent, legal-rational apparatus of formal state authority. On a quest to probe public service provision in the Congo, the casual observer would indeed remark that many spend their time negotiating unofficial “motivation fees”, sit idle on plastic chairs, rest at their desk, or watch local TV programs. To those forced to navigate the Congolese state, the prevalence of informal activities renders attempts to make an appointment, see the right official, fill out paperwork, or pay a bill, an endless stream of improvised complications.

Well acquainted to the rhythm of these absences, city residents for their part lament the gigantic potholes everywhere in sight or recurrent issues of délestage, while grabbing an evening beer with neighbours and friends in a dimly-lit nganda:

It is true our government doesn’t do good governance, especially among the political elite. Because it’s high politics, we cannot change this at our local level. Our chief, President Kabila, doesn’t do anything. When we tell him we suffer, he says we’re lying. Here, everyone is unemployed.

These words are a local rendition of a broader political narrative typically encapsulated in the diagnostic discourses of state weakness, defined mainly by the characteristics of “poor governance” (see De Herdt & Titeca, this volume). Evidently, Congo’s colonial and postcolonial history is fraught with extreme violence and protracted crises. The past three years have only buttressed this image as renewed state-sanctioned violence accompanying the unfolding electoral crisis has once again cast a menacing shadow over the last decade’s timid successes in establishing both a fragile peace and institutional reforms. Poor governance in the Congo, considered typical of many African states, prompted policy and academic circles alike to craft political remedies. Forming the building block of “negative interpretations” (Mbembe, 2001, p. 1) of African social organization, the absence of material infrastructure, modernized bureaucratic practices and economic integration in increasingly globalized market forces, act as blinding glares within international political inquiry. They do so by obscuring the complexity of myriad state-society relationships that continue to generate the (global) image of the state (Schlichte, 2005) and to enact what is seen as its key prerogatives.

Although this chapter concurs that many of sub-Saharan Africa’s ailments might be grounded in “poor governance”, it moves away from a normative and prescriptive agenda that still sees the post-colonial African state as a weaker or failing version of its presumably better Western counterpart (Perazzo, forthcoming).

In an attempt to “pay due attention to the observed heterogeneity in real governance and its modernity” (De Herdt & Olivier de Sardan, 2015, p. 4), this text argues the (colonially inflicted) Congolese state is revived and consolidated through daily processes of collective “meaning-making” and “socio-material practices” that cut-across upward institutionalization and states’ traditional areas of governmentality such as health care, education, democratic rights and land tenure. The study of the state I present below thus draws from my analytical and methodological “localizing” of its heterogeneous dynamics. First, using ethnographic tools, I localized the various manifestations of the state within the realms of the personal, mundane and routinized habits of everyday life. Second, I reconstructed patterns of state formation within the circulation of collective imaginaries and the deployment of socio-material practices among street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 2010) and other ordinary urbanites. Mundane practices, being the processes by which people make sense of the state, are solidly threaded within quotidian sites of interactions, relationships and discussions. These, I suggest, provide critical analytical leverage for capturing and informing the constant re-deployment of the state (Hibou, 1998, 2013), a phenomenon that extends far beyond the conclusions that African bureaucracies “exist solely to carry out the orders of the executive and, in petty ways, to oppress citizens” (Rotberg, 2004, p. 7). In evidencing this claim, this chapter asks a set of three imbricated questions. How is the state performed, transformed and reactivated in the Congo? More specifically: what micro-level, socio-material practices and meaning-making processes enacted among ordinary citizens and neighbourhood chiefs can be identified in urban Congo, and how do they generate broader “state effects” (Foucault 1977; Mitchell, 1991)?

In concrete terms, I argue that the Congolese state’s existence is not due to a plethora of parasitic state agents and victimized urban residents. It survives instead because many entertain connections, practices and collective sense-making that potentially re-legitimize the state both at the micro- and macro-levels of analysis. Operating in the shadow of an overbearing political elite, hundreds of thousands of low-level state agents continue, against all odds (without salaries, infrastructure and technological means), to make the state
a very real and lived experience in the Congo, both in its ideational and performative dimensions. The state thus derives from a set of socio-material (that is, both human and non-human) practices, which produces in turn larger state effects, two of which are discussed here in further detail: distanciation and humanization. While the former results from patterns of subtle violence and procedural routines, the latter emerges from ordinary problem-solving activities. The (global) idea and the concrete presence of the state, then, are in a persistent conflcitual relation—the state appears in its unitary, coherent guise as the aggregated effect (Mitchell, 1991; Trouillot, 2003) of myriad routinized activities enacted daily between street-level bureaucrats such as neighbourhood chiefs (and their subordinates) and ordinary urbanites living in Kinshasa, Lubumbashi and Goma. In the Congo, what is done, and how, both matter.

I answer these questions in two stages. Firstly, I briefly present the analytical and conceptual footing for understanding the realm of everyday life as the production site of “state effects”. This draws on academic perspectives that seek to interrogate traditional conceptualizations of state domination and have, therefore, contributed towards capturing the inherent ambiguities of the state. In this respect, I reflect upon the potentials of engaging with an ontology of the state, by which the researcher’s attention is not drawn to that which might be theoretically missing in comparison to a Western model, but instead to investigating the experiential nature of the state as a provider of public services and creator of meaning. Secondly, I provide concrete illustrations of the processes through which the distanciation and humanization effects emerge in urban DRC. This is done, in particular, through analysing the lives of low-level public figures such as neighbourhood chiefs, who, as the official mediators and disciplinary agents of the state, devise activities, employ discourses, and thread relationships that produce patterns of public authority in urban settings.

**Everyday life and state effects**

Critiques of the worldviews summarized above have long emerged. Some have shown how policies in the global south, including in the Congo, develop multiple coping mechanisms to alleviate institutional weakness and create new conduits for establishing order. Grassroots and non-governmental organizations, bus drivers, local residents, traders, educators and churchgoers (Titeca, De Herdt & Wagemakers, 2013); all have devised ingenious strategies to circumvent corrupt state authorities, access public services, and earn a living (Kabamba, 2015). In so doing, these studies have avoided taking the state for granted in conceptual terms in order to probe, empirically, how state and society interact, intersect and mutually constitute each other on a daily basis. Similarly, classical state theoreticians have shown that state and society, public and private spheres, do not evolve as distinct entities, but rather compose each other in both so-called “failed states” and Western democracies.12 Rejecting reified interpretations of Max Weber’s sociology and challenging conventional epistemologies in political inquiry, some have encouraged researchers to craft a political “ontology of the state” (Hay, 2014; Jessop, 2014). The latter hopes to grasp the inherent “difficulty of studying the state” (Abrams, 1977) as a neither real nor fictitious, but rather an “as if real”, phenomenon (Hay, 2014). Put simply, an ontology of the state works both as a heuristic device and as a theoretical tool to provide analytical space for noticing invisible ordering mechanisms, and for further problematizing the distinction between the state and society (Mitchell, 1991, 2006).

In this view, concepts that follow an explanatory avenue stressing inappropriate or absent norms tend to depict only one facet of a much more complex social reality. This is especially problematic since other approaches—such as anthropological explorations of the “everyday state” (Corbridge et al., 2005) have long unveiled the existence and maintenance of functional “practical norms” (De Herdt & Olivier de Sardan, 2015) and the broad implications of “real governance” (Titeca & De Herdt, 2011). Moving beyond academic and popular narratives that assume either extreme differentiation between Western and non-Western societies, or a progressive “Westernization” of the latter (see also Bilgin, 2008; Owen, Heathershaw & Savin, 2018), many across African studies and related fields have endeavoured to nuance and interrogate these reified accounts of the story of African states (among others: Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan, 2014; Hagnann & Péclard, 2010; Lund 2006, 2016). Building on these scholarly works, the material presented here seeks to unveil the sites where mundane state-society interactions generate relatively strong patterns of state authority in delivering collective services and exerting social control, precisely as the state in the Congo and elsewhere, remains politically contested, theoretically ambiguous and institutionally brittle. Drawing from the concept of “everyday state” (Corbridge et al., 2005), “state effects” (Foucault 1977; Mitchell, 1991), and
“assemblage” theory (DeLanda, 2006), this text offers an understanding of the state as a practical and ideational composite that cuts across institutions, rights, civil society and other institutions. This scholarship crucially problematizes the relationship between the individual, the state and society as multiple qualitative reality in which “agency – the capacity to act – is everywhere ... in individuals, groups, states, ideational structures and non-human actants” (Salter, 2013, p. 2). Applied to the ambiguous and fluid characteristics of the state, as always under construction (Lund, 2006), this connects to the idea, as Hagmann and Pécillard argued (2010), that the state is indeed negotiated, and, as such, is a relational, ideational and ambivalent phenomenon. As just one of social reality’s various “wholes constructed from heterogeneous parts” (DeLanda, 2006, p. 3), the state is simultaneously coherent and multiple, fragile and stable, mundane and high-level.

In further conceptual terms, the study of the state detailed below entails three foundational elements: a) micro socio-material practices; b) collective meaning-making; and c) state effects. Firstly, the phrase “socio-material practices” refers to the large set of governing techniques, regardless of their formal or informal status, that emerge from the intertwined relationships between street-level bureaucrats, objects and citizens. Inspired by the idea of tracing “the total dynamic – human and non-human – of a public setting” (Amin, 2008, p. 8), my study of the state starts with the theoretical premise that agency (located in practices, people, things and relations) can occur everywhere and anywhere, including in contexts where power relations are particularly unequal. Located within myriad places and things, practices then, are not the mere product of social relationships – they are also material (Latour, 2005). Social interactions among humans are critical, but they are mediated, supported and altered by the regular usages of objects and things. Looking at the role they play in preforming administrative tasks and shaping cognitive processes of interpretation, I term the various objects and artefacts discussed here “ordinary state objects”. This leads us to meaning-making.

The association of people and things in enacting the state daily, tends to produce stable patterns of collective meaning-making\textsuperscript{13} \textit{vis-à-vis} the state: what the state is for, what it ought to do, what is wrong with it. Paying attention to “meanings” leads us to the idea that the state is generative not just of practices, but of its own ideational dimension. The state practices at work in the Congo (re)produce some of the formal aspects of the Weberian state and engage in a state/society co-production of a system of significance that allows individuals – whether state and non-state – to voice grievances and imagine the state in both local and Western state registers. Finally, the perspective I develop here draws on the works of Trouillot (2003) and Mitchell on the “state effect” (1991, 2006). Defining it, Mitchell noted state theory should not attempt “to separate the material forms of the state from the ideological, or the real from the illusory”, but understand instead that “the phenomenon we name ‘the state’ arises from techniques that enable mundane material practices to take on the appearance of an abstract, nonmaterial form” (1991, p. 170). In concrete terms, these three constitutive elements of state formation aim at fleshing out the dynamics underlying such enabling processes. The combination of “matter of habit, accretion and bricolage” (Li, 2007, p. 276), local repertoires of practical knowledge and systems of significance, form the sites where the ideal-typical image of the state is simultaneously eroded by wars, neoliberal policies, or widespread corruption, and is still actively reinvented as an important provider of public goods and shaper of collective adherence to officialism, historical symbols and procedural modes of governance.

Although closely inspired by existing notions of negotiated statehood, state effects, and related terms, this analysis seeks to address two additional dimensions of stateness. Firstly, it strongly adheres to the political stand that “the mundane matters” (Enloe, 2011), and uses daily life to critique the idea of the state forming primarily via bottom-up/top-down patterns of institutionalization and legitimization. This perspective, because of its non-deterministic characteristics, highlights the networked patterns of state formation, as building vertically from top-down and bottom-up dynamics, as well as emerging horizontally in unpredictable ways that transcend and displace the verticality/encapsulation binary of the state form. Ferguson and Gupta (2002) argue that grassroots politics, and therefore the everydayness of real governance (De Herdt & Olivier de Sardan 2015), can call into question traditional understanding of the state as either distinct from (Evans, 1995; Mann, 1984), in (Migdal 2001), or standing above society. Secondly, the theoretical approach put forward in this chapter construes the ambiguities of the state as enabling multiple sites/possibilities for political transformation, rather than mere constraints on the definition and methodological capture of the realities of the state.
Neighbourhood chiefs and the contested terrain of public authority

Distantiation

As explained above, the conceptual and methodological approach developed here implies the coexistence of several “states”. It emerges in forms that echo the concrete absence resulting from institutional and administrative weakness in the words of my own informants, and others that recreate strong performative and ideational state attributes in its struggles for social control and public service delivery. The police, for instance, often epitomize failure and subsequently fall under considerable scrutiny by the individuals they abuse, harass or ignore (see Baaz & Olsson, 2011; Thill, this volume). Many Congolese, including police officers themselves, recognize and complain about the systemic lack of adequate material, training and human resources needed in order to provide security as a true public good. Laurie, for instance, who inhabits Masina, near Kinshasa’s international airport, once explained: “There is no trust between the police and us. When I lived in Binza, some bandits were active there, next to the police station, but the police there, they did nothing... They let the people fend for themselves.”

A few days later, I asked Angélique, a resident of one of Kinshasa’s southern districts, whether the police scare her. She answered, “Not really, but at night, yes. I don’t trust them at night. Because, I am sorry to use this term, but they are thieves. They patrol the streets to steal from us, our things; not to protect us.”

While investigating the daily workings of districts and neighbourhoods in all three cities, I noticed police stations habitually stood next to the neighbourhood chiefs’ offices and, as such, I investigated the relations they nurtured with one another. In practice, while tensions often run high, the police nonetheless cooperate with local residents, chiefs, the district mayor and community leaders on various security-related matters. Indeed, the chiefs who compose the cadre de base, for instance, are formally tasked with looking after the population living within the territorial boundaries of their administrative units: neighbourhood, block, street, and “ten houses”. A block chief once reported her formal attributions as follows:

We supervise the population; we ensure peaceful community relations and we guarantee security to the people and their property. We also help the neighbourhood chief to conduct the annual census because he rarely has enough agents. We have to avoid disorders and tensions among neighbours and to do this, we give them counselling and advice when they come to us.”

By contrast, as she began thinking of her own neighbourhood chief, Angélique conceded: “I do not know my neighbourhood chief’s formal attributions. I often see him on the bus, right? ... But I don’t know what he does.”

These short excerpts speak volumes about the absences, low capacity and poor governance (stereotype) of places like the DRC. In line with the concept of real governance mentioned above, an ethnographic exploration of state agents and ordinary citizens in action reveals much more nuanced accounts of the dynamics that make and unmake the state. The section below thus presents the various activities of cadre de base chiefs, as they engage in exercises of census-taking and official registration, produce paper-trails, use symbolic state artefacts such as stamps, signatures and letter heads, and cultivate regular documenting habits to their hierarchy. While deciding upon who gets access to administrative services and state recognition, these low-level civil servants contribute to composing the state’s disciplinary apparatus by exerting social and ideational control. This is done mainly through the tropes of subtle and hidden bureaucratic violence and, in Foucauldian terms, governmentality and discipline (Foucault, 1977). Insofar as the state’s disciplinary power consists of “particular ways of managing and organizing multiplicity” (Foucault, 2007, p. 12), the various micro-techniques documented here, of counting, bureaucractizing, and reporting – often informally practiced – engender a distantiation effect. Distantiation encapsulates the various moments at which state officials, auxiliaries of the state and private citizens alike engage on a daily basis in mental and behavioural adherence to officialism – that is, the strict observation of formal rules and procedures within a professional field. Although state practices and narratives reveal normalized recourse to bargaining, gift-giving, or illicit behaviour, much of the dynamics at work are blended with recurring usages of administrative procedures, red tape, bureaucratic rituals, or “ordinary state objects”. This concerns on the state its ambiguous, yet concrete, “autonomous” status (Evans, 1995) as seemingly distanced from the rest of society.

Now consider the typical work day of a neighbourhood chief. Chiefs often hold other professional occupations outside of their formal civil servant status, primarily to make ends meet in the absence of a steady and adequate salary. From owning and renting a bus to selling soft drinks, beers or phone credit, the chiefs organise
their schedules around office hours and tending to their economic activities. Often up by 5:30 am, they may first say their morning prayer before washing up, and, if available, prepare tea and eat a piece of bread for breakfast. Many neighbourhood chiefs are female, such as the woman I encountered, who is here referred to as “Henriette” for the purposes of anonymity. In the morning, she would tend to her youngest children and prepare tea for every family member, and sometimes her neighbours as well. Leaving their home around 6:30 am, they either take a bus or walk to their first order of business. One of the chiefs I met owned and rented out a taxi-bus in the public transportation system, and would meet with the conductor before heading to her office. On her way, she would typically make several stops through her neighbourhood and chat with friends, greet acquaintances, delivering pieces of advice or inquiring about their problems. Embodying the state in this context grants her the authority to act in her official capacity as she records problems. Far from being invisible in the public sphere, chiefs are always recognized as such within the vicinities of their homes or offices. “Yes, I know our chief. We are often together,” Angélique recalled. “When we moved to this neighborhood, people told us about him, showed him to us saying ‘this is our chief’. We always greet each other. He’s the chief, everyone greets him.”

Chiefs may formally go on “neighbourhood patrols”, during which they take note of their residents’ grievances and complaints, and participate therefore in surveillance activities. During those patrols, they may heed to security-related issues, including theft, murder, trespassing, family feuds or land disputes. Should serious crimes such as murders and rape have occurred, they would refer the victims directly to a police officer working with them so they might initiate a formal investigation. As Angélique confirmed: “Our neighbourhood chief can direct us, help us file complaints with the local police, because they work next to one another.” Since most Congolese do not trust the police for carrying out justice, I examined the matter further, asking: “You said earlier the police were useless. Why would you go to them then?” She answered:

Because when we have a problem, we cannot stay idle, and do nothing. We have to go to the police even though they may not help us. Also, some of them do their jobs properly so we could get lucky. The others there, they don’t work well. If people continue to cause you problems, we can have them punished through the police, they’re the ones with the authority to punish.

Similar statements recurred across the interviews and informal discussions I conducted in all three cities. Police work involves violent practices that ignore the principles of the rule of law and institutional accountability, and target political activists, local residents, children or prostitutes in the hopes of securing a few bribes and favours. The information retrieved from fieldwork and secondary sources reveal other activities, including guarding private houses and personal cars at night, investigating instances of popular justice, participating in communal works, securing neighbours and family members, collaborating with motorbike taxis in cases of lethal car accidents, and organizing public transportation parking lots and fees.

Ambivalent attitudes towards police officers and neighbourhood chiefs suggest the coexistence of conflicting sentiments, by which ordinary citizens simultaneously see state agents as both useful and trustworthy, and unreliable and dishonest. Ambiguity, however, is not just a symptom of poor governance, it is also an analytical vehicle for studying processes of collective meaning-making. Residents and state agents alike often express meaning through political grievances and expectations. Low-level bureaucrats have often voiced lassitude as they “wish [they] could do a better job” in the face of increased pressure by other non-state providers of political order and public services (churches, NGOs, armed groups etc.), who, as they entertain ambiguous relations with state authorities, lay competing claims to public authority.

Alongside dealing with (petty) crime, administrative and surveillance exercises of counting and categorizing citizens occupy a central role in the chiefs’ daily tasks. While they must be informed of any deaths, weddings and births occurring in their quarters before people file paperwork at the district office, a census also occurs every year in urban DRC. This period of the year is thus usually quite busy in the small offices where a handful of census takers travel from home to home with a mission order, as well as state forms demanding money and information. Seen as another opportunity to indulge in corruption schemes, the census is carried out nonetheless, figures are reported down on paper, and results sent out to the hierarchy for further surveillance and security purposes.

Evidently, categorizing residents by gender, age, profession and location is not aimed merely at delivering services (many of which do not materialize). It also forms part of routinized, traditional bureaucratic work. A neighbourhood chief in Lubumbashi described his reporting habits as follows:
The report has four or five categories, like Administration, State of Mind, Politics, Security, Economy, Finance and Socio-Cultural... For security, we report on the sanitary situation, petty crime... When someone dies or when someone is born, we add it here, under Socio-Cultural... The Finance category is often empty because we never receive funding from the higher authorities. We tend to keep 10% of daily transactions, fines, document fees and so on for ourselves, as administrative fees.19

As they count and categorize, order and impose rules, state agents leave behind (and circulate) an endless trail of bureaucratic red tape, which, in line with Gupta’s analysis on the politics of writing (2012), contributes further to subjugating ordinary people in contexts of widespread illiteracy and resistance to the burden of legal paperwork. Adherence to official procedures, conventional tasks and ceremonial practices thus do not work to create a facade of state administrative power. Rather, it serves the hegemonic purpose of recreating the state’s autonomous sphere of action and authority. As writing and reporting create an almost physical distance between state and citizens, the practices of counting, securitizing and categorizing bolsters the state’s capacity to exert its power of injunction. State-society relations become effectively bureaucratized even in a context in which informal practices have become the norm.

Distanciation is then further enacted via the use of voids, spaces and material objects that punctuate everyday life and routinized practices. Civil servants are confronted with a lack of office stationery and technologies (computers, office phones, printers) and rely at times on objects such as personal cell phones, stamps, hand-drawn maps, and convocations20 they print out themselves. In producing and using these ordinary objects they seek to re-formalize more informal, negotiated practices of governance (see examples below) that respond to informal logics of public service provisions. To get a more vivid image of what this means, it is worth quoting one of my interlocutors at length:

We do it in a systematic way. Not with technical devices or with lots of personnel, but through our everyday tasks. Our people in the neighbourhood, they have my personal phone number, the police works here with me, we solve criminal issues together, we have to collaborate constantly even though [local] politics, the private interests from our hierarchy, it breaks collaboration sometimes! ... People come to me; they call me, or my assistant, whenever something bad happens. They bring their land disputes to me, their property issues. When this happens, we send out an invitation to all family members, and all the parties to the dispute. I ask that they bring all the documents they possess and I will look in my own archives see if I have old property titles that might clarify the situation. If we manage to solve the issue here, it is good, if not, I send them to court. That’s how we get information. People call us, they come here, our census takers ask questions, and we also use the block and “ten houses” chiefs who know everyone and all their problems at their own level. We can share this with the intelligence services, the police, the mayor this allows the authorities to know whether or not the population is calm and where there is insecurity.21

The micro-techniques of government enumerated here continue to go largely unnoticed within conventional political theory. This is particularly problematic because an empirically-grounded analysis shows the routinized tasks that hundreds of neighbourhood chiefs and their colleagues perform daily allow the state to make countless appearances in a) crafting social control, and b) bureaucratizing state-society relations. Furthermore, this happened not in spite of personal ties and clientelist relations, but rather through them. The information thus retrieved from my data points towards a distanciation effect, whereby officialism and procedural routines not only surface from physical artefacts (documents, red tape, objects) but emerge from the collective recognition (i.e. the construction of a system of significance) that these state agents are still in charge of organizing and controlling the public sphere. Despite widespread recognition of the gross inadequacies of the state in providing public goods, and of its being consistently plagued by corruption (“we keep 10% ... for ourselves”)22 the state continues to appear as a critical political force standing above society.

In bureaucratizing state-society relations at the lowest but broadest levels of social interaction, street-level bureaucrats serve as the eyes and ears of the state, perpetuating the commonly accepted idea that citizens are an “object of governance” (Jessop, 2015, p. 34). Under the benign claim to be “securing our people”, state agents surveil and subdue potential sites of political dissent. They also aim to impose popular abdication to state authority as they organize censuses and civil registries, notify their hierarchy, summon local residents, give orders, and monitor discontent. In bypassing material scarcity, the neighbourhood chiefs, local police and other official
unofficial state personnel, manage and organize control within their jurisdiction.

Humanization

Simultaneously, attending to other aspects of their daily works, neighbourhood chiefs actively engage in another, albeit contradictory, humanization effect, whereby the state is brought ever closer to, and is strongly intertwined with, the lives of ordinary citizens. This effect emerges from a large range of activities aimed at solving problems, reaching compromise and settling issues. Mediation, in this view, renders state-society relations intimate, prompting neighbourhood chiefs to embody an otherwise cold, bureaucratic and exclusionary state apparatus at the micro-levels of governance. Let us return to the neighbourhood chiefs’ typical workday. As mentioned above, many tour the neighbourhood once a week. When I asked about their administrative territorial boundaries, the chief named “Henriette” brought her own map out of her desk drawer. Like her counterparts in Goma and Lubumbashi, she had sketched it by hand, and with a pen, showed me her habitual patrolling itinerary. She then directed me to the police station next door so I could see the hand-made map they use. I soon discovered that the objective of using maps was not only to control and bureaucratize, but to devise formal and informal problem-solving avenues. People recognizing her passing by the streets would use her patrols to discuss their problems with her:

Two days ago, by the stadium, some people ran up to me to complain about other residents who have been throwing away trash in the street. They were complaining about the bad smell this caused. Then I sent out convocations to those who throw their trash in the streets. We have conviction booklets you know. 21

Echoing the processes of distanciation mentioned above, these booklets exist because Henriette prefers receiving formal complaints at her desk, so she summons the parties to a dispute to visit her by appointment. She demands they bring everyone involved in the dispute along, in the hope of brokering an amicable arrangement. If one of the parties refuses to show up, she sends out another one of these invitations, after which, they usually show up. On many occasions, the issues were settled. Due to their formal aspect, such as their language, format, title, and ministerial seal, I at first assumed the government had provided these invitation booklets. I quickly understood, though, that she had had them printed out in a nearby shop at her own expenses, in order to give her daily activities a more procedural guise. Once her patrol finished, Henriette, like the other chiefs I interviewed, would go to the office and question her assistant and secretary about what had happened in the morning, and determine if any urgent matters were thus to be tended to immediately. She would then receive visitors at her desk and alternately reconcile neighbours if their children had been fighting, dispense administrative advice, or settle land and inheritance disputes among family members. “Papa Louis!” she once shouted to her secretary through the door, “Hand me the minute book of last week’s family council we convened here at the office. Also look for that other minute book number 119, in which we decided to divide the land plot.”

But settling disputes is only one aspect of the job. She also regularly offers guidance to many on how to navigate state services and departments at the higher levels when one of her residents needs special authorizations or legal documentation. These tasks are mediated through the use of various “ordinary state objects”. Phone calls, and their loud ringtones emanating from all over the office and its courtyard, would sometimes cut off our interviews as state agents tended to their personal businesses or made appointments. The census takers, secretary, assistant-chief, the police and visitors are often involved in long conversations about on-going private and professional matters. All chiefs told me their phones rang constantly, because their residents can reach them at any time, day or night. Apart from a small stack of invitation booklets, Henriette’s office displays a combination of work and personal objects. While an old microwave and ironing board stand in a dusty corner, hundreds of cadastral archives – some dating from the 1930s, 40s and 50s she confided – are organized chronologically, next to her old wooden desk. Between pictures of herself and her children hangs a large framed portrait of President Joseph Kabila, and the walls are painted blue. “The colours of the Congolese flag,” she clarified.

Although she continuously deplores her “terrible working conditions” and the prevalence of petty corruption, she takes pride in being a representative of state authority. “Who is the state?” she asked me. “The state is us [the chiefs]. We represent the state. If we are not respected, it’s only in instances where we are not ethically proper.” Along with their maps, convocations, stamps, signatures, reports and other symbols and artefacts, she and her colleagues provide the state with human and familiar faces. This “embodied state” (Garynt, 2009) takes shape via listening, counselling and mediating. It makes
interactions intimate against otherwise less palpable higher-levels of government. Angélique, among others, confirmed this tendency: “We go to the chief because he is the one we have appointed chief. Some people try to solve their issues among themselves, but when it doesn’t work, it’s best to consult the chief, because he can report our grievances to his hierarchy, he can help us go to the district office or advise us on how to settle our problems.” Months later, in Kinshasa, I met with two young Kinois students, who declared:

Yes, they’re very important the neighbourhood chiefs. They’re like the fathers in the family ... what I mean is that the chief’s role is very important, he’s the chief, he’s our number one guide. You bring your problems to them: ‘Mama ... we have a problem with a funeral, with documents, with inheritance’ ... she will help us. She will counsel us, tell us what to do, invite us to her office. If the mama can’t do it, she’ll bring it to the district mayor on our behalf ... I already went to see her! She is our mama. [They smile.] She is our mama. We often go visit her at home and at her office.²⁴

It is common knowledge in the streets of Kinshasa, Lubumbashi and Goma that these street-level bureaucrats come to soothe daily struggles and soften the edges of the saying “mboka ebébi”. Systematic popular recourse to local chiefs’ mediation skills generates another layer in the Congolese system of significance that many individuals connect to the state. Once again, the chiefs of the cadre de base interacting with each other and their residents shape yet another state effect. Again, socio-material and broader structural constraints result in a double, ambivalent effect. While they reinforce a sense of absences in the postcolonial state, the liminal position of neighbourhood chiefs, being both tied to the higher levels of the state and embedded in society, gives them leverage to devise a syncretic blend of organic and procedural mechanisms to governing, which creates a sense of stability and promotes peaceful coexistence.

“L’Etat ni miye, l’Etat ni weye, l’Etat ni shiyé bote”
Ambivalence and state presence

This chapter presented a brief overview on the intimate lives and relationships of a number of individuals involved in the making, however ambivalent, of the state and state authority. Perhaps the most critical insights we may gather from this text lie in the fact that fine ontological and ethnographic explorations of state–society relations do not speak to a reading in which the state exists mainly in spite of, or via, predatory schemes of governance, or thanks to international principles of internal and external sovereignty. Of course, it has long been established across African studies that there is no such thing as a purely informal or purely formal practice – these are inherently syncretic. There remains a bias, however, towards conceptualizing adherence to officialism – verbal or otherwise – on the part of state agents as consisting of a mere facade for debilitated state governance. Although it is unclear whether these micro-techniques of government directly affect, and to what extent, the highest levels of the state, a more systematic analysis of practices, meaning-making and their associated state effects can turn the otherwise invisible Congolese street-level bureaucrats and ordinary residents into essential components of the state. In this view, the socio-material practices analysed here generate a sense of steadiness, both within the subtle violence of maintaining state control over an agitated and often dissatisfied citizenry, and in ensuring networks of solidarity (Olivier de Sardan, 1999) are nurtured and reproduced. The state therefore surfaces both from the countless sites of formal and informal associations of human and non-human agencies, and through the construction of a collective system of significance. In this system, not only is it often understood that street-level bureaucrats do what they can given the limited choices accruing to them, but reiterated again and again was the collective sense that the discipline and mediation practices should retain their public character, and therefore be performed by the state. In the words of Laurie, for instance:

The Chiefs must inform people, ask them to denounce crimes and abuses in the neighbourhood. They are also in charge of census and must ensure their residents’ personal safety the neighbourhood. The chief should also know about pretty much all migrations and movements and report to the district mayor. They also are in charge of the neighbourhood’s hygiene ... At night, in cases of loud noises, music and drunks, he should be able to ask people to stay quiet.²⁵

On police brutality, she added nuance, saying: “They are not really paid through. This is why they have such a negative attitude. What are they supposed to do with 50 dollars a month? He has a wife and children, how is he supposed to take care of them? It isn’t good what the state is doing, abandoning them like this.”
Interestingly, analysing the translation of sense-making and social practices into broader effects shows that key dimensions of the official attributes of the state are recreated through attempts at formalizing bureaucratic tasks and modes of governance from various points in time, spaces, actors and practices that transcend top-down or bottom-up modes of analysis. An informal “game of the rules” (De Herdt & Olivier de Sardan, 2015), however, often comes to complement, rather than weaken, formal state structures, in cases where, like in the Congo, acute logistical, financial and infrastructural shortages challenge countless low-level state agents and their constituents to engage with one another in relationships that are not exclusively driven by predatory and abusive behaviour (Baaz & Olsson, 2011). On the contrary, while civil servants might be deemed “notoriously inefficient” in popular local narratives (Olivier de Sardan, 1999, p. 34), they also compose, along with their local constituencies, an expansive and dynamic web of narratives and activities that sustain both a public space and, to a degree, a cooperative social organization. Based on daily encounters, the words – “She is our mama” – of the two Congolese students mentioned above act as another mundane rendition of the popular Congolese phrase “L’Etat ni méye, l’Etat ni vaye, l’Etat ni shiyé bwe” (The state is me, the state is you, the state is all of us). Beyond the territorial borders of the Congo, this captures the ambivalent characteristics of the state as being enacted, performed and imagined by all of us – academics and students, writers and informants, citizens and civil servants.

To be sure, although relatively omnipresent, the distillation and humanization effects thus dissected are not carved in stone. This is because, first, states are not ahistorical apparatuses defying time and epochal change; and, second, because the societal and material agencies they are composed of are constantly in the making. The broad structural impacts of neoliberal policies, economic inequalities and international development assistance, for instance, can alter the generative micro-processes these effects have emerged from. The state, however, continues to exist in the Congo in both its ideational and performative dimensions. This, in turn, materializes the “as-if-real” character (Hay, 2014) of the state–society distinction I problematized along with other existing texts in this chapter.

Simply put, the daily relationships that tie low-level bureaucrats and ordinary residents together act as the connective tissue of the state, even as state agents espouse the characteristics of the “petty sovereign” (Butler, 2004). Through intimate interactions that humanize an otherwise abstract entity, the personalization of power by local civil servants and their residents does not always work to disintegrate state legitimacy or fuel corruption schemes. Instead, it reinforces its authority from localized state practices to its larger system of significance, and participates to the (re)formalization of sometimes informal and spontaneous practices such as mediation. As Li put it, minute social interactions “seldom reform the world according to plan, but they do change things” (2007, p. 276). The goal here, albeit modest, was to capture the idea that state ambiguities are, in fact, a realm of possibilities for change and transformation, rather than a practical impediment to grasping its content and contours. It also places Mitchell’s theoretical conversation on “state effects” on a stronger ethnographic and empirical footing, narrating the real-life stories that have been historically effaced in the study of the state and (global) politics. This may be a significant step towards “repopulating international politics with human life and recreating the dramatic milieu of everyday experience” (Vrasti, 2013, p. 62).

As such, the state in the Congo may indeed show signs of institutional weaknesses and unaccountability, but it simultaneously re-emerges both as a coherent force flowing through and above society in the Congo, and a tangible element of life consolidated through the routinized and performative work of its agents and peoples. Lending theoretical value to the broader effects of assemblages, compositions and multiplicity in studying practices and processes of collective meaning-making, new avenues are opened towards a more pressing interrogation: do we want to remain stuck with the modern state as the single political form of government promoted by and through our international system? Indeed, as history and current events around the world painfully remind us, the state – an inescapable reality of social life and politics, both in the Congo and globally – lies at the heart of political violence, exclusion, human suffering and death, regardless of its form of government, geographical location and historical origins (see also: Arendt, 1958; Bauman, 1989; Ferguson, 1990; Gupta, 2012; Scott, 1998).

Regarding the state as a mobile composition of practices, narratives and wider effects, Louise Lombard thoughtfully argued: “That people desire a state is not a bad thing.” But international, regional and local “insistence on the state form” come “to smother any organic state-making initiatives”, including those shaping accountable and inclusionary politics “while staying agnostic on the ultimate administrative shape of things” (Lombard, 2016, p. 3). This is mirrored in the practices I have scrutinized above. While bureaucratising state–society relations may support the internationally recognized role of
the state as the formal guarantor of social organization and control, it also, perhaps ironically, may cast a shadow on critical collaborative practices, such as mediation, that have cemented urban social life and may have proved significantly more effective as a collective service for communities and disempowered individuals.

Notes

1. I would like to extend my thanks to Tom De Herdt and Kristof Titeca for their kind encouragement and their thoughtful comments, which rendered this chapter’s writing process smooth and productive. I also wish to extend my thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their careful reading and helpful feedback on the manuscript. I cannot thank enough all my informants, friends and acquaintances in the DRC who have relentlessly sought to assist me in conducting fieldwork in the safest possible conditions. Finally, I would like to express my greatest appreciation to Jonathan Austin and Octavia Chirisa for reading the draft versions of this text and providing me with insightful comments.

2. Formally, Congolese cities are divided into administrative units. At the higher levels of urban governance stands the city mayor (maire). In Kinshasa, being a city-province, one finds the governor. This oversees the districts (communes). The district is located mid-level between the mayor’s authority and the neighbourhoods (quartiers) and is headed by a district mayor (bourgmestre). He, in turn, oversees the local chiefs who form the so-called cadre de base (baseline group). The latter is organized along a pyramidal administrative model, headed by neighbourhood chiefs (chef de quartier). These are official entities and are recognized by law. Their subordinates act at the levels, in descending size, of block (cellule), street (avenue), and “ten houses” (nyomba humi, in Goma, not Lubumbashi or Kinshasa. This does not always contain exactly ten houses). These entities are not enshrined in law, nor can they be registered at the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

3. A street restaurant.


5. For a dynamic discussion on the Congolese government’s lack of political will in reinforcing public services and infrastructure, see Stearns et al. (2017).

6. Organized system of electric outage in certain streets, housing units and general areas, for a time lapse ranging from a few hours to three or four days, so other areas, housing or streets can get electricity instead.

7. Popular area where people congregate around a bar or a restaurant.


9. As Habermas and Cronin put it: “The historical type of state that emerged from the French and American Revolutions has achieved global dominance. This fact is no means trivial” (1998, p. 397). Deeply entrenched in international history and, as in our case, violent patterns of colonization, the (Western) state has become a transnational idea and institution, the product of a mystified Westphalian world order (Caporaso, 2000; Grovogui, 2001)

10. Humanization is not conceived here as within anthropological works on cultural processes, nor is it opposed to processes such as politicization. It merely refers to the actions that grant a more intimate, humane dimension to the otherwise procedural, abstract entity that is the state.

11. The theoretical premises underlying the potentially broad ramifications of individuals’ aggregated understanding of the social world on producing large works of intersubjective (and thus collectively shared, contested and produced) meanings, emerged long before post-structuralist works, and was debated at length within (micro-)sociology. See the works of Erving Goffman, Harald Garfinkel, Pierre Bourdieu or Alfred Schutz among others.

12. For further reading on these issues, see: inter alia, Bayart et al., 2008; Frödl, 2012; Jussop, 2015; Migdal, 1991; Müller, 1992.

13. See also the works of Clifford Geertz on “webs of meaning” (e.g. Geertz, 1973).

References


Lubumbashi (20 November 2015).

22. For a nuanced account on corruption, see Olivier de Sardan (1999).

