

# Part 2 – The changing dynamics of the Ninja movement

The Ninja movement has evolved greatly across several dimensions and over time: from the elements loyal to Kolélas in the beginning (1993-1997) to the connection with Ntumi after Kolélas' exile (1998-to date); from armed movement to a political party; and from a movement largely composed of an urban base to one that recruited in the rural areas of the Pool region. A few authors have reflected on the changes the militias underwent in Congo, focusing on the 1990s and the early 2000s (Bazenguissa-Ganga, 1999; Ngodi, 2006; Yengo, 2006). However, there is a gap in the literature on the changes in recent years. This study partially addresses that gap.

## 1. The Ninja's early years (1993-1997)

Congo's successive wars in the 1990s were primarily linked to political rivalries between three politicians—Bernard Kolélas, Pascal Lissouba, and Denis Sassou-Nguesso—and their struggles for power. Bernard Kolélas, native of the Pool region, was the defeated presidential candidate in 1992 for the MCDDI party and was the Mayor of Brazzaville between 1994 and 1997. Pascal Lissouba was the Congolese President between 1992 and 1997 as a member of the UPADS political party before being ousted by army Colonel Sassou-Nguesso of the PCT party. Denis Sassou-Nguesso was President between 1979 and 1992 and regained power over Lissouba in 1997 after bitter fighting. These three political factions utilized parts of the civilian population as armed militias as early as 1993. Lissouba's armed militia was the Cocoyes, Sassou Nguesso's armed branch was the Cobras, and Kolélas' was the Ninjas.

The author Bazenguissa-Ganga stresses that in contrast to the Cocoyes and the Cobras, the Ninjas remained neutral for a time during the period from 1993 to 1997 (Bazenguissa-Ganga, 1996; 1999). After the truce of 1994, most members of the Ninjas were demoralized; they had not received any payment for their services, and during the second Brazzaville war in 1997 some did not agree with MCDDI leaders when they were urged to fight alongside Lissouba's militia, a former enemy. Some influential Ninja recruiters and commanders joined the camp of Sassou Nguesso shortly after the resumption of hostilities in 1997. Those who stayed loyal to the MCDDI generally lacked arms, equipment, and training compared to the other groups.

Bazenguissa-Ganga also highlights differences between the first generation of fighters and later cohorts (1996; 1999). Those who participated in the hostilities of 1993-94 were mostly young men, born and raised in Brazzaville. By contrast, those who took up arms in 1997 were primarily from rural areas and were much less educated. Nearly all of the fighters who participated in the second Brazzaville war in 1997 were organized and trained outside of the city.

## 2. From Ninja to Nsilulu and FADR: the melting pot (1998 to date)

The Nsilulu movement emerged in 1998 and was mainly concentrated in the Pool region. It emerged primarily as a response to the abuse against civilians by public security forces in the northern districts of Pool during 1997-1998, a time when retaliation against

former political opponents and their perceived allies was common.<sup>9</sup> Almost from the start, the movement was led by Frédéric Bitsangou<sup>10</sup>, a preacher and relative newcomer in the Congolese political arena who later became known as Pasteur (or Révérend) Ntumi.

While the term Ninja has been widely used to refer to the Nsilulu movement, the two movements are distinct. The Ninjas Nsilulu recruited in the Pool in 1998 bore little resemblance to the political militia loyal to Kolélas from 1993-97. However, there were some links between the two movements (Ngodi, 2009; Yengo, 2006). Because they were hunted down by government militias, some of the Ninjas who had stayed loyal to Kolelas during the 1993-97 period joined the Nsilulu in 1998 for fear of retaliation, a pattern also described in some individual interviews (box 1).

It is also believed that several former combatants who had demobilized after the peace accords in 1999 later offered their services to local commanders and joined the Ninja Nsilulu ranks between 1999 and 2004. Interestingly, the base of the Nsilulu militia was initially composed of former patients in Brazzaville's psychiatric hospital along with members of magic and religious cults. The psychiatric patients, after being released from the hospital without being cured, had been regrouped by Ntumi before the 1997 war in the Kinsoudi district of western Brazzaville, where they were said to have received successful treatments for their mental illnesses (Ngodi, 2009).



*Chicken husbandry supported by the PNDDR in Linzolo*

Ninja and Nsilulu merged in 1999 when the Conseil National de la Résistance (CNR) was created. The

CNR brought together all opposition movements active in the Pool region and the Grand Niari at that period but was not yet recognized as a political faction. The armed branch of this movement was the Forces d'Autodéfense de la Résistance (FADR), of which Ntumi was appointed leader. Local recruits added to the diversity of group and gradually strengthened the movement.

There are several stories surrounding Ntumi's background. The most common one is that he fled Brazzaville's fighting with his patients in 1997 and sought refuge in Vinza, a locality in the northern Pool region where he ordered his patients to join the remnants of Kolélas' militias and to be trained as guerrillas.

Currently, there is little information available on how these groups functioned. The armed movement seems to have taken the form of semi-autonomous militias, which varied greatly across localities. In this research, such groups are referred to as the "free-riding elements" of the Ninjas. For example, an ex-Ninja commander interviewed in Linzolo revealed that in 1999, the armed elements posted under his command in Linzolo did not receive any food supplies and had to cope by themselves.<sup>11</sup> As a commander, he was paid CFA 5,000 per week (the equivalent of US\$10) until the peace agreement was signed in December 1999. After that, he was transferred to the Presidential service for a few months, where he was paid like a RoC soldier.

Beginning in 2003, the insurgents' chain of command appears loose in certain localities, probably reflecting the increased financial stake. An informal agreement between Ntumi and Sassou-Nguesso empowered the Ninjas to run security on trains and in train stations, which opened the door to abusive financial demands. Additionally, Ntumi faced increasing difficulty in controlling the most extreme free-riding elements.

<sup>9</sup> The region of the Grand Niari was also subject to the same type of purges at the same period. See the works of Patrice Yengo for more information on the 1993-2002 period (Yengo, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> The name Bintsamou also appears in some writings.

<sup>11</sup> Native of Linzolo, he was appointed *chef d'écurie* there during the 1998-99 events. He had 180 people under his command, of whom thirty female combatants (this is worth mentioning since it gives an idea of the proportion of female fighters in a given faction). Relations with the civilian population were relatively good.

## Box 1 – 1993-2011: The trajectory of an ex-combatant

We met A. in Voula in May 2011. He had come there in 2004, because he had some friends in the area. A. is a former Kolélas recruit. He first entered the Ninja movement in Brazzaville in 1993 when he was 19. At that time, he was an apprentice in a welding workshop and had completed some education (BEPC). Several factors led to his enlistment in 1993 including the closure of his workshop when violence started in Brazzaville and an incident in which he was molested by the Cocoyes (the militia loyal to Lissouba, Kolelas' political opponent). Between 1993 and 1997, A. had to flee Brazzaville because Lissouba's militias were hunting down the Ninjas. He moved to Massembo-Loubaki, the village of his father, in the Pool region. There he started a small business and sold medicine.

In 1997, he had to flee again, this time from the national army. He lived in hiding close to Massembo for a year. In 1998, he decided to join Ntumi. As he put it, "any young person in Massembo who resembled me was being threatened by the army." He fought on the Mindouli front and stayed with Ntumi until the 1999 peace accords. After the agreement, he remembers the Reverend telling the Ninjas to stop direct fighting against the national army. Ntumi did not call for demobilization but asked for ceasefire and sent a clear order to avoid direct confrontation. A. could not return to Massembo because the town was occupied by Angolese forces allied with the national army, from whom he feared retaliation. He moved with a few friends to Kindabangoui, a locality in the district of Mindouli.

In November 1999, he and three others were caught in Kindabangoui by Angolese troops. Two were killed in front of him, and he was tortured. The Angolese kept him to help them liaise with the local population (the Angolese were only able to speak Portuguese and had difficulties communicating with the Congolese). A. stayed with them for several months before being released.

After he was set free, he returned to Brazzaville, where he experienced a period of relative calm. From 2000-04 he married and had three children. However, he was constantly harassed by the soldiers in Brazzaville. He also mentioned several disappearances among the former Ninjas. In 2004, he decided to leave Brazzaville for Voula, where he had friends who remained active in the Ninja movement. He has lived there ever since. Recently, his first wife arrived and told him that it was his turn to raise their children. The two children he had with his spouse in Brazzaville are now living with him and go to school in Kinkala.

Source: *Fieldwork, Voula, May 2011.*

### 3. From an armed movement to a political party

A turn in the development of the Ninja movement came in April 2007 when the CNR and the government signed an agreement to end hostilities. The FADR, CNR's armed branch, was dissolved, and in preparation for the upcoming legislative elections, the CNR became a political party, switching its name from the Conseil National de la Résistance to the Conseil National des Républicains (Amnesty International, 2008; 2010).

As part of the April 2007 agreement, Ntumi was appointed *Délégué Général chargé de la promotion des valeurs de paix et de la réparation des séquelles de guerre* (general representative for promotion of peace and reparation of the effects of war) by presidential

decree. He did not take up his position until December 2009, however, citing the lack of guarantee to his personal security<sup>12</sup> and some logistical issues related to personal and professional housing.

For many years, Ntumi denounced the failure to implement measures from the 1999 and 2003 peace agreements. Those measures included large-scale arms collection from all sides, demobilization of all militias, the restructuring of armed groups, integration of former militias in the national army, recognition of the CNR as a political faction, and a joint security management system in the localities of the Pool most

<sup>12</sup> Ntumi and his supporters had tried to enter Brazzaville in September 2007 but were impeded by government forces, which forced the CNR delegation back into the Pool region (Jeune Afrique, 2010).

affected by residual violence. In May 2011, when the fieldwork for this report was completed, the last point was highlighted during the discussions with Ntumi, his political advisors, and some of the ex-combatants we met, since joint security teams had once been used in RoC after the signing of the 1999 ceasefire. In 1999 and 2000, former militias were paired with representatives of the public security forces in the Pool region to ensure the security of the populations. In their minds, Operations KINZOUNOU and KIMIA of 2010 were all the more “negative,” since they were “one-sided” operations.

The last Congolese legislative elections were in 2007, except in the district of Mindouli, where elections were delayed until 2010 because of residual security problems.<sup>13</sup> Nearly all opposition parties boycotted the elections on the grounds of a lack of transparency, as the government had ignored several calls to create an independent electoral commission. After some hesitation, the CNR eventually participated in the elections in the Pool region, putting forward six candidates, including Ntumi, but won no seats. Pro-government parties won 125 out of 137 seats in the National Assembly. The elections were criticized both internally and internationally for their many irregularities.

In several localities, focus groups participants pointed out that Ntumi had toured the region in recent years, either in pre-electoral times to foster the CNR as a new political party, or to preach. The localities of Kinkala, Matoumbou, Madzia, Ngoma Tsé Tsé, Missafou, Massembo Loubaki, and Loutéhété hosted permanent CNR representatives. By contrast, Boko, Louingui, Linzolo, and Voula—the other localities visited for the study—hosted no permanent representative. The *sous-préfet* of Louingui mentioned that Ntumi had visited the locality a few times in recent years before elections and for preaching purposes. In other localities, however, such as Linzolo and Boko, Ntumi had never set foot.

In 2010, legislative elections were held in the district of Mindouli, and Ntumi appeared to be a serious challenger. However, the CNR did not win the seat. He, his political advisors, and the local consulting team suggested that the CNR defeat was mainly due to the late arrival of a third candidate who registered after the electoral deadline and eventually allied with the Presidential party.

The 2009 presidential elections were as opaque as the preceding elections in 2002. The government again rejected calls to establish an independent electoral commission, and the existing National Commission on Elections disqualified four of the main opposition candidates. This led several other political factions to boycott the elections. Sassou-Nguesso was re-elected by a large majority and quickly made major cabinet changes after the election, one of which was to do away with the office of the Prime Minister.

In the localities visited for the study, the recent electoral deadlines caused a variety of reactions. For instance, the presidential election triggered violence in Voula on the part of the remaining combatants, though it did not lead to violence in the other localities.

An interesting indicator for assessing the extent of Ntumi’s popularity is the evolution of his personal guard when traveling outside Soumona. When his personal car was spotted in Kinkala during the fieldwork (at that time the town was hosting a three-day meeting for the local councilors of the Pool region, of whom Ntumi is one) his military escort was composed of only one armed man guarding his car, which was minimal compared to previous outings. According to the local consulting team, Ntumi used much more protection and had a much bigger personal guard a few years ago.

Focus group participants were asked if they expected a resumption of war. Participants in Kinkala and Matoumbou said that they were not worried about such an event, especially since at the end of the war Ntumi had made several declarations denouncing any intention to return to fighting. According to an ex-combatant close to Ntumi, “If it has to happen again, another Ntumi will rise.” Despite the persistence of some uncoordinated free-riding elements, a resumption of violence in the Pool seems unlikely at the moment.

#### 4. The spiritual dimension

Several writings have highlighted the religious character of the Nsilulu movement and the practices of

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13 The 2002 elections were held in only six of the fourteen administrative constituencies in the Pool region, which was then in a state of civil war (Reliefweb, 10 May 2007, available at: <http://reliefweb.int/node/418656>).

Ntumi's followers. Most describe their lifestyle as ascetic. Ngodi (2009) listed some of the Nsilulu's symbolic taboos: smoking cigarettes or cannabis, washing themselves naked, drinking alcohol except for red wine, washing more than once a week, wearing red or black, touching cassava after drinking water, urinating against a tree, drinking water after 18:00, eating while standing, and wearing *fétiche* to go to the frontline. They also had to flee the rain, and menstruating women could not cook for them. Furthermore, the Nsilulus had many taboos related to food:

they were prohibited to eat cassava on Wednesdays, looted meat, bats, snakes, or any food cooked and sold at the market. In the early stages of the insurgency, it was reported that the Nsilulu sometimes forced their prisoners and the population in the area under their control to attend Thursday prayer, killing all who disobeyed (Crime, Law and Social Change, 2001).

Until recently, the Nsilulu were easily identifiable, since they all wore dreadlocks and purple pieces of clothing, purple being the color of St. Michel. Ntumi derived a large part of his popular legitimacy by stating that he was a messenger of God and that St. Michel had asked him to gather the troops spread in the forests to lead the insurgency.

The spiritual side of the movement seems to have evolved since the early days. In May 2011, only three of the ex-combatants met wore dreadlocks. One of them, met in Ngoma Tsé-Tsé, explained that they had received instructions to stop the practice, and



*Ex-combatant selling medicines in Madzia (outside the PNDDR framework)*

that in Brazzaville, police had started to harass rastas (members of the rastafari movements), even if they had never been part of the Nsilulu movement. Only in Missafou did we witness the remnants of a purple flag at the entrance of a former Ninja leader compound, the home of Ntumi's brothers. Ex-combatants no longer dressed in rags and were instead in line with the local dress code.

Although Ntumi continues to preach in Pentecostal churches, prayers are no longer compulsory. Ntumi continues to have religious followers. Some of the ex-combatants interviewed in Voula and Kinkala, which are relatively close to Soumona, said that they sometimes go there to hear his sermons. Others have different faiths, but this is not seen as an issue. Some ex-combatants still contribute to the church. For example, an ex-combatant met in Brazzaville, mentioned in an individual interview that he sometimes gives the *dime*—a kind of tithe—to the Church when he earns something.