

Part 4 – The current situation of ex-combatants

1. A diversity of profiles

The term Ninja encompasses a diversity of profiles that can be roughly categorized into ten overlapping categories:

- Type 1: The local Ninjas

In all the places visited, focus group participants acknowledged that local youth from their area were drawn into the Ninja movement. Their rationale for enlisting included forced conscription, desire to protect parents, self-protection, and genuine political or economic interest. These reasons are in line with previous studies that explored the profiles and motives of ex-combatants in RoC (Bazenguissa-Ganga, 1999; Yengo, 2006; Ngodi, 1999). When the Ninjas were chased by the army, most of the local youth fled with them, some out of conviction and others out of fear of being caught by the national army if they stayed. For example, in the village of Lindzolo 20 local youth followed the Ninjas in their flight; five of them returned a few years later.²⁵

In Voula, many local youths were coerced into joining the movement in 2002.²⁶ In Loutéhété, the focus group mentioned that most of the local youth who joined the armed movement only did so for a few weeks. Those youths were referred to as “assistants” instead of “combatants.” Others who stayed active in the movement longer apparently had no problem with the community upon return. The focus group said that all came back eventually, and that some came back in pairs. They are now regular members of the commu-

nity. Some are members of a *mutuelle*²⁷, while others are involved in small businesses and in local economic arrangements with other community members.²⁸

- Type 2: The outsiders

In all localities visited, the Ninjas who came from outside, especially from the districts of Kindamba and Vinza, are said to have been more numerous than those coming from inside the locality. It is also believed that the “outsiders” were most responsible for social disorder, even if “insiders” also played a role. In certain places, such as Lindzolo and Massembo-Loubaki, the local Ninja commander was from the area, which generally minimized cases of abuse towards civilians. This was not, however, the norm. It was very clear from the focus groups that while community members were generally willing to welcome back the ex-combatants native to the locality, outsiders were asked to leave, especially after the deployment of the military operations in the Pool region in 2010.

- Type 3: The ex-combatants still loyal to Ntumi

Ntumi continues to entertain a certain form of paternalism from Soumona, a district of Kinkala about

25 Focus group Lindzolo, May 2011.

26 Focus group Voula, May 2011.

27 A *mutuelle* is a community-based social association where members pay a membership fee to be able to claim some kind of social benefits in cases of funerals, long-lasting disease, etc.

28 Focus group Loutéhété, May 2011.

one hour from Brazzaville where he set up a sort of safe haven that attracts Ninjas who feel threatened by recent developments, particularly Operation KIMIA. His residence in Soumona consists of a large fenced compound that provides basic services for the population. He plans to build and equip a health center in the near future, and he sustains a patrimonial relationship with the people who surround him. During our visit to Soumana, we witnessed a person go to Ntumi's deputy to report a death, implicitly requesting his support. We also learned that Ntumi employs many individuals as farmers in his 55-hectare cassava plantation in Vinza and that he regularly receives request from ex-combatants to support their agro-pastoral activities.

The Soumona compound has also become an ideal place for hiding ex-combatants on the run. There are rumors that some find sanctuary there when they are harassed or fear harassment by the military. We met one ex-combatant in Brazzaville who had been demobilized since 2004 but had recently joined Ntumi for fear of retaliation by the military. Ntumi's deputy also mentioned the example of 50 ex-combatants who had each received a communication requesting that they report to the military immediately following the deployment of Operation KIMIA. They then approached Ntumi for advice, and Ntumi's response was to inform the national army *État Major* it was out of the question that these ex-combatants would report.²⁹

Notwithstanding such examples of protection, it has also been reported that Ntumi handed over known criminals to the military.³⁰ Therefore, it is likely that the most dangerous free-riding elements have sought refuge elsewhere or have directly negotiated their conditions with the local commanders of Operation KIMIA.³¹ If this is the case, Ntumi and his Soumona compound may be used more as a buffer against real or perceived threats to some ex-combatants. (See part 3, section 3 for concrete examples about the extent of ex-combatants socioeconomic reintegration.)

- **Type 4: The self-demobilized with no links to Ntumi**

We met several individuals, including former *écurie* commanders, who had self-demobilized and retained no links to Ntumi. Some of these had clearly lost the taste for war, while others were disillusioned and were

tired of feeling manipulated by their leadership. One former commander of Linzolo implied that he might take a well-paid opportunity as a military commander if it emerged. However, his comment must be put into context to avoid giving the impression that the Congolese situation is still potentially explosive. This particular former commander was a Kolélas recruit from 1993; he joined Ntumi's ranks near Vinza, when he was fleeing the Cobras' violent purges, and his comment was more likely linked to his personal trajectory than to a possible resumption of war. Between 1993 and 2003, he changed sides many times, not by betrayal but due to changing alliances. At the time, loyalty then seemed fluid and opportunistic.

During his time with Kolélas (1993–1997), he was given CFA 1,000 per day to serve in the militias. He said that he regularly sent part of the money to his mother. In 1997, with Kolélas joining Sassou Nguesso, he spent a few months in the government army, where he received free food and a daily wage of CFA 1,500. Shortly after the presidential elections, however, his former military chiefs were murdered in the military camp, so he fled north with 70 comrades and went into hiding in the district of Kindamba. There, he was only three kilometers from Ntumi, and joining the Nsilulu therefore appeared to be the most logical move. When Ntumi signed the peace agreement in 1999, the former commander was again transferred to the President's service, in which he spent five months in a military camp and was paid like a regular soldier.

At the military camp, he was offered several opportunities to conduct secret military operations, but he refused most of them so as not to upset Ntumi. In 2003, tired of feeling manipulated by both sides and having little to show for it, he self-demobilized and went back to Linzolo, his mother's village. Although Ntumi sent people after him to ask why he had left, he was not pressured to come back.

29 It would be worth exploring what has become of the Ninjas recently evicted from localities where abuses lasted until recently – Matoumbou, Madzia, Voula, and Missafou. The situation is difficult to gauge. Perhaps it is right to assume that within this group, some self-demobilized and settled down somewhere, such as in Brazzaville or Pointe Noire, in an anonymous place, or in their locality of origin. Some might also have chosen to join Ntumi's close network in Soumona or Brazzaville.

30 Interview with Ntumi's *directeur de cabinet*, May 2011.

31 Individual interview with the former KIMIA commander of Kibouendé, May 2011.

- **Type 5: The high and mid-ranking commanders**

Some former Ninjas were placed in the national army throughout the phases of military absorption (these phases are detailed in the fourth section). Others were placed in the administration. The ex-military commander of Ngoma-Tsé Tsé, a former Kolélas commander who joined Ntumi in 1999 and again in 2002, was recently appointed Conseiller Départemental of Ngoma-Tsé Tsé. A few mid-ranking commanders are said to have become dissidents and no longer consider themselves Ntumi's followers. In the district of Mindouli, for example, the CARITAS team in charge of collecting quantitative information on ex-combatants encountered such a free-riding commander—Pasteur Finition—in March 2011.

- **Type 6: The low-ranking recruits**

The bulk of the respondents interviewed during the qualitative data collection phase were low-ranking recruits. Through these interviews, it became clear that the recruit base had eroded significantly. In Voula, community members explained that the number of recruits decreased from 300 in 2002 to approximately 50 in 2009 to only about 30 in 2010. In May 2011, when we visited Voula, only eight to ten were left. In Missafou, the number of recruits fell from 900 in 2004 to 300 in 2007, followed by a gradual decrease, and then a sharp decrease after the deployment of the Operation KIMIA.

- **Type 7: The early-joiners**

We met several individuals who had been drawn into the Ninjas in 1993 when political exploitation of civilians was widespread. At the time, political parties were arming the youth, who later decided to rally around Ntumi (see the earlier examples of Voula and Linzolo). Most joined due to fears of political retaliation and the purges that followed the events of 1993–94, 1997, and 1999. Some demobilized in 1999, others in 2003, and still others have continued to do so until recently. Many followed a similar pattern: they self-demobilized in 1997 and returned to civilian life for awhile but then mobilized again because they felt directly threatened by the violence against former Ninjas in Brazzaville. Even those no longer active in the movement feared for their lives due to the prevalence of retaliation.

In the words of one ex-combatant met in Brazza-

ville: “We were chased by the government, hence to continue to be free, we had to continue in an armed movement.”³² The same scenario happened between 1999–2002. As a result, some ex-combatants who had returned to civilian life, especially those who were living in Brazzaville, once again felt the need to go on the run. Some early-joiners also reflected on differences when joining the movement led by Ntumi. “We had *fétiches* in the movement of Kolélas. We gave them up. We also gave up the *chanvre* (cannabis), by order of the Pastor.” They were also instructed not to conduct acts of arbitrary violence.

- **Type 8: the late-comers (*les petits*)**

A distinction is made at the local level between the Ninja elements who fought during the war—local references to the war refer to the periods of 1998–99 and 2002–03—and the Ninja elements who came later, often to follow their brothers. The ex-combatants in the second group are labeled *les petits* as described in an interview with the KIMIA commander in Matoumbou in May 2011. The implication is that they did not fight during combat operations and therefore have no popular legitimacy. In places where Ninja bases persisted until early 2010, the population was therefore all the more upset at constant harassment by *les petits*.

Missafou differed from other localities, as it continued to receive Ninjas between 2004 and 2010 long after combat had ended. In Matoumbou, the commander of Operation KIMIA pointed out that nearby residual crime nearby was due to a small group of four to six bandits active around the town. According to this commander, “They did not go to the frontline, they came in later. Some are young brothers of killed Ninja commanders.”

- **Type 9: The settled ones**

The bulk of persons interviewed were settled, involved in the local socioeconomic context, and intended to stay, regardless of whether or not they were native to the area. This was especially true for the ones that had self-demobilized awhile ago³³.

32 Testimony of a 1993 recruit when reflecting on the 1999 events.

33 According to the quantitative data collected by CARITAS in March 2011, only 20% of the respondents who were engaged in an armed group in the Pool had been demobilized in the past six years. The other 80% had left the armed groups much earlier.

- Type 10: The ones not yet settled

In Voula and Brazzaville, we met a few ex-combatants who were still searching for a place to settle. This does not mean that they were socially excluded. In fact, they had developed strategies to cope with the transition, but they nevertheless lacked a personal base, which had implications in terms of access to land, food supplies, and family stability.

2. The gap between Ntumi and the base

Although Ntumi is still popular in the Pool region, his political image has suffered from developments in recent years. Some ex-combatants clearly expressed disillusionment, which they framed in very practical terms: in other words, they got nothing from their participation in the armed movement, while Ntumi did (referring to his current political status, which has allowed him to enjoy economic advantages). While some have resigned themselves to this situation, others were still hoping to gain something. Among the second group, some were ostensibly sticking to Ntumi and his Soumona or Kisoundi compound³⁴ in order to get a share of any financial help that may become available for ex-combatants.

3. Integration in the local communities

The word “Ninja” was no longer used in any of the towns and villages visited. According to several focus groups, the term “ex-combatant” was only used in front of evaluation missions, and the community no longer makes this distinction. Local authorities point out other community members who have been involved in armed movements in the past for evaluation missions but only for the purpose of the meeting. In fact, Matoumbou’s village chief called for an end to the use of the term ex-combatant. To him, if the phenomenon is not mentioned, it will gradually disappear. He also pointed out that the last attacks on buses and trucks were acts of thieves and had nothing to do with past wars.

The extent of social reintegration

Socioeconomic reintegration depends on many factors. It can be fostered by an external intervention, but not necessarily by an intervention that specifically

targets ex-combatants or that only focuses on reintegration. This is particularly important to keep in mind given the developed humanitarian context in the Pool region (see appendices 1 and 2, which detail current development interventions in the Pool, as well as interventions specific to ex-combatants). Socioeconomic reintegration can also occur without any external help.

Returning to the typology developed above, community processes to socially reintegrate ex-combatants native to the same community (type 1) involved forgiveness ceremonies and general advice from the local authorities. For instance, in Matoumbou, the chief mentioned that ex-combatants who had returned were advised to join a church and to display their religious faith. Although he implied during the focus group that not all ex-combatants from the locality could come back (“depending on what they did”), we learnt later from a community member that an ex-combatant who had committed many atrocities and multiple rapes during the war had returned in early 2011 and was now living in peace in the community. In Kinkala, the *chefs de quartier* sensitized their respective populations to accept the returning combatants. (When the Ninjas left Kinkala in May 1999, they were followed by most of the youth recruited there, although some came back in 2000 after the signing of the December 1999 peace agreement.) This appeared to be a difficult task, since arbitrary murder—sometimes involving members of the same family—had been rampant in Kinkala.³⁵

Similar sensitization efforts took place in Louingui, where the administrative authorities asked the population to accept the ex-combatants. The sensitization was conducted on several levels including through *chefs de quartier*, village chiefs, and church leaders. Reinsertion posed no particular problems at the time. The focus group did point out that some of the demobilized ex-combatants, such as those more prone to violence than others, had clearly belonged to a strong *écurie*.

Reintegrating in the village of the spouse, mother, or father was another noteworthy pattern. In Loutéhété,

34 Ntumi’s official residence in Brazzaville is located in one of the southern districts, Kisoundi Barrage.

35 Focus group Kinkala, May 2011.

the assembly mentioned the case of an ex-combatant who settled there, as it was the village of his spouse, whom he had met in Missafou a few years earlier. The focus group participants mentioned that he was well-integrated and that he had even become President of a local economic association. In Voula, a respondent was asked to leave by the community and was planning to move his family to his father's village as soon as the school year ended. In the meantime, he had entered into an arrangement with community members to continue to occupy a house for a few months, although he had not before asked permission. He was also renting a field from a landowner to burn charcoal³⁶.

The perception that ex-combatants were receiving disproportionate support in comparison with other community members was present in several localities. One focus group participant said, "Being an ex-combatant is a diploma." When asked to reflect on ex-combatants' reintegration, focus group participants in several places—Matoumbou, Madzia, Missafou, and Ngoma Tsé Tsé—regretted that all the attention so far had been focused on ex-combatants. They noted that several villages had literally disappeared during the war and that nothing had been done to repopulate them. For example, much of the displaced population of Ngoma Tsé Tsé still squats in a warehouse in Kinsoundi and commutes there two or three days a week to work in their fields rather than living in their place of origin.

No better, no worse than non ex-combatants: the extent of economic reintegration

Since many ex-combatants stopped being actively involved in the movement several years ago, one could assume that they are deprived of economic activities and that they passively wait for reintegration. However, the ex-combatants who have settled in an area, whether or not they are native to that locality, are



Gardening in Madzia (outside of PNDDR framework)

generally involved in several informal economic activities such as fish farming, gardening, and animal husbandry. The ex-combatants we met were generally engaged in economic activities similar to the activities of the population at large, which in the Pool region are mainly agro-pastoral activities and small retail business, both of which require similar types of input.

It would be wrong to assume that the ex-combatants who have not yet settled are socially disconnected and deprived of jobs and occasional income. Individual interviews point out that many people who live close to Ntumi in the areas surroundings Soumona and Kinsundi Barrage are also economically active, with some doing quite well. One ex-combatant interviewed in Brazzaville was regularly commuting between Soumona and Kinsundi. He told us that he was trained as a nurse before the war and had resumed his nursing activity in a private clinic in Brazzaville. He also mentioned that he owned fifteen goats in his village, probably under some tenant farming arrangement, and that he was keen on expanding his animal husbandry activities in Mindouli. The activity was not

³⁶ Several testimonies collected in Matoumbou, Madzia, Missafou, Voula pointed out that before Operation Kimia, ex-combatants were not renting their agricultural plots; they were using them without permission.

new to him, since his father was already active in animal husbandry at the Voka farm in the Boko area.

Local economic opportunities for ex-combatants were partly shaped by whether or not they could access land and the form of that access. Land access varied widely depending on whether the ex-combatant was native to the area or not, and if so, whether or not he was a *propriétaire foncier* (local landowner).³⁷ If he was not, access to land was regulated through rental arrangements³⁸. For agricultural plots, such arrangements were usually temporary and lasted until the harvest, with the possibility of extension for two to three additional years. Ex-combatants were sometimes able to purchase agricultural land; however, in sites where land is scarce, such as Voula and Kinkala, access to land was protected by family heads, and purchases of agricultural plots were said to be forbidden. The purchase of residential plots was commonplace in the Pool region, with prices varying depending on proximity to the fields and to the village.

We noted a local tendency to prefer working individually or with close family members.³⁹ The reasons mentioned included trust, leadership issues, and the form of arrangements to access land. In Matoumbou, one respondent said, “the issue with groups is that there is always a leader, and somehow gradually, the other group members become his workers.” In Missafou, the assembly regretted the fact that external assistance is usually given to groups, while local ways of working are mainly individual with help provided by the close family. A focus group participant gave the example of fish farming. In his view, targeting groups was not ideal for such activity since what matters the most for the continuation of the activity is to target pond owners. This aspect is usually downplayed in humanitarian assistance, and *contrats de bail* (lease contracts) are generally insufficient to secure the use of a piece of land or a pond.

When ex-combatants formed groups, each member of the group usually cultivated his own plot, but they sporadically contributed to a common pot to cover communal needs, such as medical expenses. We met with a few groups in Boko and Massembo Loubaki whose activities include market gardening, fish farming, and charcoal.

The group working in the charcoal business split the costs for renting the field to burn the wood and for transporting the charcoal to Brazzaville. In Boko, a

group leader was particularly careful not to bring on too many members. In his words: “The group is doing well. We divide all benefits in three [the group consists of himself, a family member and a non-family member]. We keep a small fund to cover medical expenses. If we sell 5,000, we put 3,000 in the pot. We use the money for family issues and that is why we cannot afford to be too many in the group.” Massembo-Loubaki had several agro-pastoral associations, the main rationale for which was that a group could produce more and that it increased the benefits to sell in Brazzaville. Massembo is located in a very remote area and transporting the agricultural products was cited as major problem.

In areas where Ninja bases have persisted until recently, community members pointed out many cases of land abuse. In Voula, for example, the focus group pointed out that when a fish farming project targeting ex-combatants was about to be implemented, the beneficiaries were squatting at ponds that were not theirs. Ultimately, the project was not implemented. In Missafou, community members underlined the fact that before the arrival of Operation KIMIA, ex-combatants were not paying rent when using agricultural land. Forced labor was also common and was mentioned in Madzia and Missafou.

The practice of *métayage* (tenant farming) is also widespread for animal husbandry. We interviewed several ex-combatants involved in such arrangements with community members. In Loutéhété, for instance, the process was explained as follows: “Someone has an animal. Someone else is interested to breed it. He gives the owner CFA 12,500 to “co-buy” the animal, then he takes the animal and takes care of it. After birth, the number of animals born is divided in two and the profits from the sale of the female are also divided in two. The advantage for the initial owner is that he gets a source of income without taking care of the animal.” We heard similar arrangements in Missafou.

37 The landowners are traditionally the family heads descendant of the first settlers.

38 Prices vary depending on location. In Linzolo for instance, a plot to grow cassava is rented for around 150,000 CFA francs, depending on size; renting an area to burn charcoal costs about 75,000 CFA francs for two months. In Madzia, land rental is more or less regulated at 30-35,000 CFA francs per half-hectare. In Massembo-Loubaki, the rent for a half-hectare is estimated at 25,000 CFA francs.

39 Focus groups in Kinkala, Missafou, Boko, and Matoumbou.

Ex-combatants involved in agro-pastoral activities face many of the same issues as the community at large. Transporting agricultural products to the nearest towns is a significant challenge. In some towns, such as Ngoma Tsé Tsé, even if the village is located on the railroad, trucks transport most products because there are not enough products to fill up a train car. In Massembo Loubaki, individuals from the town fill a train car about once a week with non-food items (charcoal, wood, *foufou*). However, focus group participants stressed that upon arrival in Brazzaville, products are heavily taxed by the different services, including the mairie and the agricultural control.

Challenges

Although most of the challenges faced by ex-combatants were the same as non-combatant community members, ex-combatants also faced issues unique to their group. One such issue is anonymity. When asked why they would not settle in Brazzaville to start over their life, ex-combatants living near Ntumi pointed out that as soon as a newcomer arrives in a neighborhood (usually hosted first by a relative), the *chef de quartier* is informed, after which the police and the population start watching him. It quickly becomes known that the newcomer once participated in warfare, and he becomes the ideal scapegoat for anything that goes wrong in the neighborhood. In the words of the ex-combatants, “It is only in Soumona that there is peace for us.”

A practical challenge faced by some ex-combatants—especially by outsiders who were recently asked to leave—is the issue of housing. Voula provided a striking example: ex-combatants who had squatted there in empty houses for many years were now asked by homeowners to leave the premises. This is an interesting example of civilian leverage. If it is usually assumed that the power im-

balance favors ex-combatants, this example shows that in later stages, when the situation has calmed down, ex-combatants might become socially accountable for their actions.

Focus group participants in Massembo Loubaki pointed out the extent of illiteracy among the ex-combatants. Those that were of school age during the 1998–2004 conflicts received no education, as the schools were closed for six years. Even church representatives avoided the town during that period. One of their suggestions to remedy the situation was to set up literacy classes for young adults.

Lastly, the well-established culture of patronage is, for some, difficult to break. Many ex-combatants continue to go to Ntumi reflexively every time they have a problem—perceived or real. There is also the hope of economic benefits if one stays close to the leader. An ex-combatant based in Soumona mentioned that he was called from time to time to help safely convoy trucks, as he was known to be skilled in weapons. The main disadvantage of such practice, however, is that it tends to isolate the ex-combatant from his direct family, spouses, and children, who usually stay in the village and do not commute to Soumona.



Making charcoal in Ngoma Tsé Tsé (outside of PNDDR framework)