

# Mirroring Zaire: Authority and Self-bondage in a Congolese Prison

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Goma's central prison is a sturdy grey-walled building in the form of a square with a guard tower arising on the southwest corner. Scattered around the structure, police officers and military personnel wander around or hide from the sun while sitting on plastic chairs, always ready to ask for a small entrance fee from anyone who shows interest to enter. But their authority stops right there, at the gate of the penitentiary institution that holds over 3 000 inmates (Radio Okapi, 2022). Like other prisons in DR Congo (hereafter Congo), police and army officers guard the *Prison Centrale de Goma*, also known as *Munzenze*, only from the outside. Inside, the prison is run by inmates, headed by a president and vice-president, that mirror – more like in a hall of mirrors (Turner 1982, 104) – forms of authority and political imaginations from the outside world: a brigade along the example of the structure of the Congolese army has been erected, taxes are levied and the prison is divided into provinces. It is a classic example of what Foucault conceptualized as a heterotopia: a fundamentally “other space” that simultaneously represents, contests and inverts the outside world in rather disturbing ways (Foucault 1986). Detainees refer to this heterotopia as “Zaire” – as Congo was called during the Mobutu regime –, evoking memories of the harsh life and suffering under Mobutu's regime. But also, the ways in which daily life, coercion and self-enrichment are entangled in Munzenze explain how and why Zaire might be the perfect name for Goma's central prison. For this essay, we argue that a distinct style of authority is produced in Munzenze, that reflects and distorts the workings of power outside its gates.

The black, rusty gate with a Congolese army soldier standing next to is the only thing that separates prison life from life on the outside. Right next to it, big white letters are painted on the wall. It says: “*L'accès à la prison est gratuit*” (French for “Entrance to prison is free of charge”). The irony of it gets you when you actually try to enter. The soldier demands 500 *Francs Congolais* (\$ 0.25) to open the door for you. After paying, the door opens with a screeching sound and from that moment onwards you left Goma and entered the imagined “country” of Zaire. The Congolese state has no direct presence or legitimacy here – at least not in practice. The soldier who opens the door will let you cross the border but he will never be able to enter this country himself. Once inside Zaire, an administration run by prisoners governs this ‘other state’. When the prisoners talk about the prison as a country, this is to be taken quite literally. The prison is divided into different ‘provinces’. The word ‘province’ refers to the different courtyards of prison. A *chef de cours* is charged with overseeing a province. Since authority in the prison is decentralized, like the Congolese state, the province is also divided into different *cellules* – cities, as one former inmate referred to it. In charge

of these cellules are the *chefs de cellules*. They carry out tasks of administration, such as registering new prisoners. The prison administration operates like a state as it renders the convicted population legible which in turn allows the prison authorities to rule over them.

Prison life is not equal for everyone. The different provinces and cellules in Munzenze also reflect different lifestyles and levels of suffering. If you are lucky – that means if you were able to pay the tax of \$ 450 – you can stay in cellule E and F, also referred to as the *quartier spéciale*. Life in this special part of the prison, where prisoners lie on a mattress in their bed or sit on plastic chairs in relative calm, stands in contrast with life for those who lack the money to pay for a proper place. Those prisoners without sufficient means are sent to Cours A, where the most unfortunate ones spend all day and night on a bumpy concrete floor, hiding from the sun or rain under a plastic bag. Often, this means that people who have economic and social capital outside of prison also can use it on the inside. Not only does life in Munzenze mirror how authority works and functions, but it also reproduces social and class differences that create a fertile ground for prisoners' compliance with the penitentiary system. It means that financial opportunities can be used to either climb up or hold on to your higher position.

## II

“Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable.

In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public space. Either the entry is compulsory [...] or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications.” (Foucault 1987, 7)

Entering this separate state of Zaire does involve some sort of border-crossing. No visa, no passport. But a prisoner arriving in Munzenze for the very first time – referred to as a *mukujakuja* (Swahili for “someone who comes”) – is deprived of all his clothes. Afterwards, the brigade will put the *mukujakuja* next to a wall, called *la centrale*. Then, the members of the prison brigade take buckets of water or a hose and aim them at the newcomer. The following account of an ex-convict and gang leader in Goma shows how this initiation ritual at times turns more violent:

Early in the morning at 5 a.m. it's the parade. They made us sit down in one place. There were 4 of us: “you! you! you! you! stand up! come over here!”, we stood up and went. One of the guards held a big mortar to prepare fufu [a stiff mash made of cassava or corn] with. After pouring a whole bucket of water on us, he started to hit us with it. And then you have to see the person who is hitting you, you have to see how strong he is! Another barrel of water was poured

on us, then we had to lay down on the ground and received a whipping. Then we were thrown into the cell [solitary confinement] for a week (interview with a former prisoner, Goma, 10/10/2021).

Once inside, prison life possesses a distinct logic of “fending for yourself”. Basic human needs are not – or scarcely – provided for. This means that for food, medicine, clothes and everything else, prisoners are dependent upon support from the outside or on their own capacity to make a living in prison. Family members or the church are the most important examples of outside support. But you could also try to find a job in prison as a hairdresser or food vendor. Commodities coming from outside are sold in a parallel economy that exists within Munzenze.

Ruling over the inside of the prison is the so-called *Capita Générale* (or CG), also referred to as the president. Since the state authorities, including the prison director, do not set foot inside the prison, the latter exercises authority by appointing his prisoner counterpart, the CG, with whom he collaborates as an intermediary. This way of governing through intermediaries by state authorities is not unique to prisons in Goma. Similar to, for example, vigilante-type organizations in Goma’s popular neighborhoods, rather than yet another indication of state failure, it should be seen as a specific way of executing state power (Kirsch and Grätz 2010; Hendriks 2018). In practice, the prison director names one of the prisoners as *Capita Générale* or, in short, CG. The CG serves as the intermediary of the Congolese state in prison and creates his own authority in the process. Today, the CG is the former important administrator of a large city in the province. His close ties with the state outside allow him to navigate this thin line between state and prison authority. Under the CG and his vice president, an entire ‘state-like’ prison administration unfolds: tax collectors, an army-like brigade that maintains order and enforces ‘law’ in prison, an intelligence service that is charged with finding out who plans to escape or plans acts of resistance. All these institutions receive their legitimacy and authority from the CG in the first place and the prison director in the second place.

But why would prisoners themselves engage in such a perverse logic of guarding and keeping themselves locked up? The answer is quite simple: acquiring status and the financial benefits that go with it. A complex system of levying taxes is put in place. Each prisoner who enters prison is obliged to pay the *droits de la prison* (prison fee, literally the “rights of the prison”). It is a \$5 tax that is to be paid by every prisoner and that serves to finance the state of Zaire in prison. Paying the fee gives you the right to wear shoes or flipflops in prison, which makes it very clear to the prison administration and fellow prisoners who has paid and who has not yet done so. Apart from the prison fee, there are other taxes levied

by the CG and the institutions he is in charge of. For example, to earn the right to carry a smartphone, one pays \$50 while carrying a small phone without internet access would cost someone \$20. This is to be paid only once and afterwards a weekly tax of \$1 is demanded to keep access to your phone. These taxes are distributed among the CG, the brigade, the administration and all the other ruling bodies. That means occupying key positions in the prison government can actually be a very lucrative business. One former inmate described it as: "Prisoners are being enriched at the expense of other prisoners".

As in many cases of state-making, establishing authority in Munzenze involves some degree of racketeering. Authority is created by means of coercion and extracting capital. In Munzenze, this is done by levying taxes that are used to finance the coercive authorities that keep prisoners inside and make them pay their taxes. A perverse but sophisticated symbiosis between coercion and capital is put in place. The political imaginaries at play do matter in that regard. Seeing Munzenze as a separate state, like Zaire, has real political and material consequences in the sense that a state-like entity is created and maintained. The significance of the name "Zaire" is telling. As was the case under Mobutu's authoritarian regime, people in Munzenze are confronted with a coercive, hollow state that is preoccupied with self-enrichment. The fact that the brigade also serves as a personal bodyguard for the CG and that the CG makes good money on the back of suffering prisoners reinforces the image of the prison as Zaire, a country long gone but still very present in the collective imaginary. The only way the CG can maintain his personal authority and security is through redistributing his income. The redistributive, clientelist character of this power brings to mind strong memories of how Mobutu held on to his power in the 1980s.

This way of exercising prison authority corresponds strongly with one of the most known Congolese adagios that dates back to the Zaire of Mobutu: "*Débrouillez-vous*" (French for "Fend for yourself"); also known as Article 15 or *Système D* (*Débrouiller*). The imagined article 15 of the constitution was installed by Mobutu during the economically declining Zaire of the 1980s, where he urged citizens and state officials to fend for themselves. As Jourdan (2004, 170) notes: "The 'article 15' can be considered as an implicit social pact between the state and its citizens since it allowed the former to retire from public life and its functions, leaving to the latter the possibility to act unlawfully, in a context where the difference between legality and illegality had no more sense and everything was left to the capability of individuals to cut out a personal space of power within the society." Until today, *Système D* and Article 15 are still frequently called upon to justify predatory behavior and "self-interested opportunism in all spheres of life" (Carayannis et al. 2018, 23) both in and outside of prison.



Munzenze appears here to us as a heterotopia or “other space”, that reflects and distorts how authority is exercised in the outside world. It casts a mirror onto the workings of authority in the sense that when one enters Goma’s central prison and undergoes the transformation from Congolese citizen into a prisoner, it is akin to entering another country with its provinces, cellules and distinct forms of government. Prisoners have to fend for themselves – “*debrouillez-vous*” – and are responsible for their own survival. These are also very real aspects of how Congolese citizens are dealing with state authority in their daily lives. The logic of rule in Congolese prisons is one of coercion and self-enrichment; the same logic of state-making that prevailed in the Zaire of the 1980s and that also endures in Congo today. Exercising state functions such as tax collection and the deployment of a brigade are disclosing in detail how the sophisticated symbiosis between capital and coercion is born.

But power in Munzenze is by no means a simple replica. Rather than considering authority in Congolese prisons as a plain reproduction of power on the outside, it is an imperfect mirroring in which prisoners are twisting the meanings of authority, like in a hall of mirrors in which every image is reflected, thrown back and altered. By referring to the prison as Zaire, inmates are distorting the reflection of Congo. This is not Congo anymore but the imagined country of Zaire, inspired by but not the same as the historical Zaire. The visions of Zaire give life to a type of authority whose symbols are constantly performed and altered to establish a makeshift dominance over a detained population. The carceral order is self-referential in the sense that it constantly needs to perform these symbols – the memories of Zaire and the materiality of power in the form of taxes and the brigade – to keep its authority in place.

The broken or bent mirror is clearest in the role inversion that takes place within the walls. Prisoners reverse their social roles and become their own adversaries by acting as prison guards. This is no longer authority as we think we know it. In Munzenze, the type of authority that arises is a perverse one. Inmates are, in a way, keeping themselves deprived of their liberty. They are caught up in an act of self-bondage, in which they continuously perform authority only to keep themselves hostage behind bars. However, is this perversity only taking place in the dark spaces of prison cells? Is there a difference between prisoners guarding themselves and Congolese police officers, for example, that police a violent system that confines them as well? Does exercising authority, in Congo and elsewhere, not always involve self-bondage?

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