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Patrice Yengo

Brazzaville's Marché Total Women's Alliances during the Civil War in Congo

The Republic of Congo-Brazzaville has witnessed two major conflicts within its 40 years of existence. The first one broke out on the eve of African Independences in the 1960s and brought into conflict the supporters of the first president of the new Republic, Fulbert Youlou, with those of his rival Jacques Opangault. The two rivals belonged to different ethnic groups and the conflict obviously had ethnic implications. After a tumultuous period of military rule, "scientific socialism" and a one party system, a National Conference was convened in 1991 to resolve what was defined as a political crisis over popular demands for a multi-party system. The second crises erupted in 1992 as a consequence of the failure of the democratization process, and has dragged on till 2001. This last conflict can be divided into various sequences, the first one took place in 1993 and 1994. It brought into conflict the former president Pascal Lissouba's supporters with the supporters of his direct rival at the presidential elections, Bernard Kolélas. However, contrary to the 1959 conflict, in the violent clashes of 1993-1994 factions from the same geographical area were opposing each other.

In a study of what had lead to the breakdown of social cohesion in the 1993-1994 civil war we became aware of the role played by associations of market women in reconstructing the social relations after the violence (Yengo 1995). We came across a meeting of women traders from the Marché Total who had congregated in the courtyard of the Sacred Heart Basilica in Brazzaville. This meeting was similar to that of any lay religious group and would not have attracted my attention if I had not been told about its agenda by its president, here called Anne-Marie L. When, I was introduced to the Assembly, some thirty women were busy discussing what had become of their stalls in the Marché Total. A number of them had been forced to leave the Baongo area during the fighting and they had taken refuge in other parts of town, primarily Mfilou and Moutabala. These women came from the regions of Niari, Bouenza and Lekoumou, whose

inhabitants are collectively known as “Nibolek”, a subgroup of the Kongo ethnic group. When they left Bacongo they had lost their market stalls, which were both their place of work and their source of income. However, through gender and religious solidarity, the association of market women had protected their stalls and later sublet them and helped them to restart their trade in the new places.

The interviews which I carried out later with Anne-Marie L. and her deputy enabled me to gain an overall view of this expression of solidarity which established links over and above the conflicts. It is evidence of a social dynamic operating through religious, gender and professional networks. To get a more in-depth view of how this could happen, we have to approach it from three perspectives, namely the structuring of the market and women's trade, the 1993-1994 civil war and its consequences on the Bacongo market, the experience of the assembly of Christian women who are stallholders in the *Marché Total*.

The *Marché Total*

The city of Brazzaville consists of seven parts, Bacongo, Makelekele, Poto-Poto, Moungali, Ouenze, Talangai and Mfilou. Bacongo and Poto-Poto were the principal African neighbourhoods of colonial Brazzaville, and the site of Balandier's famous study from more than half a century ago (Balandier 1985). The *Marché Total* is both the main market of Bacongo and the biggest market in Brazzaville. It has its name from a nearby gas station.

The market is a central feature of African cities. In the colonial period, the market was the only place where Africans could carry out a trading activity. Markets were centrally located and serving the areas immediately surrounding them. In the course of time, the extension of the urban area led to the emergence of secondary markets in the suburbs of Brazzaville. The Congolese capital has now no less than seven major markets, one in each suburb, but those of Moungali, Ouenze and the *Marché Total* are the biggest. These markets are also bus stations and are the best stocked. However, the *Marché Total* in Bacongo has retained its leading position; given its central situation in the southern part of the city. It has also attracted customers from Makelekele and Diata.

The *Marché Total* was set up fairly recently. In the mid-1950's, when demographic growth had reshaped the urban landscape, it replaced what was known as the Ta Ngoma market. At the outset it covered rather a small area. At the centre was a butchering yard where also wild game was sold. Outside the central yard there were other activities grouped together; each type of goods occupying a separate section. Three quarters of the area of the market is now taken up by food and agricultural produce, including sea and fresh water fish, vegetables, root crops (yams, tarots, manioc)

and manioc products, such as *fufu*, or manioc flour, and *chikwangue*, manioc bread.

In the 1970's, Bacongo was extended and two new neighbourhoods were established, Makelekele and Diata. This meant the Marché Total needed more space and a road bordering the market was closed. The market was then enlarged beyond this road over an area three times the size of the original. We find now stalls selling fabrics and wraps, pots and pans, snack bars and small stalls selling a variety of items, but also stalls for basic food products for which there was no room in the old market.

Land use in the market area is similar to that of the city of Brazzaville in general, reflecting waves of immigration. Older people are found at the centre while new-comers have settled in the periphery. The most characteristic feature of urban markets and more particularly of the Marché Total is the high number of traders whose activities often extend into neighbouring streets. Each trader has the right to set out small heaps of goods on a small table, or quite simply on a cloth spread on the ground. The customers no longer need to go into the market to get the products they seek.

Women's Trading Activities in the Marché Total

Women play an important role in the economy of Brazzaville, their share of the non-salaried work force being as high as 73%. They are found predominantly in food production and food retailing. These are two distinct activities which merge now and then, particularly in market gardening and in the making of *chikwangue*, manioc bread. In the Brazzaville region market gardening is relatively old and has over time become the prerogative of women. Before the political conflicts of the 1990's which have destabilized Congo-Brazzaville, 81% of the market gardening was done by women. The chain from the garden to the market does not require any intermediaries; the gardeners sell their products themselves, either to retailers who then market the products, or they sell directly to consumers.

The making and selling of *chikwangue* follows a similar pattern. In the 1940's, *chikwangue* was mainly produced in rural areas and then brought to town. In the years before independence, the migration from the rural areas led to *chikwangue* also being produced in the cities, even if a considerable proportion does still come from rural areas, or from the neighbouring town of Kinshasa. Nowadays the traders no longer ret the manioc themselves, as they buy manioc which has already been retted¹, and they make it into bread.

1. The retting of manioc is the fermentation of the manioc tubers in order to separate them from their skin which is often bitter and highly toxic because it contains CYANHYDRIC acid. Two techniques are used: aerobic retting by prolonged soaking of the manioc in water, preferably in stagnant water and anaerobic retting which involves leaving the manioc in sacks buried in the earth for a certain length of time.

Alongside these combinations of agricultural production and trade, reselling manufactured or imported products is an important activity, also carried out by women. The goods may come from neighbouring countries or from Europe. The traders buy their stock of products from Kinshasa, in the fishing port of Yoro or at the beach in Brazzaville, or from wholesalers in Brazzaville. The products include frozen chicken and meat, tripe, dried haricot beans, tinned tomatoes, manioc flour, fresh-water fish, palm oil and margarine, sweets and biscuits. The prices of these everyday products are so low that everyone can buy them. They prove to be highly profitable for the traders not only because they quickly get back what they invest but also due to their rapid turnover which is highly conducive to profit. Paradoxically, the trade in fresh-water fish is carried out by young school-girls of rural origin (Kongo 1986: 415). This is a fringe activity to pay for their schooling. Haricot beans and other pulses account for a large part of the turnover of the women traders, many of whom come from Bas-Congo (Bas-Zaïre). They are often part-time traders who divide their time between the urban markets in Kinshasa and the *Marché Total*.

For the past twenty years, in the centre of the *Marché Total* catering for the stallholders and their clients has become an important activity. Although it is mainly based on selling products made from wheat flour, like bread, doughnuts and cakes, catering has extended to drinks and also cooked dishes. Makeshift restaurants have acquired a reputation by serving highly varied dishes, combining starch such as *chikwangue* or *fufu* with animal or vegetable proteins. This is one of the most lucrative niches for market women.

There is a group of extremely dynamic women who are referred to as "business women", who sell textiles, such as lengths of cloth, scarves, dresses and underwear, as well as shoes and jewellery. Most of these products come from abroad and are imported by the traders themselves. Their stalls are run by employees who are often recruited from the family circle. Although this activity does not generate much employment, it is a source of prestige for the *Marché Total* which is often presented, as is the Bacongo district more generally, as the place where fashions are launched in Brazzaville.

Local handicrafts from the rural areas, such as pottery, basketwork and hand-woven cloth have also appeared in the urban markets where they are traded by women. A number of these products compete favourably with industrially manufactured equivalents which are fairly expensive. Dressmaking, which used to be found primarily in residential areas, has become widespread and quite important around the market. There are more women than men dressmakers around the *Marché Total* and men are now involved in making clothes for women. Hairdressing salons have also established around the market, adding to the range of services provided.

Building materials, pots and pans and school materials are amongst the manufactured goods which now occupy a much larger area than before.

These trades are relatively profitable and represent niches which used to be male preserves but where women now outnumber men. Generally speaking, in the Marché Total men and women do not sell the same goods. The sale of food is more or less monopolized by women and their share of other types of trade is increasing, due to their capacity for organization in networks of mutual aid.

The 1993-1994 Civil War and its Consequences on the Baongo Market

After the National Conference in 1991 and the parliamentary elections in Brazzaville, Bernard Kolélas' party, the Congolese Movement for Democracy and Integrated Development (*Mouvement congolais pour la démocratie et le développement intégral*) (MCDDI) won the majority of the seats in almost all the constituencies in Brazzaville. In the southern part of the city, 80% of the votes in the Baongo and Makelekele districts went to the leader of the (MCDDI), whereas he obtained only 60% of the votes in the other two districts of Mfilou and Diata. At the presidential elections in July 1992, three leaders emerged; Pascal Lissouba, a former Prime Minister and a former international civil servant, who represented the regions of Grand Niari-Niari, Bouenza, Lekoumou ("Nibolek"); and Denis Sassou Nguesso, the present President, the leader of what was the only political party, the Congolese Labour Party (*Parti congolais du travail*) (PCT) and a native of la Cuvette, an important area in the power structure in the north of the country. Pascal Lissouba formed an alliance with Denis Sassou Nguesso and this alliance won the presidential elections, with 62% of the votes as opposed to Bernard Kolélas who got 38%.

Immediately after this victory, the formation of the first government gave rise to a quarrel between Pascal Lissouba and Denis Sassou Nguesso. The winning alliance broke up and a new alliance was forged, this time between Bernard Kolélas and the former president, Denis Sassou-Nguesso. Pascal Lissouba, whose electoral strength was mainly due to his strong influence in the interior of the country, did not have many supporters in the capital. He was forced to dissolve Parliament to avoid the new majority formed by the MCDDI-PCT taking the lead in the National Assembly. This opened the way to political contestation which later evolved into urban warfare. Sporadic protests broke out in Baongo, which very rapidly became more radical and even took on a para-military character. A demonstration organised by the new alliance in November 1992 was repressed by military forces after considerable bloodshed.

From then on, the followers of Bernard Kolélas opposed those of Pascal Lissouba in the Southern parts of Brazzaville, especially in Baongo and Makelekele. Whole families were driven from their homes. Women and children were beaten and houses were burnt down. For a whole week, the

people from “Nibolek” escaped from Bacongo by any means available. Some time later, it was the turn of Bernard Kolélas’ followers to be driven from the districts of Mfilou and Diata, which were then taken over by the supporters of Pascal Lissouba. Repression increased and was accompanied by the formation of private militia organised by the respective political parties. The MCDDI militia were known as the *ninjas*, those of the Pascal Lissouba’s Panafrican Union for Social Democracy (Union panafricaine pour la démocratie sociale) (UPADS) as the *Zulus*, with the *Cobras* being the militia of Denis Sassou Nguesso’s Congolese Labour Party (Yengo 1996).

Ethnicity and Trade in the Marché Total

Contrary to a very widespread idea, the Bacongo area, even if it is very homogeneous from the linguistic point of view, is ethnically very heterogeneous. Lari, a special form of the Kongo dialect, is the majority language, although Kituba (*sabir* Kikongo or pidgin Kikongo) which is spoken by other ethnic groups of Kongo origin, is also widespread. However, it is from an ethnic point of view the area is diversified. All the main ethnic groups from the south of the country have settled there. Close to the first generations, and around a core of people from the Pool region (Sundi, Kongo Manianga), migrants from Bouenza came early on. This region was an integral part of the Pool region until electoral constituencies were reorganised after independence. The Beembe, Dondo and Kamba, who are all from Bouenza are well integrated with other groups in Bacongo. They all carry Kongo family names which cannot be differentiated from those of other Kongo sub-groups. It may just be possible to distinguish their clans but, given that the Kongo clans are to be found in all the ethnic sub-groups in the South, it is rare to find names that belong to only one branch or to a single sub-group. Other migrants who come from the coast, such as the Vilis, the Yombes or those from the forest areas of Lekoumou, Sibiti and Komono, close to the frontier with Gabon, have long been present in Bacongo. They speak Lari and some have even forgotten their original language.

The conflict between the MCDDI and the UPADS has had profound consequences for the essence and traditions of this well integrated community. This is because its religious traditions were strong. Two major currents in Christianity were represented in Bacongo; Catholicism which was in the majority and Protestantism with all its affiliated churches. The Evangelical Church of the Congo which includes most of the components of the Reformed Church was the best established while the Church of the Prophet Simon Kimbangu, popularly known as Ngunzism (Kouvouama 1999) was very widespread in the southern part of Brazzaville and to a lesser extent in the Congo-Kinshasa (ex-Zaire) frontier region.

The ecumenical trend in the Christian churches enabled religious differences to be blurred giving rise to large religious groupings referred to as ecumenical assemblies. These have enabled Christians of all persuasions to establish create links with each other, links which are strengthened by the fact that they consolidate structural bonds which already exist, such as affinities between ethnic groups, or links between neighbourhoods and bonds of gender or of employment. This community had become homogeneous over time and was strongly imbued with religious beliefs which were almost messianic in nature. The political conflict affected its social cohesion so profoundly that the whole social structure of the Bacongo and Makelekele was totally changed.

Despite the very strong cohesion of the community, the lines of division drawn by the successive waves of immigration and the history of the settlement were still visible in Bacongo. There were still pockets of former Beembe or Teke migrants around the Ta Ngoma market in old Bacongo and there were clusters of houses exclusively occupied by Vilis or people from Niari and Lekoumou. These were the remnants of times gone by when the colonial power governed the suburbs of Brazzaville on the basis of ethnic groups or area of origin, administered by traditional chiefs around whom the new migrants settled.

This subdivision was also visible in the lay-out the market. Just as we see regional specialisation in production, in commercial activities one can observe similar specialisations where traders deal primarily in the products of their area of origin. It was easy to draw an ethnic, if not a regional, map of the traders in the market on the basis of the products they sold. Market garden produce was the preserve of maniangas women from Boko (Raoul-Matingou 1986: 407), while smoked fish which was produced mainly in the north of the country was the specialty of Teke women. Five types of products came from the regions involved in the conflict in 1993-1994—Bouenza, Lékoumou and Niari. These products were: manioc in the form of flour, or retted manioc, tarot, yams and plantain bananas which are local delicacies, game and especially smoked meat. Ground-nuts and gourd seeds are the main specialties of Bouenza (Mboyi 1986: 231). Of all these products to, only game is outside the control of women. The women from these regions sell all other types of food and there are whole sectors where they have a quasi-monopoly, as for example in the making and selling of ground-nut and gourd-nut paste.

In the week after the people from Grand Niari had to leave Bacongo trade at the Marché Total declined by 40% and almost half the stalls and tables were empty. There was a shortage of the basic products from these regions, particularly palm oil, ground nuts and the tubers that are staples. All that could be found in the market was vegetables from the Pool region and the pulses imported from Bas-Congo (Bas-Zaïre). The goods that were missing were gradually supplied from Bas-Zaïre, many people from there being supporters of the MCDDI for reasons of ethnic affinity.

The Congo-Kinshasa crisis which preceded the fall of Mobutu in May 1997 slowed down this flow of merchandise which found alternative outlets on the black markets on the banks of the Congo river. In the centre of the Bacongo area, the Marché Total was almost deserted as political tensions meant that customers preferred peripheral markets. The first changes in this urban landscape came with the arrival of people from Mfilou, who had also been driven away by the pressure of the militia close to Lissouba. They gradually occupied the stalls which had been abandoned by the “Nibolek” women. This was the background to the action of regulation and solidarity of the mutual aid societies of the women trading in the market.

Gender Solidarity Inside and Outside the Market

Of all the bonds in favour of the emergence of a Bacongo citizenship, the gender bonds were the oldest. In the time of the one-party system, many women belonged to the Revolutionary Union of Congolese Women (Union révolutionnaire des femmes du Congo) (URFC) the women's organisation in the single party, the PCT. This was not an association which one joined of one's own free will; women were forced to join. But the women's union also opened possibilities for of social or political mobility. This was very different from the voluntary activism of the 1950's which had witnessed the emergence of women trade unionists or anti-colonialist women politicians. However, the basis of the URFC was broad enough for the emergence of solidarity based on gender which went far beyond the prerogatives of the single party. Thus, at the National Conference in 1991, when it came to voting in favour of the PCT decisions, it became clear that the social and ideological cleavages visible in society were also present in the Union. In fact, although they had come together under the banner of the URFC, Congolese women continued to demonstrate solidarity of gender in three different areas (Oboa 1991):

The *moziki* are leisure associations bringing women together for a mutual aid activity which is often festive in nature. Periods of mourning, name-giving ceremonies, and weddings are often occasions for the *moziki* to shine and to come to the help of their members. The *moziki* charge an entry fee to new members and are led by an elected President. These associations of urban conviviality meet round a meal in members' homes. The guests are expected to be smartly dressed in order to demonstrate their wealth. As a result, the *moziki* often gained a rather ambiguous reputation and were frequently compared to gatherings of “prostitution” for well-placed people (Dorier-Appril & Kouvouama 1998: 198). The Marché Total *moziki* came to the fore after independence and at the beginning of the 1980's; thereafter they were eclipsed by the rise of religious feelings which invaded Congolese society in the wake of the economic crisis and the spread of AIDS.

The *mabundu*² or religious associations developed in support of the activities in the Protestant or Catholic parishes (Sundberg 1999). Diversified both from the point of view of their role and of their audience, the maboundou are divided predominantly into assemblies of prayer but may also be linked to other types of religious action such as singing, bible studies, support to persons in difficulty or quite simply engaging in productive activities such as making land ready for cultivation. This latter activity is typical of the assemblies of the Kimbanguist Church. The other Christian faiths have activities similar to those listed above. Particular to the Catholic church is the emergence "brotherhoods", an expression of charismatic revival. These groupings are mainly based on prayer and helping the sick. During our survey, three main "brotherhoods" were represented amongst the women in the Marché Total: Sainte Rita, Sainte Bernadette and the Christ-the King Fraternity. All the *mabundu* can be recognised by their distinctive emblems, effigies of their Patron Saint stamped on fabrics worn at ritual ceremonies or gatherings of their association.

Within the market, ecumenical activity has made it possible to establish links between various associations, whether they be Catholic, Protestant or belonging to the Kimbanguist Church. It was these associations which were the basis of the mutual aid solidarity during the fighting in 1993-1994. One has to bear in mind that the religious activism among the market women is also linked to need for protection against witchcraft which is said to be very influential in small family or individual businesses (Devauges 1977).

The mutual aid societies in the market. There is a genuine feeling of belonging to the same group among women traders of specified products, be it lengths of cloth or food. The competition between them in their search for customers is as intense as the bond which unites them when confronted with the authorities on the one hand, and with their suppliers on the other. Not a day passes without them being held up to ransom by the municipal police who repeatedly demand payment for trading licenses. Associations of traders have been formed, often in the form of cooperatives and headed by a woman who is known as the "mother" of the cooperative. These associations are also rotating saving societies or *tontines*. They have a dual function: firstly, they function as a saving bank where each of the members in turn receive the collective savings of the group, and as a mutual aid society to help members in times of need and distress, primarily when members are to help people in mourning. In African societies this function is very important, especially at times of political conflict and financial crisis.

The "Solidarity in Christ" Mutual Aid Society

The "Solidarity in Christ" mutual aid society is one of the most revealing examples of how women manage to go beyond splits and divisions to

2. Mabundu is the plural of dibundu.

reconstruct an area of social cohesion outside the zones of conflict while maintaining their corporate bonds through their religion. This mutual aid society originated in the ecumenical activity of several Catholic brotherhoods and Protestant *mabundu* in the Marché Total during the period preceding the National Conference. The tensions which followed the National Conference weakened the association and its constituting groups of women continued to function more or less separately according to their various centres of interest. It was reactivated during the 1993-1994 conflict and was consolidated as a result of the conflict. The reactivation of this mutual aid society was the result of the indignation of the women traders in the Marché Total when confronted with a situation which was beyond their control, as Anne-Marie L. stressed:

"We saw our women friends leave one by one, first from their homes, then from the market. There was nothing we could do. There was a climate of hatred and nobody could prevent these departures but we were very concerned by them. At once, we and the women friends who had stayed in Bacongo said, 'We must do something'. We had a meeting to discuss how we could still get them back. We tried to find out where they had gone, to refugee camps or to Mfilou and Moutabala. We established contact through our churches. For those who went to the Protestant church a message was sent round that we had to see each other again. The same message was given to the Catholic women who went to Notre Dame du Rosaire or to Saint Pierre Claver. We decided to meet, far away from the zones of conflict; that's why we chose the Sacré-Cœur cathedral which is in the town centre."

However, the question of how to help of this type was not solved because it depended on obtaining funds or credit which the mutual aid society did not have. Once they had been obtained, these funds would have to be managed. How and by whom? What would the funds be used for?

"To begin with, to get the funds, we called for a special subscription whereby each supporting member had to contribute 5,000 CFA francs. It was a very big sacrifice because the market was empty at the time and there were very few customers. But it was similar to family subscriptions for mourning and funeral ceremonies. It was therefore compulsory and each of us succeeded in finding something. Then, some members suggested integrating the various different mutual aid societies into one large association which was then transformed into a co-operative for support which could also help the women who had remained in Bacongo but had suffered damages. This how the various mutual aid societies of the women traders (traders in vegetables, in smoked and salted fish, and their various tontines) contributed to the consolidation of this new type of cooperative. In fact, we do not know what to call it. It is a cooperative but we see it primarily as a mutual aid society. And each mutual aid society which is a member of the cooperative wishes to remain autonomous. The result is that we are now providing support through two channels: first, from the umbrella association and then from the smaller mutual aid societies. I became the head because I was the most energetic and I live near the market so it is easy to get in touch with me at any time. Now there are young people who have come back, thanks to the message that we transmitted of support and peace in Christ."

As it was impossible for them to keep up an act of solidarity on this scale on the basis of their own funds, the need for sources of financing became urgent. Refugees from Mfilou and Moutabala who arrived a little later had occupied the part of the market which had been left vacant. We were told by Anne Marie L. that, to begin with, the militia close to Bernard Kolélas allocated the vacant stalls to the new-comers and imposed them on the remaining traders by force:

But, gradually, as a result of our contacts with these women, the relationship improved and we tried to produce the same type of cooperative for the people from Mfilou. But it was much more difficult. Nevertheless, the stalls which were occupied were sub-let and the rent was paid to me as the "mother" of the cooperative. Once a week, we met in the cathedral, and sometimes in the Mayangui Church of the Moungali Evangelical Church to share out the profits we had made. As a result of this solidarity we could thus supply the Marché Total with the goods which had been missing. This is how we now can sell the groundnut paste and gourd seeds that our women friends who went to Mfilou deliver to us, and afterwards, we do the accounts. On our side we supply them with the *chikwangué* or fresh-water fish that they cannot get over there.

The mutual aid society thus functions as a collective and enables its members to save for a productive investment and provides support for all its members. To begin with, this second activity was absolutely urgent to meet the immediate needs of the Nibolek women who had been driven away from Bacongo. But, over time, the first activity once again became predominant, thus enabling its members to continue their trade in their new locality enabling them to become economically independent. This is how the members of a Marché Total association found themselves in the Mfilou market. As from 1995, this market appeared more or less as a branch of the Marché Total. The mutual aid society made it possible for social bonds to be reinforced through solidarity of gender and work, this contributing to the reconstruction and consolidation of the urban economy.

From 1994 to the Present. What Future for Gender Solidarity?

Since 1994, the political situation in the country has steadily deteriorated. Peoples' lives have been disrupted and women in particular have been victims of extortions of various kinds and sexual violence from the militias. In 1997, just before the presidential elections, the conflict between the former president Denis Sassou Nguesso and the acting president Pascal Lissouba escalated into a five months civil war which ended by the reinstallation of Sassou Nguesso as president, helped by Angolan troops. During this period, Brazzaville was divided into two cities, the southern and the northern parts were effectively cut off from each other. Towards the end of 1998 and the first months of 1999, violent confrontations between various militias

broke out again. These two conflicts were extensions of the 1993 crisis and were particularly murderous, with 15,000 killed in the first and almost 50,000 in the second. A large proportion of the people living in the southern parts of the city (Baongo, Makelekele, Mfilou) fled to the interior. Women paid a heavy tribute in this civil war, paradoxically so, as they both allied themselves with the fighting parties and became victims of violence. Nevertheless, as social reproduction depends on them, they shape, in periods of social disruption, the possibilities of reconstruction, starting from the bonds that are the basis of society, in particular the bonds of the workplace. In a society disrupted by civil war all work becomes informal. It is then the women, be they urban or rural, who are at the heart of rebuilding society.

Because of the special situation imposed by the political conflict, the women's mutual aid societies in the market have through a completely informal structure carried out an activity far beyond individual women associations' capacity for social or market intervention. They have mastered a socially very complex situation by drawing on the experience of members of parishes or religious associations who have had management training. Once again, the reconstruction of the social and economic fabric will be based on women. Gender solidarity bonds may be the determining factor in the evolution in favour of social peace.

The territorial fragmentation and the dispersal of population were even greater than in 1993, making it impossible to reactivate the "Solidarity in Christ" mutual aid society, but the women present in Brazzaville have already renewed their contacts with each other around the initiatives launched by the European Economic Community. One of the most important of these know as the Viluka Educational Community. Despite an extremely difficult economic situation and the non-payment of the civil servants, the Viluka initiative has become a point of reference from which many lessons can be learnt in the domain of social restructuring on the basis of economic initiatives set up by women. The association has access to micro-credits granted by the European Commission and is drawing on the administrative experience of local youth organisations, thus combining collective dynamics and group and gender solidarity. Until recently, women's enterprises were not eligible for credits. However, the traders' experience from the mutual aid society have made them responsible in repaying loans. Thanks to their networking through the cooperative in the 1993 conflict, it has been easier for them to stabilize their trading activities, taking advantage here of the dual process of the mobilization of social resources and the restructuring of community space, over and above ethnic groups and fratricidal political struggles.

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ABSTRACT

Congo-Brazzaville experienced a long civil war from 1992 to 2002. The first part of the conflict (1992-1994), which opposed President Pascal Lissouba's supporters to those of Brazzaville's mayor, Bernard Kolélas, took place in the southern areas of the capital et particularly in the district of Baongo. During this crisis, women often showed a great sense of solidarity between themselves, setting up mutual-help networks, often in the workplace and according to their religious beliefs. In the context of Marché Total, this article focuses on certain aspects of these new types of networks which women managed to weave.

RÉSUMÉ

Le Marché Total de Brazzaville : Alliances de femmes pendant la guerre civile au Congo. — Le Congo-Brazzaville a connu une longue guerre civile de 1992 à 2002. La première période du conflit (1992-1994), qui a opposé les partisans du président de la République, Pascal Lissouba, à ceux du maire de Brazzaville, Bernard Kolélas, s'est déroulée dans les quartiers sud de la capitale et notamment dans le quartier de Baongo. Pour faire face à la crise, les femmes ont souvent fait la preuve d'une grande solidarité entre elles en développant des réseaux d'entraide, notamment sur les lieux de travail et grâce aussi à leur appartenance religieuse. L'article suivant restitue, dans le cadre du Marché Total, quelques aspects de ces formes inédites d'alliance que les femmes ont réussi à tisser.

Keywords/Mots-clés: Congo-Brazzaville, Baongo, civil war, christianity, gender solidarity, informality, Women's trading activities/*Congo-Brazzaville, Baongo, guerre civile, christianisme, solidarité entre sexes, activités marchandes de femmes.*