

# Chains of Dependency: Changing Importation Practices in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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The reliance on imported products has rendered many sub-Saharan African countries like the DRC vulnerable to global disruptions such as supply chain bottlenecks that have been engendered and made visible by COVID-19 pandemic dislocations. New questions continue to emerge with regards to the dynamics of transnational dimensions of trade, as a result of deepening Sino-African relations. Transnational trade is partly dependent on the geographic mobility of the individuals who travel abroad to select goods to be packed into cargo containers or suitcases to be transported to the DRC. With the COVID-19 pandemic producing global disruptions in supply chains of all manner, countries such as the DRC—where it is individual traders themselves who manage import logistics—are confronting pointed challenges with regards to the way in which geographic immobility has stymied the flow of goods into the country. Through which means do goods continue to flow into the DRC? Who now stands to benefit from import to Congo? Through an examination of the gendered geographies of supply chains—as they relate to transnational trade—as well as local social networks, this chapter’s empirical findings bring together the dialectical oscillations of global and local, and formal and informal into an analytical theoretical framework.

## Introduction

Global supply chains emerged from the doldrums of logistics to become a topic of mainstream fascination in March 2021 when images of the container ship *Ever Given* lodged in the Suez Canal began circulating in popular media. Roughly a year later, consumers around the world felt the COVID-19 pandemic’s effects as shortages in all manner of goods began to materialize. Shipping containers themselves proved to be scarce—demand exceeded supply as ports internationally contended with international logistical obstructions. Many containers were diverted away from Africa, going instead to countries that could afford the consequent price increases.

As a concept, globalization is often conceived of as a network of flows crisscrossing the globe: resources, capital, manufactured goods, but also of technologies, ideas and lifestyle choices. While often touted—at least since the 1990s—as a system destined to benefit all peoples of all countries, albeit at uneven paces, this narrative’s legitimacy has not been fully adopted by everyone caught in its drift. The crack in the ideological armor of a seeming universally-beneficial global order, with its ultimate aim of total economic interdependence, is especially revealing when considering countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where upheavals in commodity markets can make exacerbate the disruptive forces across the rest of the world.

Like many countries with little to no domestic productive capacities for basic manufactured goods, this central African country is a good example of one such “participating” nation of globalization which has consistently paid its high costs without reaping equivalent rewards, thereby creating disparity as well as vulnerability to commodity price fluctuations. This is achieved by entrenching the DRC’s dependency on richer nations. Globalization, when considered from the perspective of one participating nation, can be conceived of as a two-way flow. For this country, the inner viscera of technologies—rare metals such as cobalt, coltan, and tungsten—are extracted from the country while the final realizations of these commodity forms flood back in. These bi-directional flows are sometimes aligned and sometimes in opposition, while occasionally such alignments and oppositions occur simultaneously. What is significant about this imbalance that’s inscribed into the heart of globalization despite its superficial rhetoric of slowly bringing about a more balanced and equitable world is that countries like the DRC do not have the autonomy to be flexible with how much they strive to be plugged into globalization—that is, even the option to consider “deglobalization” policies is a luxury only afforded to the wealthy nations in this world community of different but “equal” countries.

The DRC struggles to provide adequate social security, infrastructure and health care to its estimated ninety million inhabitants, the majority of whom live on less than two dollars a day. As in many African countries, to offset the threat of inflation, the DRC’s economy is unofficially pegged to the US dollar and ranks as one of Africa’s most highly dollarized nations (De Herdt, 2002; Raheem and Asongo, 2018). The dollar is used in most major business contracts, the majority of transactions and bank accounts, and is accepted by shopkeepers and in cash machines. Mining deals between the government and Chinese companies are also transacted in US dollars as recent corruption scandals have revealed, though it will be curious

to observe if this will eventually change given the evolving geopolitics spurred by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.<sup>1</sup>

Regardless of the lack of industry in the DRC,<sup>2</sup> the consumer base for imported manufactured goods is massive, and therefore the dependency is stronger. Given this dependency on imports—such as garments, electronics, household items, medical and construction equipment—there is an acute awareness among Congolese people of the oscillating rhythms of trade connected to global supply chains. This is not only due to consumer demand, but also because many people are embedded in some aspect of trading and local supply chains. The increasing presence of China, with their supply of affordable manufactured products, has also enabled more people in the DRC to participate not only as global consumers, but also as transnational traders and logistics agents. This chapter considers some of the tensions that have emerged from contemporary trading arrangements and consumer culture, highlighting the experiences of Congolese traders particularly during times of rupture in the globalized trading network.

The dependency school, also referred to as dependency theory, has striven to grasp economic development in a particular geographic context through an understanding of global power relations as they relate to capitalism. Seminal dependency theorists like Walter Rodney (1972), Samir Amin (1972), and Patrick McGowan (1976) have written about several African contexts that struggle with their embeddedness amid the global system and the ways in which economic growth has been stymied by both internal and external forces, providing an alternative approach to the unilinear growth models. These scholars, in one way or another, advocated for a delinking from capitalist globalization and favored protectionist policies that would help “develop” and “modernize” newly decolonized countries. Early dependency theory from the 1960s and 70s has been since critiqued for being overly reductive, namely in its proclivity to divide up the world into economic tiers of rich and poor.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, it is useful in examining the matrices of power that inform economic practice on varying scales, including internal national dynamics such as patron-client networks.<sup>4</sup>

Rather than merely describe the totality of global power relations as they relate to commerce and trade in the DRC, this chapter provides insights into the ways in

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1 For more about the most recent public scandal see: <https://www.publiceye.ch/de/themen/korruption/congo-hold-up>.

2 I use the terms “Democratic Republic of Congo,” “DRC,” “DR Congo,” and “Congo” interchangeably unless it concerns the period of 1965–96 when the country was officially called Zaire.

3 Nor does dependency theory account for nations like China, once considered a poor country, now a global superpower.

4 Likewise, Gabriel Palma (1978, 898), argues for an approach that accounts for “the interplay between internal and external structures.”

which people acknowledge and understand their own positions as agents on the global stage. This has been partly motivated by attempting to avoid the “masculine theory” that tends to focus on the macro and the grand narrative, one that often eclipses the lives of working people, particularly women (Lutz, 1995). Following Carla Freeman’s contention that the dichotomies of the local/global, production/consumption, and the formal/informal demand more of a dialectical engagement (Freeman, 2001, 1009), this chapter highlights how Congolese women involved in transnational trade directly form part of global processes.

The findings presented here are based on extensive multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork carried out in both the DRC’s capital city of Kinshasa; Guangzhou, China; and Istanbul, Turkey between 2017 and 2022.<sup>5</sup> This triangulation of cities represents a constellation of trading hubs visited by African commerce people. This chapter’s conclusions are mainly culled from extensive in-person interviews with Congolese traders, local merchants and shopkeepers, middlemen working in logistics agencies, government officials, and customs agents. Several trips were made to China in the early months of 2020. With the onset of the pandemic, as many African traders had to pivot their commerce to the UAE and Turkey, I shifted to conducting interviews with traders and logistics agents in Istanbul. This research is complemented by longstanding fieldwork conducted in Kinshasa, DRC with a recent 4-month trip between October and December 2021. There, interviews were also carried out at the port city of Matadi (Figure 3), where over two hundred shipping containers arrive daily. The inquiry aimed to reveal how people themselves understand and experience change and the associated ambiguity shaped by new commodities.

I will offer a fragment of the historical conditions that have contributed to the DRC’s dependency on imported products beginning with the colonial period. Rhythms of change, first introduced during the colonial period, can be understood through an iconic folkloric siren called *Mami Wata*. Circulated by people encountering one another through global trade, this siren provides a useful framework for considering the temporal and spatial networks of capitalism, as well as its dislocations.

This chapter considers the ways in which generations of foreigners in search of new opportunities have been imbricated in the region’s economic landscape, one that has gone through waves of national programs premised on encouraging local capitalism (*capitalisme indigène*). It is against this background that Congolese traders continue to participate as arbiters of transnational trade. Finally, based on a discussion on ethnographic work, I will point to how the dependence on imported products has rendered many sub-Saharan African countries like the DRC vulnerable to global disruptions, such as those linked to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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5 I have been conducting research in Kinshasa, DRC since 2009.

## Congo's Trade Orientations Over Time

The Democratic Republic of Congo, a geographic region in the center of the African continent, is roughly the size of Western Europe. It is not entirely landlocked since the Congo River, the world's deepest, flows across this Central African country in the shape of a long clock-like arc, emptying out into the Atlantic Ocean (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Map of Democratic Republic of Congo's (DRC) waterways

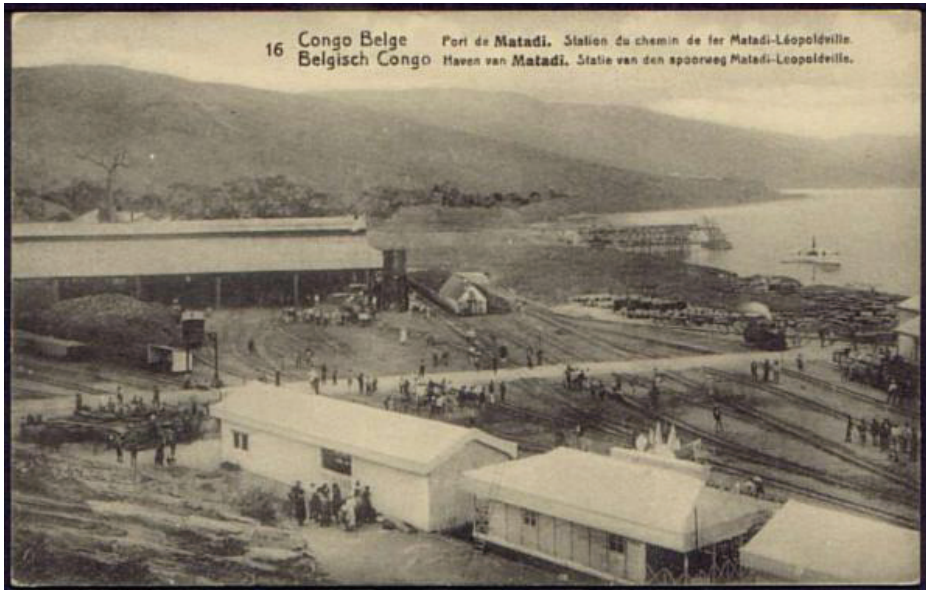


Source: Wikipedia.

Not far from the river's mouth lies Boma, a trading outpost established by Europeans in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century when the region was governed by the Kongo Kingdom. There, enslaved Africans were loaded onto ships to be taken to the New World. Boma was the capital of the Congo Free State between 1886–1923 after King Leopold annexed it as his personal territory at the Berlin Conference in 1885. Matadi is another historic trading post located 75 kilometers upstream from Boma. This city was inaugurated by Sir Henry Morton Stanley in 1879 and built by African indentured workers. It was established partly because the river cannot be navigated further into the interior due to monumental rapids. The creation of the Matadi seaport soon



**Figure 2: Postcard of Port at Matadi with train station, tracks, locomotive, 1918**



Source: Photo by author.

**Figure 3: Port in Matadi, DRC, 2021**



Source: Photo by author.

gave way to the first rail system in the Congo, built with the assistance of Chinese laborers between 1901 and 1906 (Shirambere, 2020, 82). This railway ushered in an era of unimaginable extractive exploitation of people and resources, particularly rubber. Today, Boma and Matadi continue to be crucial to the region's import/export activities, linking the rest of the country to the Atlantic Ocean (Figures 2, 3).

Ships sailing between Antwerp and Boma bore ledgers that detailed the Congo Free State's brutal human exploitation. One shipping clerk, Emond Morel, noted that cargo ships arrived in Belgium replete with copious amounts of ivory and rubber, but returned to the Congo containing nothing but ammunition. This dubious import/export rhythm, characterized by the blatantly contrasting cargo, exposed King Leopold's genocidal pilfering and he was soon pressured by international powers to relinquish control of his private territory and establish an official colony to "save" people rather than merely exploit them. In 1908, the Belgian parliament annexed the region and renamed it the Belgian Congo, making Boma the administrative capital. This move marked the entrance of multinational companies to the colony. In 1910, for example, concessions were granted to Unilever as well as to other smaller agricultural industries (MacGaffey, 1986, 32). Many of these companies continued to maintain their businesses well into the postcolonial period.

## Imported Goods and Consumer Dreams

Between 1908 and 1945, Léopoldville was essentially a labor depot of African men referred to as HAV, or *hommes adultes valides* (able-bodied adult males), who were brought there on a temporary basis for mining and other industrial activities.<sup>6</sup> This ascribed label pointed to the ways in which men were conceived of as units of work, but also of sources consumption (Jewsiewicki, 2008; Vellut, 2017). Urban centers like Léopoldville grew in tandem with the arrival of all manner of imports. "Through force or fancy, rural Africans flocked to these new capitals to do the bidding of Europeans and make what they hoped would be a better life for themselves" (Stewart 2000, 4). European imports flooded in to be sold to a population primed for a new lifestyle based on consumerist consumption. The promotion of European bourgeois values were partly executed in and through imported consumer goods such as clothing, foodstuffs, bicycles and radios (Jewsiewicki, 1983, 3f.). The growth and integration of the local colonial economy into the global economic system was asserted through the introduction of new consumerist desires thereby masking the externally forced societal changes as being partly the wishes of locals.

During the 1940s and 50s, as foreign products flowed into the region, images of a mythical siren known as *Mami Wata* appeared widely throughout newly urbanized

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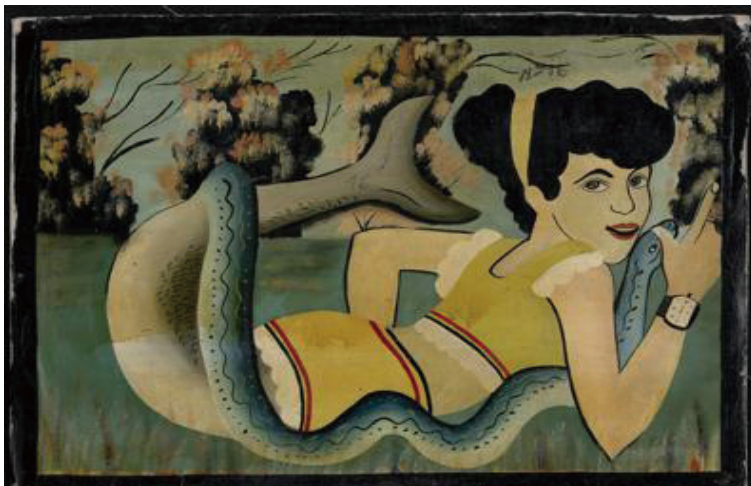
6 During this period, women, including the wives of European administrators, were forbidden to live in the colonial city. It was only after World War II that African women, particularly married women, were officially allowed to reside there (Hunt, 2001).

Figure 4: Painting of *Mami Wata* by Abdal 22, 1989



Source: Collection RMCA Tervuren, HO.0.1.3951; photo RMCA Tervuren. All rights reserved.

Figure 5: A painting from c. 1950 of *Mami Wata* and a snake coiled around her body



Source: Collection RMCA Tervuren; photo RMCA Tervuren Kayembe F., *Mami Wata*. All rights reserved.



centers on murals and in popular painting (Fabian, 1996). Also known as “mother of water,” this folkloric motif circulates throughout the African continent and its diasporas (Drewal, 1988). Drawn from many influences, including European, Indian and African, *Mami Wata’s* physical form is itself a hybrid. She is an amalgam of disparate elements from different sources, one that is continuously being reshaped. Just as her image and meaning migrate through time, space and cultures, the idea of migration itself is also linked to the rhythms of import and export. For instance, there are some connections to be made between *Mami Wata* and figureheads, the female sculptures that featured as bow ornamentation on sailing ships in past centuries.

This water-born creature, depicted as an irresistible temptress, is known to dwell in the mighty Congo River and stalk its shores. As paintings of her coincided with a time that promised mass consumption, it can hardly be coincidental that her traditional hunting grounds are where foreign ships historically came to dock and unload their various goods, only to soon part again bearing away the local riches torn out of the body of the land and sea. Bearing the imprint of the colonial encounter and the consumer goods it brought with it, paintings of *Mami Wata* often featured her donning a watch, which, as a relatively expensive manufactured good, was a potent symbol of aspirational luxury during the colonial period (Figures 4, 5).

Following what many Congolese people claim about this siren’s dangerous potency, *Mami Wata* induces excitements and anxieties related to commodity consumption and the global capitalist mode of production and distribution. In a moralistic fashion, *Mami Wata* stories often depict men who are seduced by modern material consumption and are consequently led to their own destruction. This siren became an ambiguous figure of seduction and ruin, as well as a warning against a culture of immediate gratification of imported manufactured desires, and the societal upheaval that consumerism brought (first through colonialism and later via its successor, global trade). *Mami Wata* becomes a leitmotif to animate this chapter as she swims the passage of time and is representative of hybridity and the forces of global encounters, but simultaneously of the social anxieties these forces stir up and circulate among Congolese people.

## Foreign Traders and Nationalization Projects

Water is *Mami Wata’s* milieu, pointing to the ways in which fluid mobility is poly-directional and can adapt its form to fit into any shape or travel through any channel. She is never situated statically—rather, she exists in a continuous state of passage, slithering between a broad network of people and places. She flows through the waterways where trade occurs overhead at the surface and foreign traders continue oblivious to the dark forces just below. The “otherness” captured in *Mami Wata’s* pictorial depictions—her gender, beauty, and exoticness—is reflective of the various

historic waves of foreign merchants and clerics arriving in the region. The Kongo Kingdom had been maintaining its own vast regional trading networks at the time when the Portuguese were recorded as the first Europeans to arrive in Central Africa in the late 15th century. The Belgians would only later arrive at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, drawing the region into a larger matrix of European connections, and by extension, vacillating competing foreign interests.

In addition to the Portuguese and Belgians, Greek migrants began to settle in the Congo in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>7</sup> They opened restaurants and shops where they sold imports from Europe, but also worked as sub-contractors in the Belgian mining industry, or as laborers in railway construction. An Indian community began to grow as well, coming to prominence in the 1970s as shopkeepers selling things like textiles and jewelry.<sup>8</sup> It was during this time that *Mami Wata* assumed Indian features; she began to be portrayed in paintings and murals as fair-skinned with long flowing black hair. Writing about the ways in which Indian material culture impacted visual representations of *Mami Wata* in Africa, Henry Drewal offers, “the popularity of the snake charmer lithograph and the presence of Indian merchants (and films) in West Africa led to a growing fascination with Indian prints of Hindu gods and goddesses” (2008, 71).

The Congo gained its independence from Belgium in 1960, but it was only in 1965—a few years after Patrice Lumumba was assassinated—when Mobutu Sese Seko’s regime began to govern this vast country. Lumumba suffered the consequences of non-alignment during a time when the US offered no such way out of the cold war polarity. The DRC became a stage of cold war ideology which was supported by “democratic” and capitalist global powers all too ready to sacrifice the Congolese people to their material struggle against the East.

Mobutu changed the country’s ownership structure of key economic assets in order to limit its dependency on the former colonial power, Belgium, whose interests had remained largely dominant across all sectors. Greeks heavily involved in commerce and importation saw their businesses take a heavy blow when the Mobutu government nationalized the economy in 1973 under a program referred to as “Zairization,” a moniker taken from the country’s new name: Zaire. Approximately 2,000 Greek-owned commercial businesses were expropriated and transferred to Congolese. This prompted many other foreign business owners to take flight, leaving shortages in basic foodstuff.<sup>9</sup>

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7 Many fled the civil war in Greece. Later, between 1961–1968 several thousand additional Greeks arrived to the newly independent country.

8 V.S. Naipaul’s book *A Bend in a River* chronicles the life of an Indian East African who set up a shop in an abandoned town in Central Africa.

9 The call for protectionist measures to indigenize economies is a recurrent pattern of postcolonial African societies—one only need to think of Idi Amin’s expulsion of Asian minorities from Uganda.

Zaire declared itself to be in a state of economic “crisis” in the late 1970s. Though the region has since been characterized as being in a constant state of crisis, both economically and politically, many scholars have analyzed what this “crisis” reveals about the inner-workings of this region (Koptoff, 1987; Roitman, 2014). It was during the 1970s and 80s that many individuals, faced with grim economic circumstances, circumvented official state channels by engaging in “informal” transnational trade (Vwakyanakazi, 1982). The informal economy, or a popular economy, accounts for over fifty percent of the GDP of African countries (cf. Charmes, 2000), rendering it not so much a shadow of the formal economy, but rather a coexisting one that drives economic growth. Profits from this informal trade were often used to finance public services that the state failed to survive. The contours of what was considered “official” and “unofficial” trading activity became nebulous and overlapping. For instance, state officials also often worked as smugglers, transporting goods into the country without declaring them. This type of activity was unofficially sanctioned by what has been referred to as *la débrouillardise* (resourcefulness as a lifestyle for getting by on a day-by-day basis).<sup>10</sup> *Débrouillardise* has penetrated all levels of society, becoming part of the people’s habitus where they find themselves in persistent modes of improvisation (Callaghy, 1984). The temporality of capitalism and the larger structuring global forces are indeed as much reflected in the vicissitudes of informal economies shaped by people as they are recorded by official transnational data of whole economies. And while most globalization analysis focuses on official data and macro-economic activity, this chapter’s purpose is to highlight the role such informal economies play in the global economic order.

The nationalist policies affiliated with Zairization partly reflected Mobutu’s political ties with China and North Korea.<sup>11</sup> This nationalist ethos was designed with the intention of promoting an indigenous style of capitalism to counterbalance Western influence and lingering vestiges of colonialism (MacGaffey, 1986). In addition to the nationalization of land, which implied that all businesses such as plantations, cattle and poultry farms, fisheries and quarries become state properties, it was decreed that petty trade could be carried out exclusively by Congolese nationals.

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10 *Débrouillardise* has deep-seated connotations that go back to the Mobutu era, when the president himself allegedly commanded his army and citizens to “débrouillez-vous” or “fend for yourselves”—a statement that would become infamously dubbed by the locals as “article 15” (De Herdt and Marysse, 1996; Ayimpam, 2014a). Article 15 also implies a legitimization of illegal or informal activity, perhaps stemming from the fact that the official constitution only has 14 articles, thereby making article number 15 unofficial.

11 Between 1970 and 1990, China provided Mobutu’s government with technical and financial aid, as well as a sports stadium. In the 1970s, Mobutu was engaged in extensive diplomatic relations with China. The People’s Palace, or *Palais du Peuple*, which houses the National Assembly and the Senate in Kinshasa was completed in 1979 with the assistance from the People’s Republic of China. The Chinese also funded the construction of the sports stadium called the *Stade des Martyrs* which was finished in 1993.

Figure 6: One million Zaires, printed in 1992, reflects the country's then hyperinflation



Source: Photo by author.

Not necessarily as a direct result of these policies, Congolese entrepreneurs flourished in cities like Kisangani (formerly known Stanleyville in the Belgian Congo) and reproduced themselves as a local bourgeois class. Thus, as Mobutu slashed colonial dependencies, he ushered in new ones on multinationals, as well as on foreign “aid” from both the US and the USSR.

During Mobutu’s reign, there was a brief period from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s when confidence in the domestic currency was at a peak. In 1967, the franc became the zaïre. Its value was fixed at a rate of 1 zaïre = US\$2 (Walker, 2017, 291), which benefited consumers of international products. However, hyperinflation in the 1990s gave way to a reliance on the US dollar.<sup>12</sup> As a result, a new money-changing industry emerged. At every major corner in urban centers such as Kinshasa, there are money changers (called *cambistes*)—many of whom are women—converting USDs into Congolese francs (see Figure 6).

<sup>12</sup> Reaching as high as 10,000 percent in 1994 (Beaugrand, 1997).



Figures 7, 8: Money changers called *mama cambistes* converted dollars to Congolese francs, 2021 (left); a cotton printed textile, made in China, depicting various currencies (right); 2021, Kinshasa's Zandu market



Source: Photos by author.

## Kabila and the Arrival of the Chinese

The ongoing war in the eastern part of Congo, which began in the mid 1990s, contributed to the near-complete collapse of domestic agricultural and industrial production. As a result, imports became a monopoly game between a few large foreign operators organized by sector and product. Subsequent to the overthrow of Mobutu's 32-year regime in 1996, Lebanese merchants began to settle in the DRC, often by way of other African countries.<sup>13</sup> Much like the Greeks that came before them, Lebanese merchants had intentions of growing businesses reliant on impor-

13 Many members from this Lebanese diaspora left Lebanon during its civil war.



tation. Companies like Socimex became the largest importer of cars. The massive glut of affordable foreign-manufactured vehicles meant that city boulevards had to be widened—an infrastructural project that came to be led and funded by the Chinese government.

The Chinese also began arriving *en masse* under President Joseph Kabila who maintained ambitious plans to modernize the country. One massive infrastructural program that has come to characterize his presidency, dubbed *les cinq chantiers* or, “the five public works,” could not have been realized without the help of Chinese investment. The Chinese dedicated 9 billion USD to this program in exchange for titles to various copper and cobalt mines. Subsequent to the inauguration of this large-scale project, the presence of Chinese engineers, road workers, doctors, and shopkeepers grew more visible throughout the country.<sup>14</sup>

Regarding day-to-day foodstuffs, a growth of new small-scale supermarkets began in the late-2000s, selling items imported from abroad. As a result, Indian, Pakistani, Nigerian and South African communities formed in urban cities, especially in Kinshasa. These shops created new supply chains with wholesalers from the supplier countries. During this post-war transition period (2003–2006), new political alliances formed between the government and foreigners who engendered new migrant trade networks specializing in specific products or value chains (Segatti, 2015).

Small Chinese shops selling items like needles and thread sprang up all over the country during this period. In 2008, approximately 1,000 officially registered Chinese people were working in Kinshasa as shopkeepers in a concentrated area near the capital city’s *Grande Marché*, or central market (Janssen, 2012; Vircoulon, 2010). It is currently difficult, if not impossible to know exactly how large the Chinese community in Kinshasa is, but it was estimated that in 2010 there were anywhere between 10,000–50,000 Chinese people working in the DRC.<sup>15</sup> Cheap imported goods made in China and sold in Chinese-owned shops are pejoratively referred to as *la chinoiserie*, a local term which denotes ‘made-in-China’ with connotations of tawdry quality. While the abundance of affordable Chinese products allows for more Congolese to participate in consumer culture, many people are discontent with this poor product quality. In fact, poorly constructed buildings and roads are also referred to as *chinoiserie*. In 2011, Congolese merchants, increasingly growing resentful of the privileging of foreign merchants engaged in petty trade, coordinated protest action to put pressure on the government to protect local busi-

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14 Though China had ambitions to expand their *Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)* in the DRC, it was not until January 2021, that they officially signed an agreement between Beijing and Kinshasa.

15 Figures are difficult to come by in the DRC. For instance, the most recent census taken was in 1981, and it is only estimated between 12 and 14 million people reside in the capital city.

ness interests.<sup>16</sup> Chinese-owned shops nevertheless continue to be well-positioned with regards to logistical chains as they maintain connections to wholesale dealers in China as well as shipping companies on the African continent.

Monopolies over retail chains began to coalesce across the country during President Kabila's modernization campaign in the mid 2000s. This was partly accomplished because small entrepreneurs are generally linked to the larger importers and wholesalers through family or ethnic ties. Take for instance Congo Futur, a company owned and operated by three Lebanese brothers who run businesses across West Africa.<sup>17</sup> Congo Futur controls most markets across the country, distributing cheap basic foods like canned fish, powdered milk and candy. In addition to rain forestry concessions granted to Congo Futur by the government,<sup>18</sup> this family-operated conglomerate maintains their own designated section at the now semi-privatized port of Matadi. They were also involved in a scandal exposed in 2021 referred to as the Congo Hold Up, considered to be the largest instance of corruption from the African continent to date.<sup>19</sup>

The road connecting Matadi's port to the capital city, rebuilt with Chinese investment in 2019 in the midst of China's New Belt and Road Initiative, is a crucial passage through which cargo must travel as there is no functioning train. Hundreds of trucks loaded with food imports make the journey to Kinshasa daily, paying its tolls and winding through each twist and turn—sometimes the trucks' colorful cargo appears to the distant eye as a long train (Figure 9). Despite the new construction, the narrow road offers only one lane in each direction, creating major bottlenecks, especially in the event of accidents which occur almost daily.

In 2020, the port of Matadi recorded a monthly arrival of approximately 17,000 shipping containers. Officially, 60% of the DRC's GDP (49.87 USD Billion) is made up of imports, making it an import-based economy. Most Congolese government officials are periodically involved in importation, and it is not uncommon for professionals like teachers and doctors to participate as a means of supplementing their incomes. Further, though customs agents are not permitted to import shipping containers themselves, they nevertheless circumnavigate the laws, and by extension

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16 During periods of intense political tension, Chinese and Indian-owned shops are sometimes burned and looted.

17 Congo Futur has been on the United States sanctions list since 2009 because of money laundering activities adding up to billions of dollars, as well as for connections with Hezbollah. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/08/world/middleeast/kassim-tajideen-released.html>.

18 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-congo-democratic-hezbollah-idUSBRE82F0TT20120316>.

19 The Congo Hold Up exposed how one commercial bank was used to plunder the country's public funds and natural resources, largely for the enrichment of former President Joseph Kabila's inner circle. For more about the Congo Hold Up scandal see: <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20211126-congo-hold-up-congo-futur-un-empire-sous-sanctions>.

Figure 9: Traffic jams along road from Matadi to Kinshasa, 2021



Source: Photo by author.

importation duties, by involving family members in the business. One recent public scandal involving the importation of sacks of cement suggests an overreliance on foreign imports, abetted by governmental contracts in the DRC.<sup>20</sup> Since cement is easily produced by local factories, stories of scandals such as these are particularly frustrating for Congolese groups advocating for good governance that would prevent local industry from being undercut. Cases of corruption also become political fodder for people searching for opportunities to blame foreign business operations for destroying local economies.

## Congo Connects to the World Digitally

As of 2022, DP World, the world's leading provider of smart logistics based in Dubai, has begun building the DRC's first deep sea port in the coastal city of Banana located on a long piece of land that separates the Congo River from the Atlantic Ocean. It is developing a 600-meter quay with an 18m draft, capable of handling the largest vessels in operation. It is being built with the intention of attracting more direct calls from larger vessels traveling from Asia which will enhance the country's access to international markets and global supply chains. Further, the government claims that this port will provide significant cost and time savings that proposes to boost the country's trade.

To better assess the implications of such foreign-led infrastructure projects, it is imperative to re-center capitalist relations of influence, power and dependency into any discussion of economic interconnectivity. Dependency theories are helpful because their approach is "a framework that focuses on the constraints on capitalist development arising from the economic power of industrialized nations and foreign multinational corporations" (Cooper, 1981, 10). In other words, the benefits and costs of such projects cannot be measured solely through materialist understandings of supply, demand and scarcity, but also through a social understanding of inequality, autonomy and freedom, as well as through the lens of "otherness," as these imbalanced power dynamics comprise different peoples from different parts of the globe. Amidst such issues of trade, the *Mami Wata* siren—a symbol of hybridity and harbinger of otherness—continues to surface, serving as an ambiguous warning bound up in the pursuit of material wealth, whether on the individual or national level. The following section will return to this siren to examine what she currently reveals about the seduction and anxieties associated with the modern world and all its promises of new things and material wealth, and more specifically, how an exoticized and sometimes maligned idea of otherness influences how people relate to these social phenomena.

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.africanews.com/2016/05/31/drc-s-lukala-cement-to-close-down-due-to-un-fair-competition/>.

Let us now consider a *Mami Wata* viral video that circulated in the city of Kinshasa in 2012. While this story has been unpacked in greater detail elsewhere (Braun, 2015), it is relevant to discussions about Chinese-led infrastructure projects in the DRC, as well as to how conceptions of “the foreign” have changed in Congo. The video, shared through peoples phones, showed a grotesque sea-creature with a gnarled and shriveled body surrounded by foreign men in a large room. According to the backstory story, *Mami Wata* had been apprehended by Chinese engineers who were installing underwater fiber optic internet cables in the Congo River—literally, connecting the DRC via new technologies to the global virtual world. The video was presented as news, with journalists describing and commenting on *Mami Wata’s* disturbing appearance. During a popular round table discussion on the national television station RTNC, several panelists analyzed the *Mami Wata* viral video and encouraged viewers to call in and offer commentary (it should be mentioned that not everyone believed that this was a real story, as made evident in online comments). Since *Mami Wata* is thought to be elusive, never leaving behind any material proof of her body, the idea that she was rumored to be discovered by Chinese engineers confirmed for many people just how powerful the Chinese are.<sup>21</sup> Her mutilation can also be read, taking some interpretive liberties, as a symbol of the physical environment after suffering the ravages of industrial resource extraction. This disfigurement is also evident in the transformation of the city’s former proud moniker of “Kin la belle” (Kinshasa the beautiful) which has now morphed into “Kin la poubelle” (Kinshasa the garbage). In her monstrous form, we are presented again with an anxiety over change, modernization and the consumption of global commodities foisted on the people.

## Congolese Traders and Transnational Sojourns

We should not overlook the experiences of many Congolese who have been involved in all manner of trade throughout the country’s many transformations. For example, during Congo’s economic downturn in the late 1980s, which was marked by currency overvaluation, people were driven to search for income alternatives outside the formal system. Here, the uncertainty created partly by the protracted war in the east left traders in a state of precarity, unable to make longer-term investments and business plans. It was during this time that Congolese women increased their presence in trade, particularly between neighboring Brazzaville and Kinshasa, becoming integral players in transborder trade. Women traders took advantage of the cheaply produced Asian textiles available across the Congo River in Brazzaville (Ayimpam, 2014b). Some traders purchased wholesale goods to sell in their shops,

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21 Huawei, a Chinese telecom giant, is positioning itself to be the world’s leader in 5G technology markets. It aspires to introduce this infrastructure all over the African continent, further embedding its presence and influence there.



but most would conduct business informally, out of their homes to their social network of customers. The divisions are not solely between formal shop sellers and informal home sellers, but also between scale—there are indeed several categories of traders, and what goods they import reflects the amount of financial capital they have access to. For instance, one trader might regularly fill entire Matadi-bound shipping containers with furniture and construction material, while others pack large bags with cheap sandals that they physically bring home with them to resell for five times the wholesale price.

The DRC has some of the highest import taxes in the world: In 2016, one 40-foot container cost approximately 17,000 USD in taxes (depending on the items) and shipping costs. As a result, many traders opt for what is known as *groupage*, or a system of sharing one container. This system requires additional cooperation, rendering this way of conducting business different from the more fully marketized societies of the global North. Social networks in the DRC are vital to survival in this informal economy, and this reinforces the notion of “people as infrastructure,” a phenomenon common in countries with a dearth in capital infrastructural investment.

In contrast to West Africa where women have a long history of trading in the region and abroad, transnational trade for central Africans is a more recent development (Sylvanus, 2008). In West Africa, women traders are referred to as *Nana Benz*—loosely meaning Mercedes Benz Mothers, referencing a mix of their womanhood with their connections to international goods. Congolese traders were given this name in the 1980s when trade to and from West Africa was booming. Nina Sylvanus’ (2013) research describes how Togo’s *Nanas Benz* rose to financial independence through the importation of Chinese-manufactured textiles, as well as how these goods created a stigma for those who imported them. As Chinese imported textiles are of a lower quality compared with those previously produced in the Netherlands or Togo, they are cheaper and are therefore the only imports most people can only afford. Consequently, traders in Chinese imports are perceived as being complicit with malevolent global forces responsible for the stymied local industry (ibid.). The secondhand clothing economy has also contributed to replacing domestic garment industries in many African nations.<sup>22</sup> It is quite revealing, then, that these women traders are sometimes also referred to as sirens in that they are harbingers of exciting new things that may seem wonderful on the surface, but that nevertheless carry a danger.

The Congolese diaspora in Europe has historically been vital to trading networks. MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga’s (2000) research on transnational commercial activities highlights the ways in which people who were otherwise marginalized

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22 Writing in the context of Zambia during the mid 1990s, Karen Tranberg Hansen (2000) has mapped the worldwide circuit of used clothing in the region. Fast fashion has accelerated the rate of used clothing flows to Africa, and garments often end up in garbage dumps, or burned.

from formal avenues of work carved out a space within the informal economy by forging trading networks between Congo and Paris. There is even a designated word in Lingala, one of Congo's official languages, to refer to individuals who have traveled to Europe: *milikiste* (Gondola, 1999). In the 1980s, members of the Congolese diaspora living in Europe began importing items like clothing and household appliances to the Congo. Congolese people with family members in Europe would also often travel on buying trips, filling up shipping containers to be sent to Matadi. However, patterns of trade changed in the 1990s when visas to Europe became more difficult to come by. People instead turned to South Africa and Angola to purchase consumer products.

Later in the 2000s, once direct flights connecting Kinshasa to Dubai and Turkey were introduced by companies like Turkish Airlines, Kenya Air, and Ethiopian Airlines, intrepid entrepreneurs ventured out independently in search of their own wholesaler connections. This contributed to the reorienting of supply chains away from Europe toward a constellation of global southern countries to the African continent. China became a popular destination because of accessible business visas, as well as affordable direct flights to Guangzhou with generous baggage allowances. In 2010, Kinshasa experienced a burgeoning of *mama ya Guangzhou*, another colloquial name given to traders traveling to China. Trips to China became even more accessible because of strengthened political relations between the two countries, especially during Kabila's "five public works program" mentioned earlier.

In many ways, cheaply produced imports from China have enabled more Africans to participate in global consumerism. The massive market base in Africa enriches Chinese factories but also those African traders, many of whom are women involved in bringing merchandise to local markets. In the decade between 2010 and 2019, the number of *mama ya Guangzhou* swelled to become a social class unto themselves. Many women reached a position where they accumulated enough wealth to support their extended families through their businesses. Partly due to this new female financial empowerment achieved through access to Chinese wholesale markets, there has been an increase in local negative perceptions about traders working in China. Popular television shows depicted women as exploiting their customers and overcharging them for *chinoiseries* (Braun, 2019). This perhaps points to longer histories of distrust over women's economic activities that have the potential of granting them financial independence and the possibility of operating outside of patriarchal structures. Gracia Clark's extensive work on market women in Ghana during the country's neoliberal structural adjustment period points to market women being likened to greedy "human vampire bats" (Clark, 2001, 297), a symbolic relative of other blood-sucking or otherwise destructive feminine figures, much like *Mami Wata*.

Globalization from below, or what Mathews and Yang (2012) call "low-end globalization," consists of circuits of trade independent from, or indirectly linked to, large multinational corporations, this stands in contrast to colonial dependencies

Figures 10, 11: A woman packing her goods outside a wholesale shop in Guangzhou, China, 2016 (left); an air cargo company located in the lobby of the Hotel in Guangzhou, China, 2019 (right)



Source: Photos by author.

between colony and colonizer whose relationships were more explicitly uneven, namely that the Chinese-African relationship is part of a new “global southern region” of codependency. Congolese transnational traders, especially women, are central within this schema, and they reveal the gendered dimensions of South-South business arrangements. For example, wholesale merchants in China are often Chinese migrant women from rural areas who form part of what is referred to as the “floating population.” It is in this context that African and Chinese migrant women encounter each other in the marketplace and in warehouses.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, many traders, depending on the resources available to them, made several trips to China each year. Here, trading rhythms were structured around flights and shipping schedules, and traders ensured the success of their trips through elaborate chains of people who facilitated the associated bureaucratic administrative processes, as well as the under-the table dealings often necessary.

## Disrupted Rhythms from COVID-19

Temporary trade restrictions and shortages of goods beginning in 2020 serve as reminders that the multiple and overlapping dependencies in the production strategies and supply chains of global firms have been built upon too much “just-in-time” precarious networks, and with little expense paid to “just in case.” The reliance on imported products, crucial among them construction materials, pharmaceuticals and medical supplies, renders many African countries like the DRC vulnerable to global disruptions such as those produced by the pandemic. Inflationary pressures on materials and fuel are rendering goods more expensive in the DRC—a trend that is expected to persist. Since 2020, shipping containers have nearly doubled in price due to pandemic disruptions and the rising cost of fuel. Air cargo is also costly—in March 2022 it was between 12 USD and 16 USD per kilo—and only those traders with good connections to airport officials are in positions of making a profit from goods transported by plane. Further, increasing environmental regulations in China have put pressure on many factories, causing production disruptions of a different kind.

African brokers in China, working either independently or with logistics agencies, have been instrumental in keeping imports flowing into the country. With China closing its borders during the pandemic, African traders based on the continent found themselves unable to travel abroad for business. Another obstacle that has been exasperated involves money transfers to China, as these are not possible without a Chinese bank account—something the Chinese government has strategically enforced due partly as a measure to ensure local middlemen maintain some level of control, and more broadly as an effect of China’s global policies of being “open” albeit with severe rules, restrictions and surveillance (one might say, “Globalization with Chinese characteristics”). Business has been further complicated between Congolese traders and wholesalers, given that most traders do not have WeChat (a Chinese multi-purpose messaging, social media and mobile payment app) accounts linked to a bank account. While these pandemic disruptions left a whole class of traders paralyzed, many individuals nevertheless improvised supply chain logistics to accommodate the new economic landscape. Examples of ways of coping with these barriers are the inventive strategies utilized by individuals who have experience living and working in China.

Consider for instance one young woman named Martine. At 32 years of age, Martine has completed a business degree from a Chinese university and has spent over six years in Guangzhou. She is also functionally fluent in Mandarin. Forced to return to Kinshasa because of an overstayed visa, Martine has found a temporary mode of employment for herself during these pandemic years. As she has access to a large network of traders and shopkeepers who regularly order merchandise from wholesale dealers in China but who do not have the means to transfer the funds,

Martine searches for Chinese people in various locations throughout the city—in shops owned by Chinese and in casinos which many Chinese workers frequent during their leisure time—through which he can send money to China. When she identifies willing Chinese individuals who will make the transfer, she hands over the money (in USD) and then takes a photo of the WeChat transfer in real time. The money is subsequently transferred directly to the wholesaler's account, and the order can be fulfilled and then sent by boat. While this is a functioning work around for some, most traders would still rather supervise these orders in person so that there is no room for error, or worse, getting scammed, a possibility which may also be partly the cause of mistrust toward Chinese wholesalers, Chinese people, and foreigner enterprise in general. This points to the importance of ICT in global trade, where platforms of communication and money-transferring are still owned and operated on the national level despite becoming necessary tools for international traders—connecting to the world simultaneously drives ever new and deeper dependencies whose chains can be physical as well as virtual.

## Conclusions

While the rhythms of trade and migration have been affected by the pandemic, African traders have continued traveling abroad in the search of goods to import (although this may be changing given the inflationary costs of travel). China is no longer the only destination on the map as Dubai and Turkey are now more common destinations for wholesale trade. One West African proverb perhaps best illustrates the importance of maintaining an ethos of adaptability: “When the rhythm of the song changes, so does the dance.”

Transnational trade as a mode of labor is considered by the Congolese state to be part of the “informal economy” and slips past indicators like the GDP, rendering many there invisible, along with their struggles. Women have generally been at the forefront of carving out informal work, which also makes them the first and hardest hit when economic downturns take their toll on these unregulated and unprotected sectors of labor. Women nevertheless continue to be agents of our global order by actively creating a new class of entrepreneurs which one day, hopefully, society will recognize for its legitimacy and necessity.

As for the general consumer base of the DRC, it should be understood within a larger framework of predation of resources that has led to certain economic dependencies, both material as well as social. But unlike past theories of dependency which reduced the involved countries into rich and poor, or developed and developing, today we see dependencies on foreign imports manufactured in global Southern contexts, with Western countries stepping back to play the role of arbiters, middlemen and financiers. As the case with African transnational traders shows, material trade depends on logistics made possible through networks of people.



Congolese citizens recapture a piece of the revolving signs and codes from circulating commodities for their own narratives and politics. Through oral histories, rumors, and visual depictions of the past and present, people attempt to express their relationships to the ambient and sometimes ineffable complexities of globalization. As part of the Congolese collective imagination, *Mami Wata* reveals the excitations and anxieties brought about by promises of material wealth as embodied in new commodities, as well as the modernization which comes with unbridled growth. In other words, she is a figure who swims across the globally interconnected world, engendering new encounters wherever she may feel forced to surface.

Chains bind people, but they also connect them, and the semiotic chains which form the basis of social relationships are constantly in flux. It is thus not unexpected that those who seem most bound by such chains—women, informal workers, migrants—are also the ones who first feel their movements and whose *débrouillardise* tactics of survival foreshadow larger global trends to come. Despite ideological maneuvers and legal restrictions by nation-states to protect their own interests, the circulation of goods, ideas and people always finds a way.

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