

# The Art of Positive Fatalism

—

lessons from Kinshasa

project of book  
by **Lukas Pairon**  
release end 2025  
by Routledge NY

## **Abstract**

This book examines *positive fatalism* as an art form practiced by individuals in Kinshasa (DR Congo), focusing on how they navigate their daily lives through creative, communal, and relational strategies.

Music-making, resource sharing, and other communal practices exemplify how people in Kinshasa embrace their fate, transforming adversity into acts of resistance and self-expression.

Drawing on years of his research into the role of music in social projects, Lukas Pairon now expands in this book his reflection to include broader activities and practices that allow people to endure, adapt, and sometimes resist the systemic challenges they face.

Kinshasa's realities are specific, but the lessons they offer are universal. In an increasingly interconnected and crisis-prone world, the strategies of *positive fatalism* — embracing constraints while cultivating agency — resonate far beyond the city's borders.

Ultimately, this book is not only about Kinshasa, but invites us to reflect on our own constraints, asking: How can we transform limitation into opportunity? How can we cultivate dignity, agency, and meaning in the face of adversity?

In Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, life unfolds amidst extraordinary constraints. Yet, its inhabitants demonstrate a remarkable capacity to make things work, an art form I call *positive fatalism*. This concept – emerging from my years of research there – describes a paradoxical resilience: the pragmatic ability to accept the immovable constraints of life for individuals, while exercising agency and creativity within them. Music-making, resource sharing, and other communal practices exemplify how Kinshais embrace their fate, transforming adversity into acts of resistance and self-expression.

This book builds on new data from postdoctoral research conducted in Kinshasa in 2024 and 2025, following my doctoral work (2012–2016) exploring two social music projects: *Les Jeunes Talents* of Espace Masolo, a brass band of former “witch” children, as well as *Beta Mbonda*, a traditional percussion ensemble composed of former members of violent gangs. These projects revealed how mastering musical instruments and repertoire empowered young people, helping them navigate their constrained realities and carve out spaces for agency and belonging.

The concept of *positive fatalism* will in this book be put into context of several intellectual frameworks. From Martin Buber’s *I-Thou* relationships and Hartmut Rosa’s *resonance theory*, we learn that meaningful connections – whether with others, music, or one’s circumstances – are essential to human flourishing. Olivier Hamant’s exploration of biological constraints and Arturo Escobar’s call for a *pluriversal* world, highlight how limitations can inspire ingenuity and foster alternative ways of living. Viktor Frankl’s *logotherapy* teaches us that even in suffering, individuals can find meaning. Erich Fromm’s *biophilia* reminds us of the human capacity to affirm life in adversity, while Carl Jung’s archetypal psychology underscores the transformative potential of embracing challenges. Together, these perspectives illuminate how Kinshais embody *positive fatalism* in ways that resonate globally.

This book examines the art of living amidst constraint through the lens of these thinkers and the lived realities of Kinshasa. By connecting their ideas to the daily struggles and triumphs of Kinshais, I want to offer insights into how we might all navigate our own limitations with resilience, creativity, and dignity.

## **The Art of Positive Fatalism**

Kinshasa, the sprawling capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, is home to over 17 million people, navigating some of the most constrained realities imaginable. Amidst systemic poverty, corruption, and lack of infrastructure, life continues. What struck me most during my years of research in this city is the ability of its inhabitants to transform hardship into a liveable existence. I have come to understand this capacity as *positive fatalism*: a paradoxical mindset that embraces both the acceptance of immovable constraints and the exercise of agency within those very limits.

This book examines *positive fatalism* as an art form practiced by individuals in Kinshasa, focusing on how they navigate their daily lives through creative, communal, and relational strategies. Drawing on years of research into the role of music in social projects, I expand the discussion to include broader activities and practices that allow people to endure, adapt, and sometimes resist the systemic challenges they face. From informal savings systems like *likelemba* to the transformative power of music-making, Kinshasa offers a profound lens through which to explore resilience and creativity.

## **Music as a Portal to Agency**

The central finding of my previous research – as described in *Music Saved Them, They Say (2020)* – is that structured musical practice in social projects can facilitate significant social repositioning for marginalized youth in Kinshasa, helping them shift from stigmatized identities (e.g., as gang members or “witch children”) to respected social roles as musicians. However, this impact is nuanced and context-dependent, as music alone cannot resolve broader systemic issues such as poverty or societal exclusion.

While music does not guarantee financial improvement or eliminate societal challenges, its intrinsic rewards – such as personal fulfilment, emotional expression, and the capacity of mastering – motivate continued engagement among participants. The success of these projects nevertheless relies on sustained mentorship and high-quality artistic guidance, which are difficult to maintain in resource-constrained environments like Kinshasa.

My previous research also emphasized the importance of contextual and long-term understanding of such projects’

social impacts, avoiding simplistic or romanticized narratives about the “saving power” of music. Instead, it sheds light on how musical practice fosters agency and social capital, albeit within limited and complex realities.

My initial research in Kinshasa (2012-2016) centred on two social music projects: *Les Jeunes Talents* of Espace Masolo, which brought together young people accused of witchcraft to form a brass band, and *Beta Mbonda*, a percussion ensemble of former gang members. These initiatives highlighted music’s potential to offer more than aesthetic or recreational value; they became platforms for participants to reclaim agency, forge communal ties, and assert their identity within an unforgiving social context.

The young musicians’ journey toward mastering instruments and repertoire revealed an essential dynamic: music served as both a means of survival as well as an end in itself. It was not merely a tool for economic advancement but also a space where dignity and joy could flourish. This resonates with Martin Buber’s concept of the *I-Thou* relationship, where authentic connections – whether with people, music, or one’s circumstances – humanize and transcend alienation. Hartmut Rosa’s theory of *resonance* further deepens this understanding, suggesting that music enables individuals to establish vibrant, meaningful connections with their world, countering the alienation that systemic poverty often imposes.

The book will also propose up to 5 special features in the form of portraits of young musicians who against all odds succeed to continue to develop their music practice.

### **Kinshasa as a Stage of Constraints and Creativity**

Kinshasa’s challenges are immense: widespread poverty, pervasive pollution, and unreliable governance define the backdrop of everyday life. Yet, its people are not mere victims of these circumstances; they actively shape their realities through communal practices, resource sharing, and quiet acts of resistance.

The informal savings systems of *likelemba* and *bwakisa carte* exemplify this creativity. These systems, rooted in trust and collective accountability, allow participants to navigate financial insecurity by pooling resources. Such practices resonate with Olivier Hamant’s exploration of constraints as opportunities for growth. Hamant argues

that limitations, far from being purely restrictive, can catalyse ingenuity. Similarly, Arturo Escobar's call for a *pluriverse*, challenges us to recognize alternative ways of being and knowing. The Kinois, through their resourcefulness, embody this *pluriversal* ethos, crafting solutions that subvert the logic of scarcity.

### **Positive Fatalism: Beyond Resilience**

*Positive fatalism* does not equate to resignation or passive endurance. Rather, it is an active engagement with life's realities, combining acceptance with agency. This mindset is perhaps most poignantly articulated by Viktor Frankl, who argued that meaning can be found even in the most adverse conditions. Frankl's logotherapy emphasizes that individuals, when unable to change their external circumstances, still retain the freedom to choose their response. The Kinois demonstrate this principle daily, transforming suffering into purpose through music, communal solidarity, and quiet acts of defiance.

The tension between resilience and resistance is central to the concept of *positive fatalism*. While resilience emphasizes survival, resistance implies a refusal to accept the status quo. For example, when women in Kinshasa symbolically turned their backs on President Félix Tshisekedi's motorcade – a gesture culturally loaded with rejection – they demonstrated how subtle acts of dissent can coexist with the art of survival. Such practices underscore the nuanced ways in which agency manifests in constrained contexts.

I have also in previous publications warned against romanticizing resilience as justification for systemic neglect, emphasizing the need for greater societal support while appreciating the strength and adaptability of those living under such conditions.

### **The Ethical Dimension of Positive Fatalism**

The ethical implications of my research are significant. As a middle-class Belgian researcher working in Kinshasa, I am acutely aware of the power dynamics inherent in my position. This book seeks not only to document but to honour the lived experiences of the Kinois, resisting any romanticization of poverty while acknowledging the systemic injustices they endure.

Erich Fromm's distinction between *having* and *being* offers a useful framework for understanding how the Kinois navigate these tensions. In a context where material wealth is scarce, *being* – defined by relationships, creativity, and community – becomes a vital mode of existence. Fromm's concept of biophilia, or love for life, mirrors the vitality I observed in Kinshasa: a collective affirmation of life that persists despite profound hardship.

### **Relationality, Meaning, and Transformation**

The relational dimension of *positive fatalism* draws heavily on the philosophies of Martin Buber and Hartmut Rosa. Buber's *I-Thou* relationship emphasizes mutuality and presence, which are evident in the communal practices of the Kinois. Rosa's *resonance theory* complements this by highlighting how meaningful connections create a sense of agency and vitality. Together, these frameworks help us understand how Kinshasa's inhabitants engage with their constrained realities in ways that preserve dignity and foster transformation.

Carl Jung's archetypal psychology also offers valuable insights. The *archetype of the Hero*, for example, can be seen in the resilience of individuals who confront their challenges with courage and creativity. The Kinois, through their everyday acts of survival and adaptation, embody this heroic spirit, redefining their fate through ingenuity and communal solidarity.

## Lessons from Kinshasa

Kinshasa's realities are specific, but the lessons they offer are universal. In an increasingly interconnected and crisis-prone world, the strategies of *positive fatalism* – embracing constraints while cultivating agency – resonate far beyond the city's borders. Arturo Escobar's *pluriversal* thinking invites us to learn from the Kinois, recognizing the validity of their knowledge systems and practices as pathways to resilience.

Ultimately, this book will not only be about Kinshasa but also about the human condition. It is not written for academics only, but will invite a general audience of readers to reflect on their own constraints, asking: How can we transform limitation into opportunity? How can we cultivate dignity, agency, and meaning in the face of adversity?



Lukas Pairon  
5 January 2025  
lukaspairon@gmail.com  
[www.lukas-pairon.eu/postdoc](http://www.lukas-pairon.eu/postdoc)  
[www.simm-platform.eu](http://www.simm-platform.eu) / [www.cesamm.eu](http://www.cesamm.eu) / [www.musicfund.eu](http://www.musicfund.eu)

---

Pairon, Lukas (2020), *Music Saved Them, They Say - Social Impacts of Music-Making and Learning in Kinshasa (DR Congo)*, Routledge New York.

Pairon, Lukas (2022), "The Art of Positive Fatalism", in Oscar Odena (ed), *Music and Social Inclusion*, Routledge, chp.11

Pairon, Lukas (2024), "Towards a 'pluriversity' inspired by participatory music", in *Circuit*, vol. 34, no. 2

## Contents:

---

### 1. Introduction

### 2. Music as well as poverty omnipresent in Kinshasa

### 3. Focus on two social music projects

#### 3.1. *Les Jeunes Talents* of Espace Masolo

3.1.1. Brass band of former 'witch'-children

3.1.2. Two portraits

#### 3.2. *Beta Mbonda*

3.2.1. Percussion ensemble of former members of violent gangs

3.2.2. Two portraits

### 4. Four initial findings on these social music projects

4.1. Double accompaniment (artistic & social)

4.2. At the wheel - mastering instruments and repertoire

4.3. Governance and internal democracy

4.4. Musical practice as an end in itself (pleasure of playing)

### 5. Living in extremely constrained realities

5.1. A different city - population, pollution, poverty

5.2. 9 years later - a new stage in young people's lives

5.3. Inhabitants of Kinshasa manage

5.4. The art of '*positive fatalism*'

5.4.1. Now and today

5.4.2. Community - sharing property

5.4.3. Life goes on

5.4.4. Tomorrow may be better

5.4.5. 'Article 15'

5.4.6. Make ends meet

5.4.7. Saving

5.4.8. God is with us

5.5. Resilience versus resistance

5.6. Music does not pay, but we miss playing it

### 6. Lessons we may learn

### 7. Postscript: Challenges of the research