

## **Music and forgiveness in Kinshasa**

by Lukas Paireon, PhD ([www.lukas-paireon.eu](http://www.lukas-paireon.eu)), July 2019

translation of article published in  
Tijdschrift voor Geestelijk Leven (special issue on forgiveness)  
published by Licap/Halewijn, Brussels, September 2019, nr 3

When from 2012 to 2016 I often traveled to Kinshasa (DR Congo) to do field work for my PhD-research, I always needed time to arrive and find my twist there. I cannot say that I really liked going to Kinshasa. But after a few days being there, it felt good, being surrounded by the many people I know there. The Kinshasa I was in, was on the one hand so intense, and so ugly also, a rubbish dump where rats thrive. So much poverty all over. Life is hard for most people living there.

But there is also the other side. When I began to work with the participants in my research, I also started to see something of the inside of life in this city: unbelievable courage, vitality, wisdom, generosity, humour, solidarity and.. forgiveness. That is the side of Kinshasa which gave meaning to my wish to be there after all, to each time want to stay longer, and to come back again and again.

My research (social development study) for the Ghent University was set up in Kinshasa with the ambition to increase our understanding of how the experience of structured musical training and practice could have an influence on the social conditions of young people. I examined a specific local context in detail, in the often difficult living conditions of Kinshasa. A special and unexpected outcome of this research was that it increased our understanding of the factors that motivate young people to stay in the act of music-making for a long time, even though such activity did not appear to much improve the critical aspects of their external (e.g. economic) circumstances.

Two long-term social music projects chosen to be studied in Kinshasa were: (1) a brass band - for children in street situations (almost all of them so-called 'witch'-children), 22 young men and women between the ages of 16 and 23, and (2) a traditional Congolese percussion ensemble - with 10 men, former members of violent gangs, aged between 24 and 41.

The data show a strong conviction in both groups that becoming a musician played an important role in helping them navigate to better positions in their social lives. Some expressed this by saying that they "were saved by music".

The research supports the conclusion that music can be socially transformative, but that certain specific conditions may be necessary in order to make such a transformation robust.

Music clearly played a role in these social projects, but to ensure their social transformation also the astonishing capacity of many of these young persons to turn a page and to forgive: During my fieldwork in Kinshasa I was often confronted with forms of forgiveness by victims of violence (victims of the former gangsters and among the young people who were victims of their own families who accused them of being bewitched). Even though I have found in this study that forgiveness was an important element in creating opportunities for social navigation by these young people, I have not however been able to provide sufficient attention to this phenomenon during my fieldwork and in my final PhD-thesis.

*LP: Have former victims forgiven you for what you did to them? And can you now live with them and meet them?*

*BM-YA: Absolutely. They're even happy that we've changed. And we have apologised for what we have done to them.*

This phenomenon of 'forgiveness' has in recent years often interested me and it kept me wondering what it is about. The Congolese seemed to be better able to forgive than the society where I come from and grew up in.

Here you will not read what forgiveness is, but you will find out in which particular circumstances I have been seeing it at work in Kinshasa. Indeed, it was impressive to see how former victims of violent gangs were able to quickly - and as if it were 'normal' - forgive these young men, who meanwhile had become musicians and had said goodbye to their gangster past. They were with open arms received again by many in their midst with comments such as 'our boys are back'.

I link this ability to forgive - like Dennis Vanden Auweele (2018) also does - to the strong bonds ('bonding capital') which I experienced in this society. The importance of living in community apparently makes forgiveness necessary and also simpler. The people in the neighbourhood were happy that these 'kulunas' (this is how the gangsters in Kinshasa are called) had converted and accepted them back into their midst. It was impressive to establish how victims of the former gangsters welcomed them back in their midst. Before they became musicians they fought mainly with each other and with gangs from other neighbourhoods. In doing so, those participating in my research have killed no one, but they terrorised a lot of people, attacked, robbed and wounded. It was in particular remarkable to discover how their environment seemed to forgive what such young men did to them when they were members of the violent gangs, and was prepared to continue living with them. Hannah Arendt understood this capacity as a typical example of our human freedom, because forgiveness enables us to start over and move on (Achterhuis 2010).

Before I started my research in Kinshasa I had already been told that Congolese were known for their ability to forgive. I personally suspect that one of the reasons for this is the fact that life over there is already extremely difficult, and that it is 'good news' to be able to turn a page and move on. This then corresponds to another phenomenon with which I was also very much confronted in Kinshasa and I have called 'positive fatalism' (Pairon 2016): the art - in spite of the limits that are set - to accept their own circumstances as well as possible, in order to then - with the creativity and energy that are left to them - try to improve conditions, or at least to make them more acceptable and more liveable.

BM-IB: One day I was sitting here in front of our house. I see a man passing by walking. He goes to the end of the street, and then he walks back, and back again. I was curious and wondered what he was up to. Then I heard him praying. And somehow I got touched in my heart by what I saw. It was at a time when I was preparing to fight somewhere in a kind of revenge. But I saw this young man, about my age, walking and praying, and I was touched by this face, and the contrast between him and myself. I was not the only one who heard what he said and prayed. Then he left. I stayed behind and thought a lot. I asked myself many questions about myself and about the life I was living then. My conscience was awakened and spoke to me. I said to myself that in my life I had to be able to act legitimately. I thought a lot. I talked to myself and said to myself that it was time to change my way and become a better person. I decided to change my life. That evening my friends came to get me to fight somewhere, but I refused to join them. They left without me. That night, two of them were hit by police bullets. I went to my mother, knelt down before her and asked her to forgive me for what I did to her and to the family.

Even more impressive was the way in which some of the so-called former 'witch'-children dealt with how their own family had harmed them. Most young musicians from the brass band had as children started to live in street situations because their relationship with their family was broken, most often because they had been accused of being bewitched (which is why they are called 'witch'-children). Many of these children and young people have thanks to the work of this socio-artistic music project been able to return to their families. It is one of the main ambitions of this socio-artistic community centre to reunite these youngsters with their families.

The exorcism ceremonies - called 'délivrance' - of the pentacostal churches can be violent, including torture, sprinkling with blood, olive oil or vinegar in the eyes, or even burning the children with a car tyre around their bodies.

It is hard to imagine how these young men and women then have been able to build something for themselves after their own family had rejected them and told them that they were satanic, possessed by Satan. They must somehow have been already strong, because having experienced such painful things and having landed on the streets from such an early age. They were innocent of

what they were charged with, and had the courage to take their lives into their own hands. They had the strength to say: 'I don't want this for myself. I am going to save myself. I want to live, so I'm going to take to the streets". These young people who have left their families, went to live outside in the streets of Kinshasa, and then in shelters for children in street situations, they are and remain courageous. In fact, - as also other research has shown - they often turn out to be more enterprising, more resilient and imaginative than children living with their families at home. Perhaps it is that strength that also enables them - more easily than others - to come to forgiveness, to turn a page, and continue to live with what is. Yet I was astonished that some of these young men and women - who when they were small (between 6 and 10-12 years) were accused of being bewitched - were able to forgive their families for this.

However, when they cannot forgive their families because their anger is too great, then the adult world often is being put away. They then place themselves on a pedestal and put the adult world from their heights to the side. In that case nothing has been arranged for them or they have not yet come to terms with their pain. This attitude is however quite understandable, because what they had to go through as a child with their own family was and is so difficult. There are then different ways to 'present the bills'. Forgiveness can be a good way to transcend anger, but - as Martha Nussbaum pointed out - it can also be a subtle form of retaliation (Nussbaum 2016).

*EM-CL: When I was living on the streets, I never spoke to men, because fathers made me angry. I stayed away from them. If I needed something, I asked mothers. That's because it was men who when I was little had caused a lot of suffering at home. Papa Jose, the husband of my grandmother, and the other man before that... I didn't like men. If I would ask a man for money, I would insult him, I could even throw a stone at him. But then I thought, I have become a man myself. I even found the pastor who had done oil in my eyes to get the devil out of me. I went to his church. After the service. I stood before him and greeted him. He did no longer recognise me. "I am the child you called a 'witch'-child". He then said: "How are things going with you? I heard you went to Europe for concerts?". I said: "Yes, I went to Europe." He: "Why did you come home?" I wanted to flatter him and said: 'I came to give you some money now'. He accepted it. And when I came back home I thought to myself: "The devil gave you a tenner."*

Forgiving can help to turn a page in terms of the anger that one can have towards people who have harmed you (such as the families in relation to the so-called 'witch'-children). And when it is not possible to forgive, one often looks away from the anger one feels. Because the anger they are facing is so difficult to be confronted with.

*LP: After everything you've been through with them, have you become angry at those around you, your family?*

*EM1-CK: It wasn't easy to be angry with them, because I really did not have the strength to do so. They took me to all sorts of places. They could do what they wanted with me. Even my mother was not able to oppose it. What could I do or say?*

*LP: Do you blame your mother for not protecting you or for not having defended you?*

*EM1-CK: I understood she was in trouble. She had nothing. And someone who has studied also have the opportunity to think. But my mother did not study. She was unable to defend me.*

*EM2-CH: Now I have been brought back to my family by the shelter. I now live with my grandmother. When they saw me back they were very nice with me. They took me in their arms and begged me to forget what they had done to me, and asked me to please come back in the family. I have accepted to go back. I have forgiven them.*

*Now we are together again and that is good. Of course sometimes there are conflicts, as in any family, but that is normal. We live now good.*

Many of these young people succeed to forgive the older ones who accused them of witchcraft. Why is that? It is surely also related to the influence of the churches who preach forgiveness. In Kinshasa it is mainly the pentacostal churches ('églises du réveil') who preach forgiveness as an important key to 'liberation'.

*LP: Your mother, she is really proud of you.*

*EM1-GL: Yes, it's good. But it's good that we don't talk about the past anymore.*

It is also because the guilty cannot always be punished that the ability to forgive can be considered a handsome talent allowing one to move on in life. You have to be able to do it though. It is easy to talk and write about forgiveness, but in many situations so much more difficult to achieve forgiveness.

## **References :**

Achterhuis, Hans: 'Met alle geweld', Lemniscaat, Rotterdam, 2010  
Nussbaum, Martha: 'Anger and forgiveness', Oxford University Press, New York, 2016

Pairon, Lukas: 'Positief Fatalisme', in: Rekto-Verso, december 2016 (English version written for the World Ensemble website, June 2020, <https://theworldensemble.org/positive-fatalism-and-social-music-projects-in-kinshasa-dr-congo>)

Pairon, Lukas: 'Music Saved Them, They Say', Routledge, New York, 2020

Vanden Auweele, Dennis: 'Over nut en nadeel van theologie voor vergiffenis', Tijdschrift voor Theologie, 58/4, 2018, p.381-396

Zizek, Slavoj: 'Violence', Profile Books, London, 2008-2009