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Koen Vlassenroot and Karen Büscher
Conflict Research Group, University of Ghent

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The City as Frontier: Urban Development and Identity Processes in Goma

Koen Vlassenroot and Karen Büscher
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Introduction

Since the early 1990s, the city of Goma, the capital of North Kivu located on the Democratic Republic of Congo's (DRC) border with Rwanda, has experienced a remarkable transformation. From a small, dormant town of marginal political and economic importance, it developed into a regional military and economic centre. More than fifteen years of state decline, violent conflict and massive displacement have facilitated the city's connection to extensive and flourishing transborder trade networks and have turned Goma into a notable centre of rebellion, attracting rebel leaders, businessmen, humanitarians and peacekeepers, but also vast numbers of refugees and internally displaced people in search of protection. The Congolese wars (1996-2003) also redefined Goma's relationship with the central state and have enhanced Goma's importance as a border town. Being the seat of the RCD (*Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie*) rebel movement, during the war the city was disconnected administratively and territorially from the Congolese capital of Kinshasa. This disconnection set in motion a fierce competition for control over the socio-political and economic space Goma represented, which had a direct impact on urban transformation and the identity processes of the city's inhabitants. The border town of Goma became a pivotal centre of political contestation, military rebellion and economic competition. One particular dynamic was the struggle for socio-political control. Governance efforts by the RCD rebels met fierce resistance from civil society and church associations, which presented themselves as viable alternatives to the rebel structures of control.¹ Another dynamic was the reinforcement of the city's outward orientation of economic activity towards markets in eastern Africa, the Middle East and Asia, mainly as a result of the politico-administrative autonomisation of Goma. Both dynamics have redefined political and economic boundaries between the city, the state and the region. It has been noted that the political economy of natural resources tends to produce powerful centrifugal forces that not only further fragment the state but also create 'multiple unstable, ungovernable spaces' (Korf and Funfgeld 206: 392). In the case of Goma, the rising importance of natural resources during the Congolese wars turned the city into a vibrant and autonomous centre of economic transaction and accumulation, connecting Kivu's artisanal mining centres to the international resource market and strengthening its position as regional trading centre for imported and manufactured goods. As a consequence, the city shifted from a peripheral urban centre to a vibrant city of opportunity. As was also observed elsewhere in the DRC, these changes in the local socio-political and economic context not only engendered new economic realities but also new issues of contestation that 'leave their imprint (...) on the sociological composition of border towns and villages, as well as on the shape and architecture of traditional political and power structures' (De Boeck 2008: 44).

¹ In doing so, these organisations tried to position themselves as the only local drivers of development, which was widely supported by international donors.

These dynamics also impacted on the identity processes of Goma's inhabitants, which are the specific focus of this paper. Given the notion that borderlands have their own social dynamics and historical developments (Baud and Van Schendel 1997), this paper wants to challenge traditional studies that tend to study border places from a central viewpoint. In order to evaluate the remarkable paradox between Goma's expansion, and a generalised and regional context of state decline and violence, the city will be considered as an autonomous space and a laboratory of change. Our analysis will focus on the different processes of contestation that have defined the city's present identity as well as that of its inhabitants. In this paper, two dimensions of this contestation will be illustrated: the struggle for dominance over the local socio-political space; and the struggle for economic control. The first section reflects on the position of Goma as a centre of change and contestation. The second focuses on the different dynamics that explain the city's growing autonomy, and analyses the different transborder dynamics that have shaped contemporary Goma. These dynamics will be illustrated on the basis of an evaluation of the economic and political impact of the cassiterite trade and an illustration of the socio-economic importance of Goma's border district – Birere. The final section evaluates the extent to which these dynamics have influenced the perceptions and self-perceptions of Goma's inhabitants. This analysis starts from socio-economic and political realities at the local level, but without neglecting interactions between the state, region and city. In doing so, this paper seeks to highlight how the state, region and city are imagined and experienced in the everyday lives of Goma's inhabitants and how this imagination and experience is linked to processes of identification.

The City as 'Laboratory of Change'?

Located at the periphery of the Congolese state, Goma can be considered both as a borderland and a frontier zone: it is part of a social and cultural system straddling a territorial border as well as being a peripheral or marginalised space within the state (Goodhand 2003; Scott 1976), and at certain moments of recent history even a 'non-state space' (Goodhand 2003). The dynamic and contested character of Africa's frontier zones and borderlands has gained renewed attention since the publication of Kopytoff's internal frontier theory at the end of the 1980s, which tries to offer a model for the historical understanding of frontiers and their relationship to metropolises in sub-Saharan Africa. According to Kopytoff, the African frontier 'consists of politically open areas nestling between organised societies but 'internal' to the larger regions in which they are found – what might be called an 'internal' or 'interstitial frontier'' (Kopytoff 1987: 9). Two elements are of particular importance in Kopytoff's thesis: firstly, mobility is explained as a structural feature in the (re)production of the social and political order of these frontier zones; secondly, frontier zones are highly contested places, in which both exogenous and endogenous forces try to gain social control, reduce mobility and impose their authority. In this sense, Goma can be regarded as a city of transborder mobility and ambivalent refuge, located in a region of Central Africa that has always been characterised by a considerable in and out migration, an African frontier in which many different social groups intermingle, constantly contending for power and space (Newbury 1992). This reality of Goma as a frontier zone has had a remarkable impact on processes of local urban identity formation; the city's location has evoked the emerging of multiple, strongly pronounced social identities that reflect the characteristics of contestation and mobility.

While political scientists and historians have paid much attention to how states have tried to deal with these peripheral and difficult to govern frontier zones and borderlands, far less attention has been given to how these borderlands deal with states (Van Schendel 2005). Nevertheless, besides providing 'an institutional vacuum for the unfolding of social

processes' (Kopytoff 1987: 11), frontier zones and borderlands can also be understood as regions of inventiveness, having their own social dynamics and historical developments and creating their own institutional arrangements and regulatory regimes that also define their relationship with the central state (Raeymaekers 2009). As spaces of contestation and resistance against exogenous attempts to control/define these zones, borderlands are often beyond the reach of the state, with an 'insurrectionary tradition' (Scott 1976) continually destabilising and upending 'the established meanings and limits of place and identity' (Kaiser and Nikiforova 2006: 936). The history of the Kivu provinces offers a perfect illustration of these dynamics. On the one hand, this region has been subject to continuous attempts by the Zairian/Congolese state to impose its authority. On the other hand, it has been a site of continuous contestation over what was locally perceived as a strategy to establish and territorialise exogenous domination.² The result of both dynamics is, as Le Meur (2006: 896) also observed in Benin, the reshaping of local relations between mobility and locality and a redefinition of local governmentality that is 'strongly influenced by a frontier ideology combining a discourse of autochthony (...) with a capacity to integrate and reshape exogenous parameters'.

Given their ambiguous character, these frontier zones represent attractive spaces of opportunity. As zones in the shadow of colonial and post-colonial administrations, they are spaces of engagement (Van Schendel 2005) and continuous negotiation, through which activities and goods easily pass unnoticed (Nugent and Asiwaju 1996) and fortune-seeking opportunists as well as political opponents, try to evade state regulation and control. In cases where the political centre is gradually losing its control over these regions and is forced to enter into bargaining processes with non-state actors, new political orders tend to emerge from the complex interdependencies between these state- and non-state actors, resulting in the development of forms of authority and political-economic regulation that are increasingly 'transborder' in nature.³ As Raeymaekers (2007) notes in relation to eastern Congo's border town of Butembo (North Kivu), a local business elite during the 1996-2003 wars increasingly exploited the opportunities of weakening state control over transborder trade and succeeded in establishing a growing web of social relations, which led to them becoming accepted as a legitimated regulatory authority of the Congo-Ugandan border zone. He points out that from traders 'on the margins of the law', Butembo's businessmen became makers of the law itself, forcing rebel authorities into a strategy of mediation and accommodation that led to a crucial reinterpretation of existing regulatory practices and relations.⁴ Similar process could be observed in Goma. Even if traders did not have the same capacity to force the RCD rebel leadership into negotiation or to redefine local authority, the privileged relationship between Banyarwanda business elites and the rebels engendered several processes of economic control and eventually redefined the local economic space. For these Banyarwanda elites, the city

² The Kivu-provinces are far from unique in this 'outward orientation'. As Jackson (2006: 432) states, 'it might not be too much of a simplification to think of Congo's huge territory as almost all 'borderland', a vast doughnut with populations and productive resources clustered around its edges and borders and looking outwards while the middle of the territory is covered with dense rainforest'.

³ See also Roitman (2001:19) who observed in the Chad Basin that the state and non-state forms of accumulation and power 'are often reciprocal and complicitous as much as they are competitive and antagonistic'. These non-state actors usually do not operate in opposition to the state but can 'become part and parcel of the political logics of the state itself, contributing to its ability to fulfil essential political imperatives such as extraction and redistribution'. While state regulatory authority is constantly undermined by these non-state networks, the same forces also contribute to the visibility of the state.

⁴ Raeymaekers (2007) also observed that since the start of the peace process in 2003, in order to claim their authority, the reinstated state structures were forced to negotiate with these power complexes that had consolidated their local control during the war.

increasingly became the centre of power and the place where its strategies to gain economic and political control over the rural areas were designed. However, since the start of the peace process in July 2003, growing division between Hutu and Tutsi Banyarwanda, attempts from the political centre to expand its authority and local competition from other networks of power again drastically modified this local power balance. In 2008, the National Congress for People's Defence (CNDP) military campaign led by Laurent Nkunda arrived at the outskirts of the city in October and set in motion new processes of contestation over the city's political and economic space.

Enwezor et al. (2002: 19) argue that:

The African city is the site for the challenge to the political and at the same time the location for negotiations and agreements where new organizations and services, freedoms and autonomous spaces are emerging and developing

Today's urban realities in Goma should be understood as expressions of a growing urban autonomy, which itself is directly linked to processes of state decline and dynamics of regional and local conflict. Rather than understanding the city as an embodiment of accommodation, this paper presents it as a 'laboratory of change'.⁵ One way of analysing the character of these urban realities is through a focus on the shift from a 'formal logic of colonial urban systems' to the more recent 'postcolonial attempts to redraw the old colonial boundaries for a less rigidly codified, and thus more imaginative, experiential and democratic design of urban life' (Simone 2005: 14). For many African cities, this analysis reveals that while withering state capacity and economic decline since independence have caused the destruction of infrastructure, further social inequality, marginalisation and entropy – which have eventually posed 'serious challenges to urban stability and sustainability' – cities have also turned into imaginative and creative spaces and dynamic poles beyond the control of the state (De Boeck and Plissart 2004). These creative and inventive dynamics become all the more evident in the case of border or frontier cities, which are sites of circulation and openness (Amin and Thrift 2002). Their openness and externality along with their territoriality combine to shape some aspects of their dynamic potential (Robinson 2006: 252). Important differences between cities, which point at the limits of this creativity and inventiveness, can be observed though. Even if in the case of the DRC, as part of the processes of state decline most cities tended to become autonomous spaces, this autonomy did not engender similar processes in every urban centre. Contrary to cities such as Goma, Bukavu and Lubumbashi, at the end of the 1990s, Kisangani could be considered as one of the most devastated urban centres of the DRC, a city where 'traces of modernity were (gradually) disappearing' (Tshonda 2000: 415).

Goma as Zone of Opportunity and Contestation.

Goma's current development cannot be disconnected from its mounting politico-military and economic significance. Local processes of state decline and regional dynamics of conflict increasingly gave the city its status as an autonomous space, offering new opportunities to local, national and regional actors. One element that was crucial in Goma's rising importance and urban development was the city's border location. Situated at the heart of the Great Lakes Region, the city has increasingly gained importance as a trading post in the region's vast network of transborder trade routes; while since the early 1990s regional conflict dynamics

⁵ According to Simone (2005: 1), 'if an accelerated differentiation of social practices and organisation has had to compensate for the long-term absence of investment, infrastructure development, formal employment and multiplex economic articulations with the larger world, how are the ensuing complex fields managed?'

and local processes of state decline also defined Goma's growing political and strategic importance. The second element is the presence of vast amounts of natural resources in Goma's hinterlands of Masisi and Walikale. During the Congolese war, these resources became crucial aspects of warring parties' strategies of dominance and territorial control, with Goma turning into an essential connection point between the sites of extraction and transborder trading routes. Both dynamics have provoked intensified competition between local, national and regional players and have engendered new local structures of power and control. In this section, the impact of these dynamics will be further explored. Firstly, using the example of the cassiterite trade, it will be illustrated that the growing importance of natural resources has caused a shift in local urban economic realities; the same resources have also become a crucial asset for the consolidation of urban political control. Secondly, an analysis of the local economic activities in the Birere district of Goma town will highlight the importance of transborder mobility in Goma's current urban configuration.

Although Goma has historically been a focal point for migration and trading that connected communities from central to eastern Africa, the city's economic importance mainly stems from the colonial period, even if it remained limited when compared to other parts of the Belgian colony. The introduction of a plantation economy in the fertile arable highlands of Kivu by the colonial administration explains North Kivu's reputation as the main 'food basket' of Zaire/Congo. From these productive areas, large quantities of cereals, potatoes, meat and palm oil were transported to Goma, from where these products were sold to markets in Kinshasa, Kisangani and other urban centres in the country. The construction of a port in nearby Keshero (which would later be relocated closer to the centre of Goma) was designed to facilitate this trade and to integrate the city into the eastern north-south axis connecting Bunia to Rutshuru, Goma, Bukavu, Uvira and Kalemie. From the 1920s, investments by concessionary companies were also made in the extraction of natural resources. However, when compared to Ituri or South Kivu, the importance of the local mining sector until the 1980s was rather limited in North Kivu, as was the significance of Goma as a trading centre for these resources.

Despite the importance of these practices, economic activities were not restricted to those established by the colonists (which remained largely under the control of a small number of expatriate traders). Prior to the colonial era, small-scale local economic transactions had already been organised along historical cross-border routes that connected Goma with markets in Uganda and Rwanda and that remained largely unchallenged by colonialism.⁶ After independence, these routes gained in importance and became the backbone of the local economy. Given the predatory character of the Zairian state and the increasing economic destitution caused by it, the Zairian population was forced into strategies of self-reliance and protection outside the official economy.⁷ This partly explains the further expansion in Zaire's borderlands of informal and fraudulent trading activities, which had become so extensive at the end of the 1970s that they were not only responsible for the further undermining of state effectiveness but also brought about important changes in the social structure on which it was based (Vlassenroot and Romkema 2002). Although it is impossible to accurately quantify the amount of commodities smuggled across Kivu's borders, the loss of state revenue due to fraudulent export was enormous. By the 1980s, more than half of the production of papaya, tea and cinchona was fraudulently exported by small traders through Goma's international

⁶ Products such as bananas, sorghum and milk products (mainly cheese) continued to be traded mainly at markets in Rwanda and Burundi.

⁷ These activities became known as '*Système D*', or 'fend for yourself'. For Janet MacGaffey (1987), these activities were more than survival strategies and should be understood as acts of resistance.

airport, while in 1985-1986 it was estimated that some 60 percent of the local coffee production was smuggled or exported through informal transborder networks. The same fraudulent export and barter was taking place with mining products. Even though the liberalisation of the mining sector and the institution of '*comptoirs*' (licensed counters for the trade of mining products) in the early 1980s aimed at reducing the fraudulent export of minerals, smuggling activities continued as before.

The dramatic increase in cross-border economic transactions, both in volume and in their illicit character, consolidated the emergence of a vast regional network of informal trade that became, according to MacGaffey (1987: 22) 'the means by which seemingly disastrous national economies managed to keep going'. Where official international treaties in the Great Lakes Region failed to create regional economic integration, unrecorded cross-border trade resulted in unofficial market integration beyond the state. As MacGaffey concludes, 'it was partly owing to the ingenuity of local entrepreneurs that (...) Zaire was able to ward off harsh blows of a decade-long flight of foreign capital and cuts in economic assistance'. It was not only local entrepreneurs who profited from these smuggling activities: 'private businesses, transportation companies, and tax-collecting bureaucracies throughout the region benefited significantly from the informal sector and the income opportunities it provided' (Mwanasali 2000: 140). These dynamics explain the growing economic importance of Goma, which became an important market for agricultural and mining products and a point of access for manufactured goods to eastern DRC's markets. Several trading routes connected the city to eastern Africa. The most important one linked Goma to Rwanda's markets through the Goma-Gisenyi border post, even though smuggling activities were also increasingly organised via the smaller border posts of Bunangana and Ishasha. The second trading route, which was mainly controlled by Nande traders from Beni-Butembo, connected Goma to Uganda via Beni-Butembo and the Kasindi border post.

Goma's position as a regional trading centre was further consolidated during the Congolese wars (1996-2003), as the *comptoir* trade set in motion new processes of frontier expansion and urbanisation.⁸ Control over these trading networks was no longer serving purely economic interests but became an essential element of local political and military power struggle. At the same time, Goma's close connection to mineral-rich areas in the Kivus turned the city into a crucial point of access to the local war economy. This new context made of Goma a space of opportunity (attracting new settlers including international criminal networks, cargo companies and traders but also vast numbers of ordinary Congolese and Rwandese in search of protection and economic opportunity), as well as a zone of contestation, in which natural resources shaped local power strategies that were increasingly based 'on the territorialisation of sovereignty around valuable resource areas and trading networks' (Le Billon 2001: 561).

Both dynamics have had a considerable impact on the city's spatial development as well as on its inhabitants' identification with the city. Goma's image of '*lieu d'opportunité*' mainly stems from its particular position during the second Congolese war (1998-2003). Hosting the headquarters of the RCD rebel movement and being politically and militarily administratively disconnected from the Congolese capital, this '*siège de rébellion*' became an attractive location for the expansion of politico-military and economic ambition, which provoked fierce

⁸ De Boeck (2001: 551) observed a similar development on the Angolan-Congolese border. As he states, 'the political economy of the *comptoir* has always been colonial in its very essence. In the past it contributed a lot to the urbanisation of the African material and mental landscape. The contemporary *comptoir* economy in Congo and Angola has contributed a great deal to the frontier urbanisation'

competition for socio-political and economic control over the city. While it is often argued that rebel control over the exploitation and trading of natural resources ‘permitted an explosion in profiteering from minerals’ (Jackson 2006: 431), the commercial rivalry that was caused by it was also ‘an expression of competition around means of ensuring one’s own and one’s community’s physical survival in an area of profound and prolonged conflict’ (Tegera and Johnson 2007: 6). One of the outcomes of the Congolese war was a concentration of mineral trading in Goma, with the increased exploitation of natural resources in Masisi and Walikale transforming the city into a major trading centre. As a consequence of growing global demand for coltan, during 2000-2001 local traffic was primarily dominated by this ore. After the coltan boom, cassiterite took over as the main export product, with a dramatic rise in exports from 71 tons in 1999 to 2904 tons in 2006 and an estimated value of US\$115 million on the world market in 2007 (Garrett 2008).⁹

Control over this trade became part of larger power strategies between Nande and Banyarwanda elites. As the import of manufactured goods in eastern DRC is traditionally dominated by Nande traders, Banyarwanda elites have increasingly tried to get control over the resource exploitation and trade in order to reduce the Nande’s commercial, and consequent political, dominance.¹⁰ This rivalry partly explains the division of North Kivu during the war between the Banyarwanda-backed RCD and the Nande-supported RCD-K-ML movements. The heightened importance of the Goma-Gisenyi border post results partly from Banyarwanda’s attempts to generate local income through control over trade routes and trade incomes,¹¹ as well as by the closure (due to security considerations) of the traditional trade route connecting the city to the border post of Kasindi (which during the war was controlled by the RCD-K-ML). This concentration of mineral trading in Goma resulted in another effect: besides strengthening the Banyarwanda’s local position, it also reinforced the city’s autonomous status.

Since the peace process started, roads between both zones of control have reopened and the DRC has been administratively reunited. This has caused renewed animosity among Banyarwanda elites in Goma, who according to Tegera and Johnson (2007: 19):

..fear that Nande traders using the Kasindi/Uganda link would take advantage of the newly opened roads to inundate Goma with cut-price imports and undercut current Goma prices, while Banyarwanda traders are still not accepted in the Grand Nord.

These differences in price are explained by the introduction of preferential trade agreements (*‘système forfaitaire’* or pre-financing system) that were concluded during the war between Nandetraders and the RCD-K-ML rebel leadership (in the RCD zones of control, the official method of declaration, or *‘système déclaratif’*, remained in place). Even if the reunification

⁹ According Garrett (2008), the cassiterite deposits in Walikale, North Kivu, contribute an estimated 70% of cassiterite exported through Goma.

¹⁰ One strategy was to get a firm grip on the exploitation of resources. The advantageous relationship between Banyarwanda traders and the RCD leadership made it possible to claim exploitation rights in Walikale, where most of the cassiterite originates. The dominance of these Goma-based Banyarwanda in Walikale caused frustration among Bukavu based traders who feared for their own business opportunities in Walikale.

¹¹ Besides the trade in natural resources, the import of oil products was another source of contestation. During the war, this sector was controlled by businesspeople who had close ties with the RCD rebel leadership. Today, the same group is still in control over this sector and mainly obtains its supplies from Nairobi and sells the fuel through petrol stations in the city. Between 2005 and 2007, the number of petrol stations in Goma has almost doubled (from 13 to 25) (Bureau Urbain de l’industrie et PME 2006; interview Richard Bongenia and Mr Kashabana, Goma, January 21, 2008).

of the country put an end to this plurality of rules, in practice Nande traders were largely able to safeguard their trading advantages. Moreover, on a provincial level, the parliamentary and provincial elections also strongly reduced the political impact of Banyarwanda leaders to the advantage of Nande representatives. This politico-economic competition was further complicated by the growing interference of Kinshasa-based actors who, with the start of the peace process, attempted to secure their share of the local resource exploitation and to reverse trading routes back towards the Congolese capital.¹² Control over mining sites and trading networks has also been put forward as the key reason for the continuous proliferation of armed groups in North Kivu (Garrett et al. 2009) and was believed to be of crucial importance in the armed resistance led by Laurent Nkunda's CNDP. As was confirmed by the Panel of Experts' report of December 2008, close alliances also existed between the CNDP and Banyarwanda traders and other influential Banyarwanda based in Goma (United Nations 2008).

The impact of this natural resource trade on the city of Goma went well beyond political and economic issues. Goma's shifting politico-economic importance strongly redefined the city's urban image. For example, its position as a regional trading centre caused a considerable spatial expansion; those who were able to profit from the local war economy reinvested part of the rent in the construction of houses and hotels. During the coltan boom (2000-2001) in particular, numerous new constructions drastically changed the cityscape. Economic opportunities in Goma were not limited to the trading business though. Particularly after the influx of Rwandan refugees in 1994 and the volcanic eruption in 2002, the humanitarian organisations' and donor agencies' share of the local labour market grew excessively (Interview, Maire adjoint Déo Katindi, February 2, 2008).¹³ The international humanitarian presence in the city offered additional opportunities and increasingly promoted the development of alternative urban economic activities. '*Le secteur humanitaire*', as they call it in Goma, has become an important new source of economic opportunity, that affects the economic, social as well as spatial structures that characterise the city of Goma. The sector was perceived as a new source of income by Goma's population, through its search for local staff, but also as these organisations became a new clientele for some local urban businesses. Real estate in Goma, for example, was stimulated by the presence of the international sector (not to mention the huge numbers of humanitarian staff with the UN peace-keeping force). Moreover, the new service infrastructure (luxury hotels, restaurants, supermarkets, etcetera), almost exclusively oriented towards this humanitarian clientele, became an important element in Goma's current economic development.

However, the image of Goma as a centre of opportunities is largely linked to its significance as a border space. As will be explained below, the border between Goma and Gisenyi is skilfully exploited by petty traders, school teachers, transporters and students among others. In 2004, around a thousand Congolese officially crossed the border daily, mainly to sell agricultural products in Rwandan markets. In return, a lack of economic opportunities in Rwanda explains why several hundred Rwandans transit daily to Goma in search of a job or to do business (Tegera and Johnson 2007). Many Congolese teachers go to Rwanda because of higher salaries, while Rwandan students often go to Congolese schools. Even for ordinary daily activities such as checking one's bank account or searching for a good internet connection, crossing the border had become the obvious solution. While the border is needed since it creates the necessary incentives for illicit profit, for many Congolese and Rwandan

¹² A similar dynamic was observed in other resource-rich provinces such as South Kivu and Maniema.

¹³ An often heard complaint is that the job opportunities offered by these organisations largely remained reserved for educated people and have especially persuaded highly skilled people from Bukavu to move to Goma.

citizens it hardly exists. Since the war, the cities of Goma and Gisenyi have practically merged, with houses even being built right up to the border. In this context, Goma appears to be a 'transboundary space' (Baud and Van Schendel 1997), where borders in certain circumstances can become completely irrelevant. As we have observed above, mobility is of central importance in this borderland. The city of Goma has mainly developed as a result of transborder mobility and intense contact with the other side of the border and in a context of crossing and exchange. But in this context of crossing and overlap between Goma and Gisenyi, or between DRC and Rwanda, the border is never totally absent and can reappear and gain importance when used as an identity marker for distinguishing one from another (a Congolese from a Rwandese, or an insider from an outsider etcetera). As will be illustrated, competition over the urban space and economic or political resources has provoked further contestation over notions of urban 'belonging' and citizenship. In particular, the large presence and power position of Banyarwanda in Goma has, given the recent history of conflict and war, become very sensitive among non-Banyarwanda *Goméens*.

The development of Birere – a popular and lively district located between the border and the area of the city that was devastated during the Nyiragongo volcano eruption in January 2002 – illustrates very well the significance of Goma as a transborder space. This district is considered as the oldest district of Goma and is marked by its multi-ethnic character and its vibrant vitality, but also by its insecurity and poverty. Given its particular setting, this district is a key location for informal cross-border trade. It occupies part of the '*zone tampon*' (neutral buffer zone between Congo and Rwanda) and houses numerous stores, warehouses, restaurants and popular clubs or '*ngandas*'. For many, it is a zone of opportunity; thousands of people walk long distances every day from the peripheral districts to this popular centre to do some *affaires* and to buy or sell goods for the best price. It is in this part of the city that important business deals are being concluded, yet at the same time where thousands of *Goméens* balance all sorts of survival strategies in order to have something to eat at the end of the day.

In spite of numerous attempts by urban planners (especially after the volcanic eruption) to relocate the city's economic centre to safer areas, Birere has remained until today the single most important economic hub in town. The main reason can be found in the presence of the *petite barrière*, a border opening for pedestrians, the perfect site for the fraudulent traffic of various small goods and for many Congolese and Rwandese the source of their daily incomes. As a local trader joked (Interview, October 9, 2009): '*Si tu veux faire de l'argent, tu viens ici à Birere, tu construis une maison avec deux portes, une qui ouvre au côté Congolais et une autre qui ouvre au côté Rwandais.*' (When you want to make money, you come here, to Birere, you construct a house with two entries: one that opens on the Congolese side, the other on the Rwandan side). This clearly shows how the ambiguous character of the border creates a space of opportunity where 'members of an ethnic group, or even a single family, may choose to live on either side of a border line in order to exploit the benefits of both spheres' (Nugent and Asiwaju 1996).

Since their early existence, the two border or 'twin' towns of Goma and Gisenyi have developed a strong economic interdependence, that to a large extent has to be situated in the informal sphere. The two cities are intertwined by their history and socio-economic reality (Tegera and Johnson 2007). As we have seen, this reality is marked by intense mobility and interaction, where Birere can be understood as a 'fluid social space' and a 'site of inbetweenness and hybridity' (Dürschmidt 2006). The numerous handicapped traders ('*les handicapés de Birere*') that are active across the border are a striking example of these

dynamics. This remarkable group earn their daily income by transporting all sorts of goods (such as flower, cloths or soap) from one town to the other. On both sides they work for different traders for whom they deliver the goods to the depots indicated by them. The disabled have, according to Congolese and Rwandese law, the right to import goods with reduced taxes. As a consequence, some of these ‘*handicapés*’ of Birere have become well known businessmen and respected agents in the district. In a way, ‘*les handicapés de Birere*’ are borderlanders that ‘realize that their very marginality – their borderland advantage in the interstice – gives them the opportunity to exploit the ambiguous values of powerful cross-border movements’ (Flynn 1997: 35).

Although the district of Birere is sometimes referred to as the city’s ‘*zone rouge*’ – a chaotic, filthy and insecure place and a home for prostitutes, criminal bands and children of the street –¹⁴ the attractiveness of the district is very striking. As the urban centre of opportunities, Birere is considered by Congolese and Rwandese as a place where everyone can profit, whether you are rich or poor. Numerous present day ‘big men’ of Goma (traders, politicians and businessmen) were born in this neighbourhood, and these ‘*enfants de Birere*’ have proved that it is possible to rise out of this district one day with a lot of money. The identification by citizens of Goma with this district (‘*je suis de Birere*’ is another way to say that one is from Goma, often used in an intimidating way), reflects the image of the city as the place to be, a location where everything is still possible, where impressions of ‘newness’ and rapid change tempt people to continue their search for prosperity. As is locally explained (Interview, February 3, 2008): ‘*Goma est une ville favorable aux affaires, l’argent circule bien à Goma et la vie coûte moins cher. C’est une ville neuve, on a plein de chances à explorer.*’ (Goma is a city that is favourable to doing business; money is circulating very well in Goma and life is less expensive. It is a new city, there are lots of things to explore).

In this respect, Goma seems to reflect recent observations of the post-colonial city as ‘creative and imaginative space’ or zone of ‘opportunity’ and ‘inventiveness’. However, recent anthropological theories of the African city as a dynamic pole beyond the control of the state (Abdoumalig 2004, 2005; Robinson 2006; Trefon 2004) only cover part of the reality. Goma’s citizens imagine their city as a place where the money flows and opportunities are open to everyone, but in fact these opportunities are only reserved for those who can make it to the city centre, who have the right origins or the right connections in economical or political circles. Contestation over markets is dominated by certain groups and largely restricts opportunities for outsiders. Even if in the spectacular growth of the informal economy that followed the influx of fortune-seekers into the city one can observe a fascinating inventiveness or creativity, this ‘fending-for-yourself’ lifestyle has proved to have its limits. Most new settlers are faced with the harsh living conditions of Goma’s popular districts, where high levels of violence and poor or non-existent infrastructure condition daily life. The urban expansion seen during the Congolese war has a double face. On the one hand, there is the current city centre and some nearby residential districts, which make up the economic heart of the city where all the important economic enterprises, markets, administration, banks, hotels and donor agencies are concentrated. On the other hand, there are the fast growing popular districts, where infrastructure is lacking, running water, electricity and health services are absent and where inhabitants’ search for success usually ends in survival strategies. The present spatial reality of the city thus illustrates very well how the search for economic opportunities has mainly resulted in the creation of a new urban

¹⁴ Most of the traders, dealers and shop owners do not live themselves in Birere but in other, somewhat ‘higher-class’ urban districts like Katindo, Mabanga or Katoyi.

proletariat, including hundreds of thousands of people who will never be able to take advantage of this urban space of opportunity.

Multiple Urban Identities: Contact, Contrast and Autonomy

This final section deals with the impact of recent developments in Goma on local processes of identification. The city's recent history, which has been marked by conflict, contestation, migration, transborder economic interaction and processes of growing autonomy, has affected its inhabitants' self-perception and their perception of others in a particular way. The growing relevance of the city as a transboundary space and its changing position at the national and regional level have influenced the way people associate and identify themselves with their city and with national, local and regional realities. In turn, these identification processes are also determining the making and re-making of the city. As it was a starting point of our analysis that borderlands are social constructions, here attention will be paid to how people in Goma imagine, shape and re-shape these realities from below. These urban processes of identification are understood as being constantly constructed, reconstructed and negotiated by groups and individuals and being situated in a context of plurality and opportunity. By analysing these processes, the impact of local political and economic dynamics at the social and psychological level will be evaluated.

The city of Goma today is the result of local, national, regional and transnational dynamics that have resulted in various and multiple identities for the city's inhabitants. These are manifested in different 'scales' that reflect strong notions of ethnicity, citizenship, belonging, nationality and supranationality. The complex processes of perception and self-perception in the city show us how living in a border city of opportunities, contestation, mobility and autonomy can strongly influence people's identification with their local urban way of life.

People from Goma are often referred to with the term '*Gomatrancien*'. This term, however, is hardly heard in Goma's streets and seldom used by Goma's citizens themselves, who interpret it as something rather artificial and strained. Because the suffix *-trancien* has a scientific connotation that refers to animal species (specifically amphibians), people prefer the term '*Goméén*', which has a more human connotation. When comparing Goma to the Congolese capital Kinshasa, however, it can be observed that while 'being *Kinois*' (Trefon 2004; De Boeck and Plissart 2004) suggests a very strong urban identification that reflects an intense connection with the city as a set of social and economic realities, this is much less the case for being '*Gomatrancien*' or '*Goméén*'. To a certain extent, urban identity in Kinshasa goes beyond ethnic or national identification, in contrast to Goma, where people will identify themselves only as a last resort as *Gomatrancien* or *Goméén*. '*Être Kinois*' has become a very prestigious and clearly defined identity, almost a new sort of 'human tribe' according to some (Trefon 2004; Yoka 1995, 2000), which contains a set of fixed elements: '*la débrouille*' (to 'fend for oneself'), '*l'ambiance*', '*la sacrifice*', la SAPE (*Société des Ambianceurs et Personnes Elegantes*), and so forth.

Where the relation between the '*Kinois*' and Kinshasa is very clear (they *are* the city, and the city *is* them), people in Goma find it much more difficult to identify directly with their city. This can partly be explained by the fact that the city of Goma is perceived as 'new' and has gained its present importance and characteristics only very recently. So a shared history of inhabiting and making the city together is largely lacking. The most important issue here, however, is that identification processes in Goma are mainly defined by the city's borderland location. While Kinshasa is a city that is very much turned in on itself, with a life and an end in itself, Goma is much more a transit point, a place of interaction, of coming and going, that

occurs out of processes of exchange with the hinterland and the larger Great Lakes Region. Instead of resulting in one single, strongly pronounced urban identity, the ‘border life’ in Goma tends to generate a fluid and weakly defined ‘border identity’ (Donnan and Wilson 1999) that is characterised by notions of mobility, contestation and autonomy.

According to Olivier, a university student but also member of a small music band called Free Hills (Interview, February 2008):

Bien sûr qu’ici nous sommes des Congolais, mais les liens avec nos voisins proches sont aussi très forts. Pour moi et mes mecs, visiter Bujumbura ou Kigali, c’est très normale, (...) par contre, aller à Kinshasa, non, c’est trop loin! Et qui entre nous peut payer ce voyage?! En plus, à l’autre côté [Kigali, Bujumbura] nous sommes aussi un peu comme chez nous, on parle tous la même langue, on écoute la même musique, on a presque le même style. (...) Nous sommes à l’aise, tu vois.’ (Certainly, here we are Congolese, but the links with our close neighbours are still very strong. For me and my friends, visiting Bujumbura or Kigali is normal (...) but on the other hand, going to Kinshasa, no, this is too far away ! And who among us can afford this trip ?! Furthermore, on the other side (Kigali, Bukumbura) we feel at home, we all speak the same language, we listen to the same music, we almost have the same time (...) we feel at ease you see)

The band is made up of a mix of Congolese and Rwandese youngsters who often cross the border to Rwanda’s or to Burundi’s capital to participate in music workshops or to perform. As he says, for him and his friends travelling to Rwanda or Burundi is very normal, almost a daily habit as if the border is hardly present. Youngsters like Olivier and the members of his band are fluent both in Swahili and English, which is what connects them to the region of East Africa (*‘la région’* as they say). The connection with this region is therefore very striking: *‘Nous ne sommes pas que des Congolais ou des Rwandais, nous sommes aussi ‘le peuple de l’Est!’* (We are not only Congolese, or Rwandans, we are also ‘people of the East’) (Interview, February 2008).

This demonstrates how living in this context of overlapping and constant contact and exchange with the region can generate a sort of supranationality at the level of urban identity formation, which transcends local and national territorialisation. In this way, Goma becomes a ‘place of assimilation of multiple identities (to ‘rhizomatic and creolized identities’) where people become ‘broad persons’ (Malkki 1992: 36). This supranational identity in Goma underlines how place and identity are interconnected in borderlands. More than with one particular place, the identification of people in Goma seems to be connected with multiple, scaled places, or even with mobility itself, as geographic or political borders are often ignored and hardly define their daily lives. In this ‘transboundary space’ (Baud and Van Schendel 1997) it is precisely this blurring and ignoring of borders that makes sense of Goma as a regional centre.

The border as a vector of opening, contact, crossing and mobility is strongly reflected in this notion of *peuple de l’Est*. It should, however, be noted that this identification with the region is not always shared by everyone. Often a generation gap occurs. According to elders, this ‘transnational’ view is just the view of a youngster who has not experienced history and has not yet had the chance to get to know his own capital (Informal conversations, September 2007). But a similar regional identification is not only encountered among young students like Olivier. As we observed, ‘being at home’ in the region offers a lot of opportunities. Most of the ‘big men’ in Goma are businessmen whose daily lives are grounded in border crossing.

For example, they carry out business in Nairobi, own houses in Cyangugu, have family members living in Burundi and send their children to boarding schools in Gisenyi. The same can be said about the thousands of petty traders that daily cross the border to Rwanda.

However, the border is never totally absent, and is often instrumentalised as a means to define others' identities. As Kaiser and Nikiforova (2006: 936) state:

Borders are territories to be patrolled against those whom they construct as outsiders, aliens, the Others; forms of demarcation where the very act of prohibition inscribes transgression; zones where fear of the Other is the fear of the self; places where claims to ownership – claims to 'mine', 'yours' and 'theirs' – are staked out, contested, defended, and fought over.

Just as the border in borderlands generates contact and opening, it also leads to enclosure and separation between in and out, or between insiders and outsiders. As such, borderlands can generate 'contestation over the interiority and exteriority of place and identity' (Kaiser and Nikiforova 2006: 929). These dynamics are very visible in Goma, where next to processes of transnational identification and the blurring of borders, a parallel dynamic of identity formation that strongly stresses the national scale is observed. At moments of intensified political competition (such as the democratisation process of the early 1990s) and since the start of the Congolese war, reference to national identity is widely used as strategy of inclusion and exclusion. The long history of Goma as a place of opportunity and contestation has further reinforced this dynamic.

Processes of identification and the mental construction of the 'self' and the 'other' in Goma have been given a new dimension since the start of the conflict. Questions about citizenship and belonging have been sharpened and identities further politicised. Contestation over national identity and debates about inclusion and exclusion still have a strong impact on Goma's urban society today. Identifying oneself as 'Congolese' in Goma is often the same as simply identifying oneself as not being Rwandan. This assertion of national identity is therefore a much more exclusive than inclusive act. Where the presence of the border and the overlap of different cultures and nationalities in Goma is sometimes experienced as something positive and constructive, since the conflict it is increasingly conceived as something disturbing and threatening. As a local student commented:

Les frontières n'arrêtent pas les gens qui ont les mauvaises intentions ici. Tu sais, à mon avis, Goma devrait être placée au milieu de la province, pour que les agresseurs ne puissent prendre la ville de Goma en un rien de temps! (the borders do not stop people with bad intentions coming here. You know, as far as I am concerned, Goma should be placed in the centre of the province, so that aggressors cannot take over the city so easily) (Interview, February 5, 2008)

Since the start of the Congolese wars, Goma has increasingly been caught in a discourse of belonging and a climate of general distrust and suspicion. Banyarwanda are often considered by other *Goméens* as the cause of most problems that people in Goma have to deal with. For example, one young woman explained to us that insecurity in Goma is largely due to the presence of '*les bandits et criminelles de l'autre côté*' (bandits and criminals from the other side) (Informal conversation, August 2007). The problem in Goma, as she said, is the difficulty in identifying these criminals, because 'even when they say they are Congolese, you can never be sure about that'. This more than once resulted in a paranoid search for 'infiltrators' in different districts of Goma, often very efficiently executed by the *chef du quartier* or other local authorities. It explains why, since the flaring up of the fighting around

Goma in the autumn of 2008, Rwandese that lived and worked in Birere preferred to rent a room on the other side of the border in order to protect themselves from possible anti-Banyarwandan urban violence.

Today this mistrust is widespread because of Goma's rising levels of insecurity, yet it is also part of the city's image as an uncontrollable and violent place. In Congolese society, Goma is increasingly being experienced as a city of rebellion: *'une ville des rumeurs de guerre où quiconque voudra créer une rébellion s'y installe facilement'* (a city of rumours, where whoever wants to start a rebellion can easily install himself) (Informal conversation, August 2007). This image is translated into the term *'Banyarebelle'*, a term which, particularly at the start of the second Congolese war in 1998, outsiders (mostly from Kinshasa) used to refer to the inhabitants from the Kivu provinces and from Goma in particular. This term encapsulates not only a vision of the city as the heart of conflict and rebellion, but also the perception of *Goméens* as people generating instability and acting against the state. As a participant in a focus group discussion in Ishangu remarked:

Pendant la guerre, nous étions les 'banyarebelle', tout le monde se méfiait de nous (...). Et cette image négative nous suit jusqu'aujourd'hui! Les gens de l'Ouest continuent à nous regarder comme des rebelles, les gens qui ne sont là que pour créer des problèmes...' (During the war, we were *'banyarebelle'*, everyone was wary of us (...) and this image is still following us today. People from the west continue to look at us as if we are rebels, people that are only there to cause trouble)

Nowadays, however, this nickname is also adopted by some *Goméens* as a form of urban identity. For them, being *'munyarebelle'* implies a certain sense of 'turning away' from and even resisting the central state and its capital Kinshasa (and consequently, the Kinois, about whom numerous caricatures circulate in Goma).

Conclusion

'The anthropology of borders is an anthropology specifically concerned with the negotiation of identity in places where everyone expects that identity to be problematic', Donnan and Wilson (1999: 11) argue. The remarkable identification of youngsters with their 'city of rebellion' in the case of Goma illustrates how local 'borderlanders' experience and connect with their socio-economic and political environment through expressions of identity. Looking at this local 'border experience' (Flynn 1997) through processes of identification does not only reveal how a political context of conflict and state weakening impact on local processes of perception, interaction and identity, but also how these processes construct and reconstruct realities from below. The identification of Goma's youngsters as *'Banyarebelles'* reflects the 'insurrectionary tradition' (Scott 1976) of the borderland, and what we observed earlier about borderlands that operate in a semi-autonomous way and largely beyond the direct control of the state – and which can be places of resistance against the 'centre' or other exogenous attempts to control them (Raeymaekers 2009). Through such forms of urban counterculture expressed through new forms of identification, Goma's inhabitants turn the rather negative force of rebellion into the positive force of autonomy and independence, pointing at their ability to render chaos into development, disorder into order.

This paper focused on processes of identification in order to illustrate how these urban dynamics of autonomy, but also of mobility and contestation, can have an impact on local urban life, on the city dwellers' actions, interactions, strategies and visions, and how they determine the identification and connection with urban socio-economic realities. The city's

significance as a zone of opportunity and contestation, and the processes of redefinition of political and economic bounds between the city, the state and the region, are clearly reflected through these processes of identification. Resulting in multiple, overlapping identities, they endorse the character of Goma as a transit point and a dynamic border space.

It was in a context of conflict and state decline that the Eastern Congolese city of Goma became an attractive economic centre and evolved into a transboundary space of opportunity. The history of violent conflict in Eastern Congo strongly marked Goma's relationship with the central state and redefined its economic and political position in the national and regional context. Presented in this paper as a zone of accumulation and of contestation, the city gained an increasingly autonomous status as part of processes of state collapse, informalisation of political and economic structures, armed contestation and the development of alternative regional networks of accumulation. Key to the city's increasing role as a point of commercial transit and transaction was the natural resource trade, as well as economic interactions with the East African and Asian markets. However, emerging opportunities also brought with them new contestation over the political, economic and social urban space. Goma's significance in the local war economy fostered fierce competition between local and regional, political, military and economic elites for control over urban networks of opportunity and power. These dynamics were obviously enhanced by the significance of the city as part of the Rwandan-Congolese borderland and frontier zone. Intense transborder mobility and the interaction between the local, national and regional scale strengthened the city's autonomous position and stimulated processes of profound urban transformation yet at the same time explain Goma's remarkable development and expansion in recent years as well as its increasing economic and political importance.

Goma's development confirms the general observation of the growing political and economic importance of peripheral secondary cities in Eastern Congo. Being located at the margins of the nation state yet at the centre of regional and transnational dynamics, border towns like Butembo, Kasindi and Uvira often seem to be more successful in connecting to global networks than the established, 'colonial' or primary cities. In this respect one could speak of a changing urban order in the DRC, where these new, emerging urban centres in the periphery are playing an increasing role at the national and regional level, and where relations between centre and periphery are strongly redefined. Border towns like Goma, which have developed into dynamic regional poles in a semi-autonomous way, reveal new, original urban developments, realities and identities that strongly differ from those in DR Congo's large, established cities. Furthermore, the significance and role of peripheral cities such as Goma will become even more apparent in the context of the current Congolese decentralisation process, which is likely to result in more autonomy and responsibility at the urban level. It will thus be interesting to see what the future role of a city such as Goma, which developed largely outside the direct scope of the central state, will be in this new politico-administrative context.

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Research Components

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Development Studies Institute (DESTIN)

LSE, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE

Tel: +44 (0)20 7849 4631

Fax: +44 (0)20 7955 6844

Email: csp@lse.ac.uk

Web: www.crisisstates.com