

PART TWO

CONGOLESE FORCED MIGRANTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

The early literature and the early years

The literature on forced migration from what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to South Africa is both smaller and less substantial than the literature on Mozambican refugees in South Africa. Until the early 2000s, all we had were a handful of academic papers, some of them of indifferent quality, none offering an adequate global account of migration and settlement. It is only since late 2003 that work of some substance has begun to be produced. For the first time, we now have reliable quality of life data on the 24,000-strong community of Congolese refugees and in South Africa; the emergence of sound qualitative work on Congolese experiences in the South African labour market and urban environment; and an account of the networks of organisations Congolese migrants have built in Durban, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

This review, then, will move quickly through the early years before settling on the more substantial scholarship of recent vintage.

During the late apartheid years, when South Africa was a pariah state among the community of African nations and had few diplomatic or trade links on the continent, the P W Botha government courted a handful of central African states. Limited diplomatic and trade contact was made with Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Rwanda, Gabon and Mobutu Sese Seko's Zaire. In 1988, Zaire was South Africa's second largest trading partner in Africa, second only to Zimbabwe.⁵⁹ In the context of these economic and political ties, South Africa saw a limited amount of elite emigration from Zaire. As Antoine Bouillon has commented: "In addition to the businessmen and politicians who were part of the Mobutist movement, and who came to South Africa with a view to exploring the potential of the country, and the engineers who were sent on assignments to the mines, dozens of Zairean medical doctors and academics found employment in the country."⁶⁰ Several hundred teachers, doctors and other professionals were wooed by various skills-deprived homeland governments. Indeed, until 1986, it was not permitted for black African nationals to settle in South Africa proper. Elite migration from Zaire to South

Africa continued through the 1990s; in the period around the fall of Mobutu in May 1997, South Africa was a haven and a refuge for Mobutuists and their assets.

In the early 1990s, the nature of Congolese migration to South Africa changed abruptly. The change is unfortunately poorly documented, and its precise contours are anything but clear. In the broadest terms, migration from Zaire in the early 1990s can perhaps be characterised as middle-class flight, partly from economic uncertainty, but also from political instability and violence. A mutiny in the armed forces in 1993 saw outbreaks of violence in several parts of Zaire, and civil war in Katanga and Shaba provinces resulted in the displacement of more than a million people.⁶¹ It appears that an entire stratum of Kasai businesspeople and professionals who managed and owned the region's mining industry were forced to leave, and that many came to South Africa.⁶²

Many middle-class migrants seem to have chosen South Africa as a destination for two reasons. First, the preferred destination of most was Western Europe and North America, but the tightening of the immigration policy in those regions during the course of 1980s foreclosed that option for many. South Africa was the next best – the most developed economy in sub-Saharan Africa and on the brink of a new, more open dispensation to boot. Second, a residue of the apartheid government's close ties with Mobutu took the form of free, visa-less access to South Africa for Zairians, until April 1993 at any rate, when South Africa began to introduce hefty visa fees for Zairians.

Kadima and Kalombo estimated that at the end of 1992 there were 23,000 Congolese living in South Africa. They do not tell us how they arrived at their estimate.⁶³ Between 1994 and 1997, Kadima interviewed 139 Congolese living in Johannesburg. He used a snowball sampling method and it is not certain how representative his sample was, but it is of some interest. Many Zairians he spoke to had found a niche in the nascent and exploratory trade links that were developing between South Africa and central Africa. Several exporters Kadima surveyed were exploring trade opportunities in Zaire and had employed Zairian nationals living in South Africa as trade consultants, business advisers and interpreters. Other Zairian nationals in South Africa had entered the international trade market in cruder fashion, filling the boots of their cars with electronic and other goods from South Africa and exporting them to Zaire over land.

Several Congolese in Johannesburg saw lucrative opportunities in the virtual demise of the Zairian telephone network during the latter years of

the Mobutu regime. They invested in powerful radio transmitters and hired out their services to traders and businesspeople wishing to make contact with trading partners in Zaire. In one instance, a Johannesburg suburbanite complained that his neighbour's powerful radio transmitters were jamming his television reception.

Kadima also visited Johannesburg's flea markets, where he found Congolese people selling curios and clothes. Most were professionals ("I met a maths teacher, a person with an honours degree, a former pilot in the Congolese air force, three engineers and several accountants"). Some were making a decent living, and others were not.⁶⁴ Rigorous studies of Congolese traders in South Africa's informal sector would only emerge in the early 2000s.

The Refugee Baseline Survey

The literature of the mid- and late 1990s speaks of another "wave" of Congolese migration to South Africa following that of the early 1990s. Some place the beginning of this wave in 1994, others in May 1997, when Mobutu's regime fell.⁶⁵ But precisely what distinguishes this wave from the last is never entirely clear, and the truth of the matter is that the nature of Congolese migration in the mid- and late 1990s is scarcely known to academic scholarship.

It is really only in late 2003, with the publication of a baseline survey of refugees in South Africa, that we get a clear sense of who is coming to South Africa, why, and how they live once they get here.⁶⁶ The study surveyed 1,500 of the 75,000-odd legally recognised refugees and living in South Africa in 2003, 24,000 of whom were Congolese. The sample was weighted to make it representative of the total registered refugee population.

It should be said that the legally recognised refugee population is not precisely co-terminus with the population of forced Congolese migrants in South Africa, and this for two reasons. First, as Landau and Jacobson point out, the category "ignores the many more who have been refused asylum but fear returning home or who, either out of ignorance or frustration with the government's asylum determination process, have simply not applied".⁶⁷ Second, as some of the literature surveyed below illustrates, there are Congolese nationals in South Africa who are clearly economic, and not forced, migrants, who have applied for refugee status in order to remain in South Africa legally. The result is that baseline survey may well over-represent well-educated refugees as well as those who forged success survival strategies in

South Africa. Those without the means to enter the formal asylum application system would not have been captured in the survey.⁶⁸ Despite these caveats, the baseline survey remains the most illuminating and representative survey of Congolese and other forced migrants in South Africa.

Perhaps the most striking finding of the survey is that Congolese migration to South Africa is primarily middle class, young and male. The average Congolese refugee is 32 years old; 43% are single and a further 23% do not live with their spouses. Congolese refugees in South Africa are extraordinarily well educated; 47% have a tertiary education and a further 33% have matric; 36% were students in the DRC, 20% were skilled professionals, and just 4% were unemployed.⁶⁹ In stark contrast to near ubiquitous prejudice, Congolese refugees in South Africa represent an influx of a solid block of valuable human capital.⁷⁰

These figures immediately tell a rich story. The first is that of the millions of people displaced by the conflict in the DRC, the poor generally do not move very far. Most are internally displaced, or settle in refugee camps in the DRC's immediate neighbours. Those who come to South Africa generally appear to hail from families of means.

That migration to South Africa is young, middle class and male says a great deal about the motives and aspirations of migrants. It suggests – and this is confirmed by some of the qualitative research discussed below – that motives for coming to South Africa have as much to do with middle-class life planning as flight from violence; that the disintegration of the DRC's education system and the falling away of prospects for a professional career are perhaps as important as the immediate dangers of war. South Africa is reputed to have a good education system and a developed economy. It is easier to access than Western Europe and North America, and its legislation is far more welcoming of asylum seekers. It is, from this vantage point at any rate, a natural destination for young, educated men fleeing a war-ravaged economy.

Yet if this is indeed the nature of the planning invested in the decision to migrate to South Africa, the experience is without doubt bitterly disappointing to most. While 4% of Congolese migrants were unemployed in the DRC, 29% are unemployed in South Africa. A further 50% are in work they describe as unskilled – street vending, cutting hair, washing and guarding cars – while just four 4% are in what they regard as skilled work.⁷¹ If the majority occupied the upper echelons of the Congolese labour market and education system, their situation in South Africa is pretty much reversed.

Indeed, the mean monthly income of Congolese refugees in South Africa is R618 per month, the median monthly income R500 per month.⁷² The spectacle of social dislocation is striking: a group of well-heeled young men leave home to find themselves rubbing shoulders with the inner-city poor in a foreign country and in the midst of foreign languages.

Millan Atam's study

It of course takes qualitative research to put some flesh on the bones of this story, and a handful of valuable studies have indeed begun to emerge. Perhaps the most arresting is a student dissertation, researched and written on a shoestring by Millan Atam, a master's student in forced migration studies at the University of the Witwatersrand.⁷³ Atam's study, conducted in late 2003 and early 2004, examines the networks recently arrived Congolese asylum seekers form in inner-city Johannesburg. His subjects had all been in South Africa less than six months, had been granted asylum seeker status, and were waiting to hear the outcome of their application for refugee status. At that stage, asylum seekers in South Africa were not permitted to study or work. (That changed, by statutory amendment, in April 2004.) His primary research question was what newly arrived asylum seekers do to survive in such circumstances.

The typical member of Atam's sample was a young man with at least a junior degree, sometimes a tertiary education. Most had left the DRC because of its moribund educational system and its dismal vocational prospects. None intended to stay in South Africa for good. Most came seeking opportunities to study, some to work. In general, their parents had raised money for the journey to South Africa and understood the fund-raising exercise as an investment in their children's future.⁷⁴

While most had applied for refugee status on arrival in South Africa, "it appeared ... they had not left home because of political persecution. Many understood, even before coming, that they were supposed to become refugees on arrival in South Africa, as a result of advantages that supposedly came with this status."⁷⁵

Indeed, in Atam's subjects' home districts in the DRC there was a great deal of talk about South Africa, much of it from the mouths of silky-tongued entrepreneurs who spoke of South Africa as a paradise where refugees are paid stipends and work is plentiful. Most, if not all Atam's subjects, hired an entrepreneur to accompany them on the land journey south and to facilitate

their applications for refugee status once in South Africa. These entrepreneurs were pervasive enough to have a name: they are called *Tindikuers* – from the Lingala word *tindika*, which means “to push”.⁷⁶ *Tindikuers* are, it appears, a variant of that timeless entrepreneur who works in a twilight zone between beguiling deceitfulness and genuine service. They charge up to US\$300 for the journey, and demand further payment on arrival in South Africa to bribe Home Affairs officials to expedite the process of becoming an asylum seeker.

All of Atam’s subjects knew somebody who lived in Johannesburg, but most did not manage to find their respective contacts within the first days and weeks of their arrival. Some were offered temporary accommodation, for a fee, by their *Tindikuer*, while others made their way to the parochial ethnic networks that characterise Congolese settlement in inner-city Johannesburg. Many ran out of money shortly after arriving and had to make contact with home for a replenishment of funds.

One of Atam’s central findings is that there barely exists a Congolese, let alone a francophone or refugee, identity in Johannesburg. “It was clear,” Attam writes, “that the Congolese did not have a consolidated structure as a community that could offer assistance. None of the respondents could say if there was any formal structure or association that united the Congolese.”⁷⁷ Instead, Congolese refugees moved in tight-knit ethnic networks. People who shared regional, ethnic and linguistic identities lived together in rented rooms and negotiated the city together. None had close friendships with people from other countries, and relations with Congolese from other ethnic groups ranged from the acrimonious to the mutually suspicious. “If a Congolese is aware that you are going to get money from home ...,” one of Atam’s respondents complained, “he may arrange for you to be robbed so he can get a share from the *tsotsis*.”⁷⁸

Atam’s respondents also reported limited contact with South Africans. None, for instance, had ever been to a township. All were essentially ghettoised within the confines of the inner city. Some of Atam’s respondents, however, did have South African girlfriends, and it is unfortunate that Atam did not explore this avenue further. For in the context of the extreme frailty of his respondents’ ties with outsiders, sexual relationships with South Africans must surely count as the most valuable and substantial contact between refugees and locals. Did they “buy into the family networks of the women with whom they live”, as the sociologist Owen Sichone has asked of his Congolese respondents in a separate study?⁷⁹ Unfortunately, this question is left unexplored. Given the preponderance of men among refugees to South

Africa, the heterosexuality of most migrants is possibly their most important asset in forming ties beyond their parochial networks.

Drawing on the work of the American sociologist Mark Granovetter, Atam points out that migrants who develop weak ties with outsiders are for more likely to access the labour markets and services of a foreign city than migrants with only strong ties to insiders.⁸⁰ Given Atam's account of the extreme parochialism of Congolese refugee networks in Johannesburg, and the frailty of their relations with outsiders, it is clear that his subjects suffer dearly from the absence of Granovetter's "weak ties". It is unsurprising, then, that, while most of Atam's respondents did find work shortly after arriving in Johannesburg, much of this work took the form of bleak and tenuous survivalism:

"Quite often [Atam writes] asylum seekers clandestinely take up employment for very low wages. There are employers who take advantage of this vulnerability, but respondents also found them to be useful as no one else would give them the chance ... Others venture into their own little businesses like roadside haircuts, or do petty trading, for example selling fruits and foodstuffs."⁸¹

Interestingly, some of Atam's respondents told him that they would not dignify the survivalist strategies they employ in South Africa with the word "work". (We return to Congolese in the South African labour market later, in a separate section.)

The portrait Atam paints of his respondents resonates with Gotz and Simone's characterisation of central Johannesburg. "The inner city," they argue, "represents a veritable vacuum of belonging, where almost no one presently living there can claim an overarching sense of origin in this place or profess a real wish to stay ... The absence of a plot or a house, the semblance of security embodied in a territorially rooted set of social connections, or the ability to marry and reproduce in lineage – is thus inculcated from nearly the start of immigrant's life ... The actors that do inhabit the inner city do so only in the hope of leaving as quickly as possible. The inner city therefore represents a process of 'running away'."⁸² A vignette of Congolese settlement in the inner city is particularly striking:

"... [A]s Congolese networks began to extend themselves out of the foreign African ghetto of Ponte City – a large cylindrical apartment tower in Berea ... – into neighbouring Yeoville during the early 1990s, the exodus took place in highly visible ways. Up Harley

Street, Congolese drinking clubs, set up in front rooms of dilapidated single-family households, would blare out Soukous music and intonations of Lingala were loud on the street, conveying to all that a Congolese neighbourhood was in the making ...⁸³

Such vigorous and exhibitionist self-assertion, Gotz and Simone argue, is, ironically, a mask that hides an underlying timidity and a sense of dislocation. Later, the authors talk of immigrants' dramatic enactments of close ties as "a parody of belonging".

The tenuousness of Atam's subjects' place in Johannesburg is perhaps best exemplified by their relations with state institutions and private services. Legally, refugees enjoy all rights South Africans do barring the right to vote. In practice, state personnel and institutions exercise pervasive discrimination against immigrants and refugees. Thus, for instance, despite the fact that the Refugees Act of 1998 explicitly gives refugees and their children the right to primary education and healthcare, there is a *de facto* requirement that migrants pay school fees.⁸⁴ A study of Somali refugees in Johannesburg conducted in 2002 suggested that 70% of Somali refugee children of school-going age were not going to school.⁸⁵ There is no reason to believe that the lot of refugees from other countries is much better.

In regard to healthcare, refugees are formally exempt from the R1,800 fee state health care facilities are obliged to charge foreign nationals. Like South African citizens, they are entitled to primary health care free of charge. In practice, however, it is not uncommon for health care workers to deny refugees access to services, to force them to pay fees, or to make them wait for long periods while South Africans are being attended to.⁸⁶ The baseline refugee survey cited earlier found that 17% of those who had tried to access emergency health care had been denied it. Of these, 45% were denied access to treatment by reception personnel at state hospitals, 21% by nurses, and 9% by doctors. In 23% of cases, respondents called ambulance services which never arrived.⁸⁷

Like all other disempowered residents of the inner city, refugees are vulnerable to extortion and blackmail by corrupt state officials. In a later section on the labour market, we show that harassment by law enforcement officials is an abiding feature of work in the informal sector. Here we concentrate only on the Department of Home Affairs, and note that the payment of bribes to process applications for asylum seeker and refugee status appears to have become institutionalised. In the baseline survey, 29% of respondents were asked to pay to submit their applications for refugee

status. The median fee DRC nationals pay was R400. In 75% of cases, it is an “interpreter” who demands fees.⁸⁸ Atam’s subjects speak a great deal about their “interpreters”. All bar one hired one. Interpreters “facilitated possession of ‘home affairs’ papers,” and helped applicants to “concoct” and “rehearse” stories of political persecution.

“Ironically,” Atam comments, “these interpreters are usually from the home countries of the new arrivals and are supposed to assist them with problems of communication. As an attempt to prevent corruption, there are information posters on the walls of the DHA offices that say no one is required to pay money for services rendered and that asylum seekers are allowed to bring their own interpreters. This unfortunately would not be useful for those asylum seekers who do not understand English ...”⁸⁹

How much this bribery is prompted by Home Affairs officials, and how much is the work of interpreters who prey on the ignorance of their co-nationals is under-explored in the literature. One would imagine though, that if Home Affairs officials had the will, they could eradicate the practice without much difficulty.

Institutional incompetence in the Department of Home Affairs plays no small part in creating a state of affairs amenable to endemic bribery. By law, those given asylum seeker status or to be told within six months whether their applications for refugee status have been expected. Yet when a refugee baseline survey was conducted in late 2003, 71% of respondents who had applied for refugee status since April 2000 were still awaiting a decision.⁹⁰ Given that before April 2004 asylum seekers were not permitted to work or study, the stakes were very high indeed.

Finally, banking and credit facilities are almost entirely closed to refugees in South Africa. It takes little imagination to grasp that without credit – let alone an account to deposit revenue – small businesses are seldom able to grow beyond the status of micro survivalist enterprises. Lack of access to banking also exposes refugees to high risks of robbery and theft, since they are forced to hold cash.

It appears that the situation may slowly be changing. In late 2003, having been lobbied by the Coordinating Body for Refugee Communities, First National Bank agreed to begin opening accounts for refugees and asylum seekers. At much the same time, Jesuit Refugee Services and the UNHCR began a modest, small-scale microfinance programme for a group of refugees in Johannesburg.⁹¹

Networks of cultural preservation

Atam's depiction of a highly atomised Congolese community, splintered into a plethora of defensive ethnic networks, is confirmed by the research of Baruti Amisi and Richard Ballard, who have conducted an audit of the public associations Congolese refugees have established in South Africa.⁹² Their primary research question is why Congolese refugees have not forged a common political identity and made demands on the state in their capacity as a distinctive group of rights-holders. One of their answers is that Congolese in South Africa have brought with them a number of legacies from the DRC. "Even before the war of the mid 1990s," they argue, "the failure of the Mobutu state over decades killed the kinds of expectations citizens would normally have of their government. In response, local level ethnic organisation begins to function as ... 'local strategies of resilience'."⁹³ Indeed, ethnic "resilience" networks appear to have a multi-generational history in the DRC: "Some Congolese refugees said that they remember their parents having formal monthly meetings about a range of issues pertinent to their community ... If a person moved to another province within the Congo, they would seek out individuals from their ethnic group and organise a support network."⁹⁴

Finding themselves an ethnic minority in yet another apparently hostile state, Congolese refugees have merely transplanted this tradition to South Africa. The associations Amisi and Ballard studied call themselves "families" or "tribes". The authors found 11 "tribes" in Cape Town, 17 in Durban, and suspect that there are probably more than that in Johannesburg. In general, the tribes are highly organised, hold regular meetings, charge membership fees and have written constitutions. The larger among them have in excess of 500 members.

These organisations appear to serve two functions. The first is survivalist: they help newcomers with accommodation and job-seeking, assist with access to state services, and make contingency plans when a member is arrested and thrown in jail. Their second function is perhaps best described as rearguard cultural defence. It is ensured that young children are taught their native tongue before English or Zulu, and that no child is reared by a non-Congolese. Some respondents spoke of an informal rule which dictated that children only begin to learn Zulu after the age of seven. Ersatz cultural archives such as books of proverbs folklore are produced. Traditions are kept alive through the preservation of songs.

The authors report a great deal of antipathy towards local culture. South

Africans, they were told, were too permissive, and did not respect their elders. Refugees expressed particular distaste for *lobola*, which, they believed, turned women into traded commodities. "Resistance to assimilation," the authors remark, "... came through strongly as an objective of the networks. Many leaders and members express an extreme dislike for living in South Africa and say that they hope conditions in the Congo will one day allow them to return."⁹⁵

Congolese refugees in the labour market

There is a body of literature, about seven or eight years old now and associated largely with the South African Migration Project, which has devoted itself to documenting the contribution of informal sector cross-border traders to the South African economy.⁹⁶ One of the explicit aims of the project is to refute the popular prejudice that "non-South African street traders are 'illegal', 'ill-educated' new arrivals who take opportunities from South Africans and money from the country".⁹⁷ The project has focused on the veritable explosion of non-South African street traders and small manufacturers who have set up shop in the streets of South Africa's cities since the early 1990s. All the studies cited above have found that the majority are young and male, are well educated, do not bring their families, and have no intention of settling in South Africa permanently. They are "transmigrants", "connected to strong informal and formal transnational networks of trade, entrepreneurship, and migration".⁹⁸

The crux of the project's argument is that despite their non-recognition and their informal status (most enter South Africa on visitors' visas), foreign cross-border traders represent an expansion of Africa's rich and lucrative continental trade networks to the South African economy, creating jobs for South Africans, exporting locally manufactured goods throughout the continent, and stimulating local entrepreneurs to enter the transcontinental trade. Most of the studies have found that cross-border traders use local suppliers, and thus invest in the domestic economy, are significant exporters of electronics, appliances, clothes, household goods and shoes, and, rather than stealing jobs from South Africans, are modest employers of South African labour.

To what extent do Congolese refugees join the ranks of these "formidable entrepreneurs"? The answer must be hardly at all. In the baseline refugee survey discussed earlier, 29% of Congolese refugees described themselves as unemployed, while 50% described themselves as engaged in unskilled work such as watching and cleaning cars and selling goods on the street. It

would be tempting to read “selling goods on the street” as participation in a thriving continental trade. But it appears that the “businesses” of the vast majority of Congolese street traders are not so much dynamic SMMEs as meagre survivalist enterprises.

To be sure, there are exceptions. In a survey of 70 immigrant street traders conducted in Johannesburg in 1996, Chris Rogerson found that “non-SADC traders”, a number of whom were Congolese, accessed deeper and more extensive international trade networks than their SADC counterparts, employed more people, and made more money. But most of Rogerson’s non-SADC subjects were traders before they arrived in South Africa, and capitalised their businesses with funds they had accumulated at home.⁹⁹ Most, in other words, were traders by pedigree and by design, rather than by necessity, as the makeshift traders of the survivalist sector surely are.

More typical of the Congolese street trading experience are the survivalist enterprises reflected in Nina Hunter and Caroline Skinner’s 2001 survey of over 170 immigrant street traders working in the Durban inner city.¹⁰⁰ A quarter of Hunter and Skinner’s respondents were from the DRC, about 20% were Senegalese, and half were from various SADC countries. Perhaps the strongest indicator of the marginality of these traders is that their most common direct experience of state officials was of harassment and demands for bribes. More than two-thirds of respondents did not access state services such as health and education for fear of deportation. Most reported that police officers had demanded money or stolen merchandise.¹⁰¹

The demographic profile of the respondents was similar to that of the baseline survey, but younger and more male; the average age was 27 and 96% were men. Just over three-quarters of respondents had no children and only a fifth lived with a partner.¹⁰² Congolese respondents were overrepresented among those with post-secondary schooling. Of the 40 respondents from the DRC, 14 had a tertiary education. Of the 130 other respondents, nine had a tertiary education.¹⁰³

Judging from their self-reported income, most, perhaps all the respondents, are best termed survivalists. The authors report their findings in this regard eccentrically, but one can get the gist: “Forty percent of foreign traders,” Hunter and Skinner write, “earn profit in a good week of between R101 and R249, while 60% of these traders in a bad week earn less than R100.”¹⁰⁴

Despite the meagre size of their businesses, 25% employ one or more people. Interestingly, even though the unemployment rate among refugees

is high, and despite the fact that relations between refugees and locals are negligible, two-thirds of those who hired employees hired South Africans; 31% of all those employed by the respondents were South African.¹⁰⁵ A piece of qualitative research exploring the relationships between foreign survivalists and their South African employees would be very welcome indeed. One can only imagine that a business making less than R250 a week recruits its employees from the very bottom of the urban underclass.

Most interesting of all, perhaps, is that the immigrant street traders surveyed by Hunter and Skinner sold goods and services South African street traders generally did not. The authors cite a 1997 survey of South African street traders in inner-city Durban which found that 47% of local traders sold food, 20% sold clothing, 4% repaired shoes, and 3% cut hair. In contrast, 32% of Hunter and Skinner's respondents cut hair, 31% sold clothes and leather goods, 15% repaired shoes, and just 2% sold food.¹⁰⁶ This would suggest either that foreign street traders have created services which were underdeveloped, or have come to dominate existing markets. This is another fruitful prospect for social researchers.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that Congolese refugees in Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town are particularly well represented among car guards and hair cutters. Why Congolese should dominate these two positions in the informal sector is something of a mystery. It is certain that few cut hair or guarded cars in the DRC; indeed, many regard what they do for a living in South Africa as so unskilled as to demean the word "work".

While the genesis of Congolese presence in the haircutting business may be lost forever, Owen Sichone's gentle, but acute narrative about haircutters in Mowbray, Cape Town, suggests why many businesses survive. Describing a Cameroonian-owned barbershop, he describes how, even here, at the very lowest rung of the service sector, foreigners compete with South Africans by offering a cheaper and more rudimentary service. Sichone writes of the barber, whom he calls "CM": "He opened his Mowbray barbershop with three shaving shears, a few mirrors and a sofa that looked as if it had been retrieved from a refuse dump or a Steptoe & Son wagon. There was no washbasin in the room and he did not sell any hair creams. He did not even keep a record of clients as the South African operated hair salons on the same street do."

So, CM's barbershop "appears to be of low quality", but it is "very popular with a particular kind of client" nonetheless. Two types of client, to be precise: those in search of the cheapest haircut in town, and those who are

attracted to CM's barbershop for its cosmopolitan atmosphere. Immigrant men, students of various sorts, young white and coloured men looking "uncomfortable and self-conscious" and "usually accompanied by their mothers or some other woman ..." are the sort of client CM attracts.¹⁰⁷ What Sichone is suggesting, perhaps a little optimistically, is that CM's very foreignness is the secret to his brand, that the cosmopolitanism immigrants bring to the fabric of inner city life breeds a new form of belonging.

Conclusion

We conclude with a study of car guards in Cape Town which captures some of the more remarkable aspects of the presence of Congolese refugees in the South African labour market. Much of the study is essentially a census, conducted in 2003, of car guards along a one kilometre stretch of Kloof Street and Long Street, which straddles two inner city neighbourhoods dotted with restaurants, clubs and bars.¹⁰⁸ The researchers interviewed 53 informal car guards: 17 were South African, 20 were from the DRC, nine were from Congo Brazzaville, six were Angolan and one was Cameroonian. Thirty-five of the 36 foreigners were self-reported refugees or asylum seekers.

The division of labour between South African and immigrant car guards was interesting. Immigrants and South Africans worked together during the day, but at night only immigrants worked. All were embroiled in a noxious cat-and-mouse game with the police and with private security officials: 19 of the 53 car guards had been arrested, some on the grounds of creating a public disturbance, others on no grounds at all. Some were kept in police cells for up to 48 hours. Interestingly, South African car guards had appeared to be hassled by the police more than immigrants: 63% of immigrants reported no police harassment, compared to 18% of South Africans. Of the 19 who had been arrested, 13 were South Africans.¹⁰⁹

The difference in education levels between South African and foreign car guards was as stark as one might expect. Four in ten foreigners had some tertiary education compared to no South Africans. A further 28% of foreigners had completed high school compared to 18% of South Africans. Finally, just 3% of foreign car guards had only a primary school education or less, compared to nearly half of the South African car guards.¹¹⁰

These figures throw into sharp relief the journey many Congolese refugees have taken – from middle-class privilege back home to the very bottom of urban society in South Africa. The story of Congolese migration to South

Africa is not unique, but it is distinctive; it is a story characteristically associated with sudden economic collapse, war and societal implosion. A group of young people, groomed to take their place among the professional classes of their society, have the rug pulled from under their future, and end up living in a foreign land where they cannot access credit, open a bank account, or appeal to the police when in trouble. In these inhospitable conditions, they develop few ties with outsiders, cluster into defensive networks, and negotiate life from the fringes of the urban economy. What sort of sensibility do they bring to this dismal segment of the South African labour market? Sichone interviewed several Congolese immigrants employed as car guards in hospital and shopping mall parking lots in Mowbray. One of his informants, "Mr MJ", spoke of his South African peers among the car guards:

"... South Africans [Mr MJ told Sichone] have a stronger sense of entitlement and are thus more likely to demand higher wages than take on a second job as a means of improving their lot ... He observed that men, in particular, are fond of taking sick leave after a weekend drinking bout and suggested that, after they have received their wages, South African men will disappear for a whole weekend and only report back for duty after their money has run out. They thus do not save and instead live from hand to mouth. They are often surprised to see that foreign Africans who arrive 'with nothing', as asylum seekers, soon have more resources than their hosts ... Mr MJ described how surprised his fellow guards were when they found that he lived in a furnished flat and even had a telephone."¹¹

Stories like these do not tell us why Congolese refugees turned to cutting hair and guarding cars in particular, rather than to other peripheral occupations. But they perhaps do begin to explain why Congolese have come to dominate these sectors. The answer, in all probability, is that these functions are so lowly that South Africans are not prepared to fill them. On Kloof and Long Streets, foreigners have cornered the night-time market because South Africans only work by day. And in Mowbray, if Mr MJ's story is right, Congolese are over-represented among those who manage to turn up to work at the beginning of every shift. The image conjured is both tragic and strangely out of joint: a group of middle-class people bringing their earnest middle-class values of hard work and careful financial planning to the task of guarding cars.