Enterprising Strangers: Social Capital and Social Liability Among African Migrant Traders

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I seek to analyze the advantages foreign entrepreneurs may possess in this context by considering the types of social relations in which these merchants are embedded. Two closely related concepts will be critical to my analysis: social networks and social capital. Through this exploration of immigrant traders in an African city, I identify weaknesses in the conceptualization of social capital and call for a re-thinking of the linkages between migration, social networks, and social relations.

Keywords: Foreign entrepreneurs, social networks, African societies, Migration, social capital

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At the beginning of a year-long period of ethnographic fieldwork in Brazzaville, capital of the Republic of Congo, in 2005, I was struck by the prominent role of foreign entrepreneurs in the city's markets, especially foreign Africans. The market where I spent the most time, in Brazzaville's Poto-Poto neighbourhood, was dominated by immigrants from various West African countries. Shopkeepers selling dry goods, clothing, shoes, hardware, and electronics were mostly Malians. The men behind the counters of the beauty products shops were mostly Mauritanians. Other small businesses were owned by immigrants from Senegal, Guinea, Benin and Chad. The ranks of Brazzaville's foreign entrepreneurs also include small numbers of Lebanese, South Asians, and Europeans, as well as a new contingent since the end of Congo's civil wars in the late 1990s: lining certain paved boulevards in Brazzaville, especially the Avenue de la Paix in Poto-Poto, today one can find scores of shops owned and operated by Chinese merchants, selling a variety of low-cost goods manufactured in their home country.

Not all entrepreneurs I encountered in Brazzaville were foreigners, of course. Congolese were quite active in a number of specific sectors, such as transportation, hotels, restaurants and bars, and the trade in cassava (almost exclusively controlled by women), the primary staple of the Congolese diet. Some Congolese were also entrepreneurs abroad (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, 2000; Dzaka, 2001), a point to which I will return later. Yet these few areas only highlighted the under-representation of Congolese from other key sectors of the economy, most notably retail and wholesale commerce, and their slim presence in many artisanal trades. Years after Congolese took over the political and administrative affairs of their country from the French in 1960, their conspicuous absence from vast areas of the country's private sector has remained a problem which social scientists studying Congolese society (e.g. Devauges, 1977; Dzaka and Milandou, 1994, 1995; Tsika, 1995) have sought to explain.

The palpable supremacy of Brazzaville's foreign merchants, both in overall numbers and in their ability to succeed, raises a question: What has enabled these merchants to flourish in business where native Congolese have not? This subject is the focus of occasional public discussion in the national media, in internet forums for the Congolese diaspora, and in salons and bars throughout the country. Lively and often acrimonious debates attribute foreign entrepreneurs' success in Brazzaville to factors of cultural difference, corruption and political favouritism. The advantages which outsiders enjoy as entrepreneurs relative to locals constitute one of the keys for understanding Brazzaville's elusive attraction to West African migrants.

In this paper I seek to analyze the advantages foreign entrepreneurs may possess in this context by considering the types of social relations in which these merchants are embedded. Two closely related concepts will be critical to my analysis: social networks and social capital. Through this exploration of immigrant traders in an African city, I identify weaknesses in the conceptualization of social capital and call for a re-thinking of the linkages between migration, social networks, and social relations.

Social Networks and Social Capital

West Africans, like people around the world, belong to social networks composed of relatives, people from their hometowns, coethnics, and others. These networks are spatially dispersed: many people in Mali, for example, know and remain in contact with Malian friends and kin in a host of other countries, including Côte d'Ivoire, Congo, Gabon, France, Spain, and increasingly North America and the Far East. Many families rely on remittances from abroad to make ends meet; even in rural areas there is tremendous dependence by households on the contributions of members in distant locations.

Social networks are commonly associated with dynamics of cooperation, reciprocity and mutual assistance. In the context of transnational immigration, they are also characterized by what Portes and Zhou (1992: 514) call "bounded solidarity." As members of a distinct foreign minority, immigrants feel a heightened sense of shared identity, a common bond with their fellows which is much stronger than any bonds which exist in their homeland above the level of kinship. In Brazzaville, bounded solidarity unifies immigrants from the West African Sahel who would have had little in common back home, but now find themselves strangers in a strange land, as well as Muslims in a non-Muslim society. Various kinds of associations, organized at the level of kin, village, regional, and national communities, reinforce this sense of solidarity and facilitate its mobilization by community members. Bounded solidarity is strongest in minority groups defined by ethnicity or immigrant status, both because of discrimination by members of the host society, and because members of the minority population would have difficulty finding alternative sources of livelihood outside their minority's niche activity in the host society, in this case commerce (see Granovetter, 1995). For them, the price of exclusion would be too high.

In such settings, bounded solidarity also fosters what Portes and Sensenbrenner (1993: 1332) call "enforceable trust." This mechanism discourages wrongdoing by individual network members, who as part of a

tightly bounded, solidary group must rely on one another for their mutual security and livelihoods. The Congolese state justice system is seen as thoroughly corrupt, siding with the rich or powerful rather than the just. In this context, it is more promising for entrepreneurs to rely on the collective power of the social network to sanction malfeasance and reward good behaviour. Many entrepreneurs similarly rely on siblings, cousins, children, or other relatives to "mind the store" for them, take charge of new ventures, purchase merchandise or assist in other ways. Increasingly, enforceable trust even permits local family businesses to go multinational: the Malian owner of a Congolese metal sheeting plant has one relative in charge of his Bamako plastics factory, another in charge of his Congolese sawmill, and another running an export office in China.

Enforceable trust at the level of the social network is a reasonably effective way to promote intra-group bonds and minimize risk. In an environment where the legal system is deficient, and where one may never even be investigated—let alone prosecuted and convicted—for theft or breach of contract, among the greatest challenges for entrepreneurs is knowing whom to trust. Where the law fails to create a climate of enforceable trust, kinship, friendship, ethnicity and other more informal varieties of association intervene to provide a solution (cf. Cohen, 1969; Hart, 1988). This solution is certainly not foolproof, as many business owners I knew in Brazzaville had stories of being betrayed by someone close to them whom they had trusted. Such cautionary tales constitute the exception to the rule, however: friends and trusted relatives are less likely than others to risk such a deception for fear of the social sanctions they would face as a result.

The concepts of bounded solidarity and enforceable trust show the importance of social relationships for entrepreneurial success. By promoting in-group loyalty and respect for contracts, these mechanisms help to disseminate valuable information among trading partners and effectively lower their "transaction costs" (see Grabowski, 1997). Yet, as I will demonstrate, it would be a mistake to portray social relationships and networks in this context as purely positive factors.

Social capital is a concept which has been saddled with several overlapping but frequently dissonant definitions (see Portes, 1998; Sandefur and Laumann, 1998; Robison et al. 2002; Johnson and Percy-Smith, 2003). Bourdieu (1986: 249) originally defined social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition." His definition was later adapted by Coleman

(1988: 98), who described social capital as a facilitating quality which "inheres in the structure of relationships between actors and among actors." For both Coleman and Bourdieu, social capital was conceptualized in instrumental terms, as a quality which individuals may generate and exploit within societal norms of reciprocity.

These early definitions were substantially altered by scholars like Putnam (2000), who used metrics of civic engagement and participation in voluntary associations to apply it to whole societies. Such formulations have moved the concept in new and controversial directions. The notion of social capital has acquired clout in policymaking circles: a report published by the World Bank went so far as to identify social capital as the "missing link" in economic development (Grootaert, 1998), and from the mid-1990s, developmentalist discourse bundled social capital with related understandings of microenterprise and informal economies as mechanisms to promote economic growth while bypassing the state—forming a strategy in which "the genius for survival of the poor was being set free from the bonds of bankrupt, downsized nation-states" (Elyachar, 2002: 508; see also Fine, 2001). As its appeal has grown, the social capital concept has been pushed beyond its feasible limits. There is little agreement on its core meaning, to the point that "the status of social capital as a concept should more accurately be characterized as chaotic, while at times it operates as little more than a warm metaphor or a vaguely suggestive heuristic device" (Johnson and Percy-Smith, 2003: 332). In the words of Robison et al. (2002: 1), the social capital concept is "at risk of becoming the ether that fills the universe."

In light of these difficulties, some scholars, including distinguished economists (Arrow, 1999; Solow, 1999; Fine, 2001), anthropologists (Meagher, 2005, 2006), and political scientists (Smith and Kulynych, 2002), have advocated that social capital be abandoned or replaced as a conceptual tool in the social sciences. But it seems to be too late for that: the social capital genie is out of the bottle, and the term, despite disagreements over its fundamental qualities, "is now firmly entrenched in the language of social scientists" (Robison et al., 2002: 8). Social capital is a regular theme of research in leading social science journals (e.g. Moody and Paxton, 2009). Might its popularity prove its downfall? I want to address this problem by defining the concept as narrowly as possible. Like Bourdieu and Coleman, I take social capital to be a property of individuals embedded in specific relationships, not a diffuse quality obtaining even among strangers. Like Robison et al. (2002: 6), I use the term here to designate *sympathy* toward individuals or groups which carries the potential for instrumental benefits (such as information, employment, housing, and other forms of support).

This definition—something of a lowest common denominator—reflects the concept's use in migration research (e.g. Palloni et al., 2001) as a capacity both manifested in and exercised through social networks.

Another problem is that in much social scientific literature, social capital and social networks are virtually coterminous (see critique in Fine, 1999: 5-7). Giddens (2000: 78), for example, describes social capital as "trust networks that individuals can draw on for social support, just as financial capital can be drawn upon to be used for investment." The World Bank (2007) defines social capital as "the norms and networks that enable collective action." Social scientists have a strong tendency to perceive social networks as a universal good; they help people solve problems, achieve their goals and live better lives. Social scientists are particularly prone to seeing "good things emerging out of sociability" (Portes, 1998: 15)—a dictum which applies to anthropologists and sociologists perhaps most of all. In certain cases we recognize that relationships and the social capital they yield can be detrimental to society at large: the close ties between members of a mafia crime family or a street gang, for example, only permit the more efficient victimization of law-abiding citizens.[1] Nonetheless, scholars usually presume that social relationships must be beneficial at least to the individuals embedded in them.

Social capital and social networks are intricately interwoven with each other. In any setting, "networking" (cultivating social contacts for instrumental purposes) is a vital means of building up social capital, and the human relationships which the social capital concept is perceived to index are perhaps the most important means through which people, not least entrepreneurs, achieve their ends. At the same time, however, social relationships have a pronounced ability to cut both ways, to further as well as hinder an individual's interests. In other words, social capital and social networks are not coterminous. Nowhere is this truer than in sub-Saharan African settings like Brazzaville, where bonds based on kinship, ethnicity, regional affiliation and other commonalities are of utmost importance in daily affairs (Milandou, 1997). It seems to me that social scientists have not adequately explored the capacity of one's social connections to be detrimental to one's interests in such environments.

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[1] Rubio (1997), for example, highlights what he calls "perverse social capital" in the dealings of Colombian criminal groups. Bayart et al. (1999) highlight the ways social networks have brought about the "criminalization" of African states. Browning (2009) highlights potential linkages between strong neighborhood social capital and criminality in an urban neighborhood in the U.S. Portes (1998) offers insight into the ways social networks may have negative consequences outside of criminal activity, while Silvey and Elmhirst (2003) demonstrate the gendered limitations of social networks.

The Burden of Social Relations

A common theme in my discussions with people in both Mali and in Congo has been the weight of their obligations to kin. It is exceedingly difficult to refuse a request by a family member, particularly when that person is in serious need—as so many are in African societies. Strong kinship bonds, as well as patron-clientelism, encourage the fortunate to provide for the poorest and most vulnerable members of society. This system applies throughout Africa and in many other parts of the world. Analyses of social capital are prone to stress the positive effects of this communitarian ethic and the "social safety net" it establishes, but often overlook its "dark side"— the penalization of personal success and the stifling of individual initiative.

One anthropologist who has examined this underside of social relationships is Keith Hart: describing urban entrepreneurs from northern Ghana, he states that "those who manage to enrich themselves [are] a widespread target for the aspirations, hopes, fears, and antipathies of their less fortunate fellows" (1975: 16). There is bound to be tension between any individual who accumulates wealth and the members of that individual's group who do not: in the words of Sandefur and Laumann (1998: 493), "visibly successful members of a solidary group may become targets of less successful members who may wish to 'free-ride' on their success, and are able to do so because of norms that require successful individuals to aid less fortunate members of the group." Entrepreneurial success requires exploiting kin and social relationships; at the same time, it also requires breaking free of those relationships which might hold one back. Thus arises a problem which Hart (1975: 28) has named the "entrepreneur's social dilemma": how to divide one's resources between, on the one hand, a "public social security fund of reciprocal exchanges," and on the other hand the private accumulation of personal wealth.

For most Africans, contributing to the "public social security fund" of their elders is vital. Most elderly Africans are utterly dependent on support from their offspring to survive in their old age, and one of the worst faults of which an adult may be accused is failing to provide for his or her parents. Underlying West African Muslims' norms of filial piety and obedience is a phenomenon known as *danga*, a kind of curse which a parent can invoke upon a wayward child. Sanneh (1996: 172) defines *danga* as "ill-omen, sometimes incurred by the curse but more often from the ill-will of those unjustly wronged" which "haunts and tracks down its subjects." A *dangaden* (literally "curse-child") is a common Bamanan term for someone "good-for-nothing, damned" (Bailleul, 2000: 88). Anyone who defies parental authority

is at risk of *danga*; this threat is greatest for migrants who are not generous toward parents back home, and for those who disobey their families' wishes regarding marriage. As one elderly head of household in Togotala put it,

> If you leave here to go to America, and find work within two or three months, and start collecting your pay, you should come back to take a wife here. But if you stay, and marry a white woman, and you don't send anything to your father, your mother, or anybody, just looking out for yourself, well, then you're a *dangaden*. You can pray, you can fast, you can give alms and everything, but if you don't think of your mother and father, it's finished! You get no blessing, it's over. You're ruined.

Such a curse can bring temporal retribution to those lacking generosity toward their kin: in the words of one Malian sociologist, there is a "very real fear that if you do not spread what you have around, people will curse you, and you will lose everything, perhaps go blind, or even die" (*New York Times*, 1997). *Danga*, moreover, negates the value of one's wealth. According to one Togotalan interviewee in his late teens, "even if [a *dangaden*] makes millions abroad, he'll lose all of it and he'll be stuck in a foreign land with empty pockets and all sorts of problems."

According to some Islamic beliefs, being a *dangaden* also means losing favor in the eyes of God, and with it losing all hope of going to heaven. The importance of this sanction—being denied access to the afterlife—should not be underestimated in any analysis of these migrants' behavior. Muslims are encouraged to strive to reach paradise and to avoid the torments of Hell in the afterlife. Selfish acts, particularly not sharing one's wealth with one's parents, can irreversibly bar the gateway to heaven. *Baraka*, or blessing, represents the other side of the coin; it is *baraka* that the pious seek to amass through good deeds. Significantly, one may obtain it only from one's elders or superiors; *baraka* can be passed down a social hierarchy but never up (Sanneh, 1996). These migrants seek to accumulate not only value (the rewards of which exist only in the short term) but also virtue (with rewards in the long term). For devout Muslims, there would be no point in building up short-term rewards if it meant forfeiting long-term ones—the blessings that accompany righteous acts.

For this reason, choosing whether to fulfil a parent's request for funds or other types of material support entails more than just economic consequences: a person's very salvation may depend on it. For a potential or current entrepreneur, however, kin relations often constitute a burden which

places the entrepreneur in a difficult position. The "entrepreneurial ethic" requires one to accumulate savings and start-up capital. This is impossible, however, as long as one must take care of one's relatives: the "dutiful kin ethic" requires that one provide for the needy, and any surplus generated will be automatically claimed by and distributed to kin.

The difficulty of reconciling enterprise with kin obligations is similar for Congolese, except that for them, instead of Islamic injunctions and the threat of a parent's *danga* hanging over one's head, it is *bunganga*—a powerful form of supernatural aggression—which acts as the enforcement arm for relatives' demands.[2] Congolese widely adhere to a belief in the power to manipulate spiritual forces: 85 percent of Brazzaville university students surveyed said they believed in sorcery (*Jeune Afrique-L'Intelligent,* 2004), and local political imaginaries are dominated by references to the occult (Gruénais et al., 1995; Eaton, 2006). Within the lineage structures of Congolese society, *bunganga* is wielded by powerful elders to enforce their will upon junior members. Like a sinister twin of *baraka* in West African Muslim societies, *bunganga* moves only from senior to junior members of a hierarchy, but instead of blessings it carries ill fortune, sickness, and in extreme instances death. An elder can unleash this spiritual force through a conscious or even an unconscious expression of discontent with a junior member of his or her lineage, usually a maternal nephew. The most common impetus for *bunganga* from these senior relatives is the junior relative's failure to satisfy their demands. Congolese entrepreneurs frequently interpret their elders' claims for money and goods as not only insatiable but malicious, intended to bring about their ruin (Devauges, 1977: 124ff; see also MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, 2000). Fears of sorcery even keep some Congolese from keeping their money in banks, where their funds' fusion with those of anonymous depositors could expose them to supernatural aggression. For good reason, sorcery has been called "the dark side of kinship" (Geschiere, 2003), described in the Congolese context as an "instrument in the struggle against scarcity" (Dzaka and Milandou, 1994: 109) and its claims upon successful kin as a "social recognition tax" (Tsika, 1995: 251).

The intra-lineage power balance discourages attempts by junior members of a lineage to build up their own wealth, which may be interpreted by those in the upper levels of the lineage as a bid to upset the social hierarchy. Under the logic of the lineage system, the most essential characteristics of the entrepreneur—risk-taking, innovation, organizational talent, the drive to

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2   *Kindoki*, the usual term for sorcery in Congo, is a different phenomenon and refers to practices knowingly employed by malevolent actors to diminish another's life force; see Devauges (1977: 107-114).

accumulate capital — pose a threat to the status quo unless they are embodied in a socially dominant figure. Lineages promote a particularly powerful communitarian ethic: historically, for groups such as the Kongo, "the right to individual enrichment was almost unknown" (Dzaka and Milandou, 1994: 116). Success in business is often constructed as an inherited family trait (*lusolo*), the fruits of which must be redistributed to kin (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, 2000: 126ff).

It is important to point out that there is nothing new to the observation that would-be entrepreneurs are hindered by their family and social obligations. Since long before the popularity of concepts like social capital and social networks, anthropologists have debated the power of kin relations to sap the entrepreneur's resources.[3]

Escaping the "Entrepreneur's Social Dilemma"

There are three main ways out of the conundrum confronting those who seek to accumulate wealth without completely cutting themselves of from their greatest source of support, their kin networks. The first is to join a social group with different internal norms than one's home community. This strategy often takes the form of religious conversion: in Ghana, for example, Hart (1975:28) finds that a number of entrepreneurs eased the burden of kin obligations by "joining a religious congregation which did not place the same degree of moral restriction on self-enrichment" as did their kin groups. Similar linkages between successful entrepreneurship and religious conversion have been observed in settings all over the world, from Ecuador (Portes and Landolt 1996) to Nigeria (Cohen, 1969) to Congo (Dzaka and Milandou, 1994; Dorier-Apprill, 2001); in Mali, the rise of Islamic reformism since the 1950s has been intimately associated with the country's merchants (Kaba, 1974; Amselle, 1985; Warms, 1992). Alternately, actors can attempt to "disembed" themselves from communal obligations through membership in certain types of secular voluntary associations, such as social clubs or credit societies (Meagher, 2005).

The second "escape route" is to conceal one's sources of income and keep one's economic success under wraps. This approach is mainly for individuals who work for themselves and collect no regular salary. For example, Seydou Keita, a well-known Malian photographer, toward the end of his life reportedly projected the image of "the exploited artist, left with nothing at the end of brilliant career," despite earning generous royalties

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[3] The scope of this anthropological debate has been by no means limited to Africa: Geertz (1963) studied the same question in Bali, for example, as did Foster (1974) in Thailand.

and owning homes all over Bamako (*New York Times*, 1997). In Côte d'Ivoire, many urban youth prefer informal and even criminal forms of economic activity (known in Abidjan as "*le bizness*") to regular salaried work, since "having a real job is too high profile to save any money" (Newell, 2006: 185). This option is less feasible for entrepreneurs with capital assets, such as shops and merchandise.

The third way out, and the most important to my analysis, is emigration. By distancing oneself in a physical sense from one's neediest family members (who are also the ones least likely to emigrate), one dramatically reduces the weight of obligations one is expected to uphold. This is true for a number of reasons. Distance has the effect of filtering out all but the most urgent requests. Once one goes abroad, it becomes more difficult for kin to convey their demands: telecommunication remains very expensive in much of Africa, and low computer literacy limits e-mail use. Even when a request does manage to bridge the distance between family and migrant, the latter has more leeway to ignore it or to postpone a reply than would someone back home. While it is hard to say no to any request from family, the more distant the origins of a request, the easier it becomes to practice artful deflection, deferral, and delay, all of which I noted repeatedly during participant observation. Excuses which might not sway a demand in person (e.g. "my goods are stuck in customs," "nobody's buying," "the tax office just cleaned me out," etc.) can be much more effective when the one hearing them cannot verify whether they are actually true. As Cliggett (2005: 152) finds in her study of rural-to-urban migrants in Zambia, "physical distance from relatives means that the most direct and effective form of pressure for support, a face-to-face request, is simply not an option." Of course, migrants still must be responsive to the needs of their families back home, but while abroad they can respond at their discretion and on their own terms, in ways that do not prevent them from building up their enterprises. This was a recurring theme in conversations I had with West African entrepreneurs in Brazzaville, and has been observed among West African migrants elsewhere (Barten, 2009).

It is especially difficult for entrepreneurs to do business in their home communities, where they face a constant barrage of requests by their kin, both close and distant, for goods on credit, for discounts, for employment, and for short-term loans or grants outright to help pay for weddings, baptisms, and burials. In her research on informal manufacturers in Nigeria, Meagher (2006: 568) identifies a disinclination among entrepreneurs to trade with "townsmen," i.e. people from their home communities:

Suppliers of shoe parts claimed that townsmen were the most problematic customers, because they exercise moral pressure to get credit and then expect the trader to understand their problems when the time comes for repayment. Associative ties, especially through the church, were considered more reliable.

In Bamako, I met a taxi driver who would not accept a fare to his home neighbourhood in that city, because he knew once he arrived there he was likely to be spotted by some relative who would insist on being driven somewhere for free. It is always possible to turn down such requests, in fact most requests *are* turned down, but the necessity to do so creates unrelenting tension for the entrepreneur (Vuarin, 1997); it is far simpler to manage one's affairs a little farther from home. During my research in Togotala in 2002, I noticed that the majority of shopkeepers were not only outsiders to the village but came from a different region of Mali altogether, hundreds of miles away (cf. Jonsson, 2008). At the national level, some observers feel that Malians are underrepresented in their own country's private business sector. "To an unhealthy degree, entrepreneurship is still left to the Lebanese and other foreigners," writes Pringle (2006: 37) of Mali's national commercial scene. Increasingly, these other foreigners include Chinese, who have been gradually moving into certain areas of retail commerce since the 1990s (Kernen and Vulliet, 2008; Bourdarias, 2009). In many parts of Africa, it is common to find that the traders and small- and medium-size business operators hail from someplace else.[4] The merchant, to use Prashad's formulation (2001), is always a stranger.

Congolese would-be entrepreneurs would thus do well to put some distance between themselves and their kin. They are too close to too many burdensome relations, and face grave dangers if they choose to ignore the claims placed upon them by members of their lineage. (Unlike Sahelian traders who operate too close to home, Congolese entrepreneurs risk losing not only their fortunes but their very lives if they displease their relatives.) Congolese entrepreneurs find themselves, to borrow the evocative title of a book chapter by Tsika (1995), "between the anvil of the state and the hammer of the family." But migration from Brazzaville to another part of Congo would be problematic because so much of Congolese life is clustered in the capital. For decades many Congolese—especially those raised in the city—have been unwilling to settle in rural areas and provincial towns, and in any case entrepreneurs would find few customers and even less money in the sparsely populated hinterland. People coming to Brazzaville from elsewhere in the country, on the other hand, would still be unable to

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[4]   This is also true in many settings outside Africa: see discussion in Granovetter (1995).

dissociate themselves from their kin: home to a third of Congo's population and the largest concentrations of schools, government services, and salaried work, the capital has attracted large numbers of migrants from every region and district of the country. Finally, individuals' attempts to break away from kin by physically moving away could be seen by elders as an affront and result in not only the renegades' social marginalization but in their supernatural victimization as well.

Congolese traders have been more successful abroad, particularly in informal commercial activities in France (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, 2000; Douma, 2003) as well as in some of Congo's neighbouring countries (Dzaka, 2001). Yet prosperity in business remains challenging on home soil. Some Congolese interest groups such as trade unions have responded to this situation by advocating government training and credit programs for would-be entrepreneurs, and by pressing for laws to bar foreigners from performing certain types of work in Congo. Indeed, a few such laws have recently been enacted pertaining to street vendors, truck drivers, and bakers (Syfia Congo, 2006), and the government has experimented with even more draconian measures in the past. My own research, however, backed by the findings of others cited above, suggests that such measures are unlikely to bring about their desired effects. The roots of the problem lie less in government policy or official favouritism toward foreigners, and more in the power of social relations at the micro-level to support collective welfare over individual ambitions vital to entrepreneurial success. Brazzaville's growing number of revivalist churches, which promote an ethic of individual initiative and encourage members to break from their lineages (Dorier-Apprill, 2001), may offer Congolese a more promising prescription for business success than state policy measures.

Conclusion: The Double-Edged Sword

Migration, whether for labour or transnational trade, is plainly a social as well as an economic phenomenon. The West African presence in Brazzaville demonstrates that people leave home for reasons that may have little to do with macro-economic conditions. Governments, both in Africa and in Europe, have sought to keep Africa's potential migrants at home, or encourage existing migrants to return, by offering monetary incentives for them to start businesses in their home communities. The Congolese government periodically announces new initiatives to encourage Congolese participation in private enterprise, and the French government has long advocated "co-development" policies geared to create enterprises in

migrant-sending communities and provide local residents with an alternative to emigration. These programs have met with little success (Daum, 2002; Gubert, 2008), in part because they ignore the dynamics of enterprise in African societies and particularly the difficulties inherent in doing business in one's home community.

Studying Brazzaville's West Africans and other similar groups within Africa's internal diasporas reveals just how important migration is in contemporary African societies. More than a short-term response to conflict or economic crisis, migration offers attractive opportunities for social and material advancement even to individuals living in stable, peaceful communities. It has become a vital part of the livelihood strategies of millions of ordinary Africans, in no small part because of the social pressures which favour entrepreneurial success abroad and discourage certain forms of labour at home. These pressures may play only a slight role in drawing migrants from poor African countries to wealthy countries in Europe and North America, where multiple economic incentives exist including higher pay and better business environments. It is my contention, however, that they are a significant factor underlying existing migration *between* poor African countries, and particularly migration to impoverished, unstable, periodically violent countries like Congo.

On a more theoretical level, the activities of West Africans in Brazzaville provide important insights into the nature of social relations, and specifically the often confused relationship between social networks and social capital. Social scientists have demonstrated a propensity to characterize the relationships which make up social networks as unequivocally positive forces in people's lives, while overlooking the potential these relationships have to undermine individuals' aspirations, threaten their interests, and penalize their successes. We can and should celebrate the ability of collectivities based on kinship, shared ethnicity or other bonds to guard against the ravages of hunger and destitution in poverty-stricken communities. But we must not forget the capability these same collectivities have to compel the successful few to share in the misfortunes of the majority—enacting what Portes (1998: 17) calls "downward levelling norms" (see also Meagher, 2006: 572). Embeddedness in social networks can act to drive people away and to distance themselves physically from the people closest to them. Like most anthropologists, I have long been inclined to see the virtues of sociability and group solidarity. This research, however, has forced me to confront some of their ills as well, and in so doing to recognize a key aspect of social dynamics in Africa. Sociability cuts both ways, as the eminent sociologist Alejandro Portes (1998; see also Portes and Landolt, 1996) has noted.

As for the value of the social capital concept, it is clear that this concept is here to stay whether one likes it or not, and that it should therefore be used in the most helpful way possible. Despite its conflicting definitions and troubled history, social capital can still be analytically useful in the study of human societies, provided that two conditions are met. First, social capital must be distinguished from the social networks through which it is manifested. Second, the social capital concept must be employed in a manner that takes its potential "downside" (cf. Portes and Landolt, 1996) into account. The existence of this downside does not diminish its potential to bring various forms of benefits to those who possess it; in other words, it does make it any less a form of "capital." As Robison et al. (2002) point out, a factory that produces a useful good may also produce pollution, but that factory is nonetheless considered capital. Likewise, sympathetic relations between individuals are marked by social capital, even when those relations can yield negative outcomes from an individual's point of view. Just as factory owners cannot ignore the harmful by-products of their plants, social scientists must remember that social capital can bring unwanted by-products of its own. More generally, social scientists must make greater efforts to appreciate social relations' power to shape a host of processes including migration, and to affect people's lives both for better and for worse. As the lives of these African migrants illustrate, social relations are a double-edged sword.

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