



STREET CHILDREN UNDER A BAD STAR

Children accused of sorcery eke out a living on the streets of Mbuji Mayi, in Kasai Oriental .

Most of the time, the Reunification Stadium in Mbuji Mayi, the capital of Kasai Oriental, is a volley-ball pitch. But three mornings a week, at six sharp, the cement playing field is turned into a dojo. But it's not your run-of-the-mill karate club – most of the 200 youths who attend are street children.

Under the watchful eye of instructors, the young fighters kneel, concentrate, do warm-up exercises and clash in silence. After the fight, the budding athletes salute each other Japanese-style and embrace Congolese-style.

A local non-governmental organization, CAMEER (Centre des arts martiaux pour l'éducation des enfants de la rue), is keen to give these homeless children a chance to fight for fun with boys who do have a home in this working-class neighbourhood known as Cité 44 Bodine 2. It wasn't an easy undertaking. In Mbuji Mayi, street children – an estimated 5,000 boys and girls under 18 years of age – are the poorest of the poor, deprived kids often accused of sorcery. And their peers didn't exactly welcome them with open arms. On the contrary. They sometimes refused to engage them, complaining that the “filthy” boys would get them dirty.

Mike Makungu, CAMEER president, doesn't blame them. He confesses that he also harboured prejudice against these youths. “Before, I was just like everybody



else," he says. "I used to think that they were little bandits. Now, I can see that they're just like any other children."

At the Reunification Stadium, instructors teach basic karate rules and principles, which can also be considered useful life skills: respect, concentration, refusal to bear arms and observance of basic health and hygiene.

For CAMEER, karate is a means to an end. It's true goal is not to train black

belts but to reunite street children with their families. And it appears to be working. Since its founding in 2002, the NGO has been able to convince parents to take in about 50 boys. Makungu says that parents who often blame their sons for being "good for nothings" are impressed when they find out that they have taken up karate.

Like fans of martial arts everywhere, the children themselves say they want to learn karate to become stronger.

Dieudonné, a 13-year-old who looks much younger, speaks Chiluba, the local language. Through an interpreter, he says that he wants to have a "strong heart," i.e. to be tougher. A budding karate fighter, he has received blows and often fallen on the cement pitch. He says he is used to it. He is often hit at the Bakuadianga Market where he spends most of his time.

Many children haunt its narrow streets covered with a thick layer of ash and shredded plastic bags. Dieudonné earns a living by carrying parcels and bags for merchants willing to part with a few Congolese francs. But his dream, he says, is to one day become a black belt and a *Monsieur* (Sir), his word for teacher.

Orphans initially made the street their home when their parents were chased from neighbouring Katanga in the early Nineties. An unknown number of people died when hundreds of thousands of people were forced to return to their home province, Kasai Oriental.

Today, many street children, already despised and feared, stand accused of witchcraft. They can be blamed for

almost anything that can go wrong, including ill health, death and job loss. Many people believe it is easy for adult sorcerers to cast a spell on unsuspecting children. Some say that children turn into *sorciers* without even realizing that this is going on. A malicious adult sorcerer, it is thought, can bewitch a child simply by giving him or her something to eat, especially everyday food like bread. As the child begins to chew on it, the food supposedly turns into meat or candy in the eater's mouth. At that point, it is thought, the unwary victim is already tainted with malevolent powers. In common parlance, accusers will say that the young sorcerer now has the capability of "eating," i.e. casting a spell. As evidence of this, accusers may even point at a child's bloated stomach as proof of his or her gluttony. In most cases, of course, the swelling is due to severe malnutrition.

In the past, charges of sorcery were traditionally directed at the elderly – not the young. But since the Nineties, for reasons that remain unclear, street children in several large Congolese cities have been the target of modern-day "witch hunters."

Children accused of sorcery are often handed over to small Evangelical churches in an attempt to have them exorcized. For these services, pastors and so-called prophets ask for payment, often in kind. A chicken, for example, can be required from the child's family. The animal will be sacrificed in a ritual that has less to do with religion than with traditional animist practices.

In most cases, children accused of witchcraft plead innocent. "Some children admit that they are sorcerers, but only because they have been intimidated and, in some cases, tortured," says Marie-Thérèse Tshiska, an official with the local Ministry of Women's and Family Affairs. "They are told: Confess – or we will kill you!"

Dieudonné, who has also been accused of witchcraft, refused to confess. He says he doesn't believe these fantasy stories and that the allegation was cooked up by his stepmother to have him thrown out of the house. But such accusations have now become commonplace in Mbuji-Mayi.

Two local child centres run by Betu Bana ("our children" in Chiluba) are



home to about 170 boys and girls. One in three has been accused of sorcery, a charge that has had dramatic consequences in the past.

In September 2004, Betu Bana's two homes were attacked by an angry mob wielding knives, sticks and machetes. Livid and enraged, attackers accused Betu Bana educators, including Roman Catholic brothers, of harbouring "snakes" and "sorcerers." At the time, enraged assailants went on a deadly rampage. According to official figures, 17 boys and girls were burned alive, including a nine-year-old boy. Thirty-four others were seriously injured. But the true number of victims is higher, according to Betu Bana, which lost one of its boys. He was decapitated.

How could this happen?

Betu Bana blames the troubles on local "diggers," men who work in the local alluvial diamond mining. A few days before the massacre, they had launched a public ultimatum, demanding that local authorities force homeless children to return to their homes. The miners threatened to solve the problem themselves if this was not done.

"Diggers" said they no longer wanted kids to steal their bags of earth before they could even sift them for diamonds. They also complained that going to the police was useless because security forces had already recruited these young people as vigilantes. They now enjoyed a certain degree of police protection. Even political parties had reportedly enrolled street children to disturb their political rivals' marches and demonstrations.

Many people dislike and distrust these youths who – beyond sorcery accusations– are also assumed to be juvenile delinquents. It was thus easy for "diggers" to urge supporters to take up arms in their anti-street children campaign. By calling for the murder of "snakes" and "sorcerers," child rights defenders charge, the miners lit the match that set the city ablaze.

Most of the time, the Centre d'hébergement Saint-Vincent-de-Paul, a Roman Catholic orphanage, takes in street children. But it urges kids who still have their parents to go home.

Some parents, however, set a condition: they want their child to cease being an alleged sorcerer. How can this be done? Saint Vincent de Paul nuns have resorted to soliciting the help of priests, who pray for alleged evil-doers for a month. After that time period, the child is considered exorcized. But, despite this intervention, the sisters have found that some parents still refuse to take in their son or daughter.

That's what happened to Marcel, who's 11. His father, a traditional singer, chased him from the family home when he remarried. His new wife continuously slighted the boy for reasons that were not clear to him at the time. She convinced her husband of taking his only son to an Evangelical pastor who locked him up for a week – without food. Marcel was then sent back home to fetch his *mukaya*, a piece of clothing that sorcerers are expected to wear. That's when Marcel's irate father told him to leave and to never return.

Marcel isn't anxious to see his father again. If he ever chances upon him, he says that he won't even greet him. "He

sees me like some kind of animal, as something rotten," says Marcel. "Why should I say hello?"

Like many street kids, Marcel sleeps in a "cinema," a house where videos are showed to a paying audience. He is usually shooed-out when a movie is on, but he has managed to see two films nonetheless, one of which, an action movie, he really liked.

CAMEER, Betu Bana, the Ministry of Women's and Family Affairs and the Centre d'hébergement Saint-Vincent-de-Paul are UNICEF partners.

