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The practitioners highlight a fear, which embraced the whole society, of poisonous forces moving across the urban landscape.
Trovalla (2016: 182)

1. *Karuho,* its emergence and instrumentalization in Goma

Ever since the outbreak of the Rwandan genocide in 1994 and throughout the initial stage of the conflict in DR Congo (from 1996 onwards), there have been tremendous waves of refugees arriving in eastern DR Congo from neighboring Rwanda and, concurrently, the level of insecurity in the broader region of the Kivu Provinces has drastically worsened. Apart from a major deterioration to the inhabitants' livelihoods, due to violence and large numbers of internally displaced people (IDP) throughout the area, linguistic and cultural change have also accompanied these major sociodemographic changes and the inhabitants' increased patterns of mobility. One of the aftereffects of the migration waves from Rwanda into the Congo was the increasing occurrence of poisoning cases in Goma, the major city and provincial capital of North Kivu. While there were 7-8 traditional healers specialized in curing poison in 1994, only ten years later were 68 healers specialized

in this growing business (Namujimbo 2004). In this growth, it is also essential to observe that healers are not only the ones who "cure" victims, but equally the producers and distributors of the so-called *karuho* substances; a poison that is the source of fear and wild speculations, in part due to its often undefined nature. Narratives around the poison are, however, only shared among close friends or family members – and never publicly: *Karuho* talk is perceived as strictly taboo in eastern Congolese culture (while it is less stigmatized in the capital Kinshasa and in the western part of the country).

While in numerous African cultures love potions are commonly used as aphrodisiacs and employed for love spells, the Congolese *karuho* is mainly used as a tool for intimidation or the elimination of adversaries and, as explained by several interview partners, mostly motivated by personal or professional jealousy and envy. The generally fragile political climate, with several dozens of armed groups in the broader area, of mistrust and hostility has led to revenge acts that have included the use of poison. When noticed early enough to be cured, the treatment usually costs between 25 and 50$ (according to Namujimbo 2004) and is administered by a healer. He (in DRC usually a male individual) is commonly known as *mulozi* (the one who is able to mix potions and distribute them), *munganga wa asili* (a healer who can cure poisoning but cannot produce harmful substances nor bewitch people), or *mufumu* ('witchdoctor', who is generally considered as evil) (Bose, p.c. 2017).

Historically, in eastern Congo, poisoning did not constitute a common cultural practice, nor a way of eliminating political enemies. The close vicinity of the city, Goma, to the adjacent Rwandan territory across the national border has, however, contributed to the sudden increase in cases of food poisoning: Several sources cover the concept of poisoning practices being steeped in long traditions of the Rwandan kingdom. Also, neighboring groups such as the Banande in North Kivu consider poisoning practices to be mainly a Rwandan practice: The word *akaruho* in Kinande, a lexical borrowing, can be translated as "*un type de poison que les Wanande croient que les Rwandais possèdent*" [a kind of poison that the Banande think the Rwandans have (Kavutirwaki & Mutaka 2012: 5). [1] A further available source that explores the long tradition of poisoning is Vansina (2004: 144), who relates Nyarwaya's death (a successful warrior during King Gahindiro's reign), in around 1867, to a poisoned dish prepared by the Queenmother Nyiramongi, of the Nyiginya court. Burnet (2016: 79), in his analysis of the concepts of 'evil' in regard to the Rwandan genocide, summarizes that the fear of being poisoned is still very much alive in Rwanda and remains related to the *abacunyi* ('healers, herbalists'):

> As in many other African regions, certain ritual and healing specialists could also provide the poison (*uburozi*) necessary to cause trouble for an adversary. Rwandan beliefs about and fears of poison, which can administered [sic!] through material and spiritual forms, persist into the present and strongly shape their habits. For example, family members suspect poisoning in deaths easily explained by modern medicine,

[1] The fear of poisonous substances is not limited to Goma (DR Congo) and Rwanda. Also in Burundi, in parts of adjacent Tanzania, in the Ugandan capital Kampala and the Kenyan capital Nairobi similar narratives can be witnessed, mostly due to the interconnectedness of these spaces and the fast travelling stories around this phenomenon.

> such as a stroke (...). In any home, celebration, restaurant, or bar in Rwanda, the server will only open a bottle (whether beer, soda, or water) in the presence of its drinker as proof that it has not been poisoned.

However, the classification of *karuho* as a type of poisonous substance is difficult. There are two tentative directions in response to this issue of classification; (1) to consider *karuho* as a toxic substance, produced and diffused by local healers leading to severe sickness; or as (2) a psychological tool of intimidation, spreading insecurity and fear. The second clarification develops from the uncertainty and variety of ingredients, recipes, producers, bodily effects and incubation times, consequently leading to a blurring of the boundary between poison (*sumu* in Kiswahili) and witchcraft (*bulozi* in Kiswahili); two concepts that are expressed with the same lexeme in the neighboring Kinyarwanda language (*uburozi*). The most recent medicinal study, a toxicity profile by Kyolo et. al (2018), tested four different kinds of *karuho* samples on the brains of Wistar Albino rats and clarified some of the speculations around its ingredients and biochemical effects.

> Different varieties of Karuho poisons are commonly used to poison people and the effects observed can be acute or chronic depending on the dose and the type of poison used. The poisons are reported to be made locally from the available natural products including venoms derived from chameleon and toad/frog skin, blue headed Agama lizard, human placenta or some rare plant extracts such as Datura stramonium and some minerals like arsenic, mercury and cadmium and many others. (Kyolo et al. 2018)

The findings further showed that acute poisoning may result in nausea, vomiting, sweating, loss of consciousness, convulsion and death (among other outcomes), while chronic poisoning may lead to weight loss, fainting, coughing, chest pain, fever, or nausea, and many more; each depending upon the dose and type of *karuho* poison used (ibid.). A major challenge with these symptoms, and consequently the 'poisoning' diagnosis, is that many resemble those of common diseases such as tuberculosis, HIV infections, typhoid fever, or malaria. While some poisoning incidents go unnoticed by the targeted victims, in other cases the victim will receive a message, either before the poisoning occurs, while the assault is still in the process of planning (see Section 3), or afterwards. Addressing these matters of poisoning in Goma, the linguistic aspects of a 'taboo' topic are evident in the ways inhabitants creatively opt for euphemistic strategies to avoid specific terminology.

The actual Kiswahili term for poison, *sumu,* cannot be publicly uttered at all and is considered a strict linguistic taboo; its use may either result in being poisoned, or lead to social stigmatization. Instead, a broad range of other terms have to be employed; analyzed in more detail in the following sections. The common euphemism *karuho* was translated by Kivu Swahili speakers as *"la petite chose qui fatigue"* [the small thing that exhausts/causes fatigue], stressing that the word became very popular around 1994, at the time of the Rwandan genocide. Etymologically, several speakers of Kinyabwisha (the local Congolese variety of Kinyarwanda, the Bantu language from Rwanda), traced it back to the verb *kuruha* in their language 'to get tired/be weak' (Bose, p.c. 2017). From Kinyabwisha it has probably then entered Kivu Swahili, however most speakers (who have no knowledge of Kinyabwisha)

are today no longer sure of its etymological origin.

While the most common denotation for poison stems from Kinyabwisha, the present work focuses on the linguistic taboo in Kivu Swahili; a regiolect of the Bantu language Kiswahili[2] and the main lingua franca all throughout eastern Congo (see Map 1), spoken by approximately 8-10 million individuals. While Kivu Swahili has already been approached in several grammatical studies (Nassenstein & Bose 2016, among others), no study has, so far, touched upon the topic of taboo in the language.

Map 1. The approximate area of diffusion of Kivu Swahili and the city of Goma

In my paper, I am mostly interested in exploring the linguistic strategies with which speakers of Kivu Swahili (based in Goma) avoid face-loss and social stigmatization by using euphemistic strategies that are – in general only among close friends or family members – carefully employed. Moreover, I intend to show the power of taboo words, which blur the boundary between toxic substances and linguistic practices; revealing that threats and hear-say statements may also have severe psychosomatic effects on their addressees, without any actual substance being involved. This will be discussed in the following paragraphs through detailed insights into the linguistic taboo around poison(ing) (Section 2); I then turn to a discussion of the 'poisoning register' (Section 3) and the intertwined dimensions of poison and witchcraft (Section 4). The preliminary findings presented in this contribution are based on qualitative interviews with residents from Goma (and the Kivu Provinces in general) during several fieldwork periods (between 2010 and 2017).[3]

[2] In labels for specific varieties of the language Kiswahili, the prefix *ki-* is often omitted, such as in Kivu Swahili, Kisangani Swahili, or Bunia Swahili (all spoken in DR Congo). Whenever referring to (Swahili) society and culture, the *ki-* is equally dropped.

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2. Sharing, swallowing, embodying "sweet medicine": The linguistic taboo of poison(ing)

There are very few studies available on the linguistic taboos surrounding poisoning practices and, in the general framework on taboos provided by Allan and Burridge (2006), poisoning is not dealt with at all. In contrast, early anthropological works such as Evans-Pritchard (1976: 121) extensively describe the powerful poison oracle, *benge*, of the Azande people, as more powerful than the witchdoctors and to be usually consulted in significant matters. The red poison, a substance "manufactured from a forest creeper and mixed with water to a paste", is commonly smeared upon the domestic fowls' beaks – resulting in spasms and a specific behavior of the fowls – which is then interpreted and used to answer the Azande's questions.

Apparently, the most detailed account of poisoning practices, in regard to modified euphemistic and creative language on the African continent, is given by Storch (2011: 168-177) who discusses several practices from East and West Africa. Among others, Storch provides a poison register in Luganda, a Bantu language from Central Uganda, which functions similarly to the Kivu Swahili 'poisoning register', since "danger and power are openly displayed" (p. 158): In itself, the poison terminology already hints to the potential use of the substance, generally by women in Ganda society. The term *kafumbe* ('mashy, cooked') insinuates that a type of poison may be used when cooking the traditional dish of *luwombo*, as its name is derived from the Luganda verb *okufumba* ('to cook'). In other examples, the semantic reference is more complex; such as the connotation of *kafuga nkaande* ('herb used against head pains') as a poison to kill a co-wife, which can be understood when one knows that the grass used "doesn't allow other grasses to grow" (ibid. p. 159). In Kivu Swahili, the different euphemistic and concurrently threatening strategies of 'avoidance speech' neither indicate potential victims (as everybody is constantly in danger of being poisoned), nor relate details about the identity of the person using the poison. While women in Buganda who use herbal poisons know about the ingredients and traditionally use it as an agency-increasing strategy in their relationships, in eastern Congo, those who order and employ poison from herbalists or witchdoctors usually know nothing about the substance, or its potential effect.[4]

In the Kivu Provinces, the direct mentioning of poison and public accusations that somebody is operating as a *mulozi* or *mufumu* are taboo; mostly due to fear, but also in accordance to a general understanding of *heshima* ('respect') and as an avoidance strategy of *(h)aya* ('shame'). This is deeply rooted in Swahili society and reaches even to the fringes of the Kiswahili-speaking world, as in today's DR Congo (Yayha-Othman 1994, Nassenstein 2018). Negative politeness strategies in Kiswahili, i.e. attempts to mitigate face threats

[4] Unlike in (African) linguistics, the delicate topic of poisoning through a harmful potion (and or mixed within one's food) has been a consistent motive in European art: The act of drinking, mixing or curing poison can be found in famous paintings by Caroto (*Sophonisba drinking the poison*; 1615), Cizza (*The death of Cleopatra*; 1675), David (*La mort de Socrate*; 1787), Goya (*Self-portrait with Dr. Arrieta*; 1820) Wallis (*The death of Chatterton*; 1856), de Morgan (*The love potion*; 1903), and many others.

(Brown & Levinson 1987), are recurrent patterns that include a speaker being indirect and avoiding verbal confrontations. As several interlocutors confirmed, the 'sender' of poison is often a close relative, a neighbor, or a former friend – poisoned drinks do not affect a person arbitrarily but are generally always well-planned and well-placed, in order to reach the targeted individual. While narratives around poison, stories and the latest incidents are privately shared in Goma (see below), accusations of potential perpetrators are uncommon, revealing the same underlying linguistic taboo that restricts the mention of the concrete term *sumu* ('poison'). The fear of accusations can be explained through the pragmatic principle of *kusutwa,* which is defined by Yahya-Othman (1994: 146) as "an occasion, sometimes fairly ritualized, with witnesses and particular gestures, in which someone who has lied about someone else is publicly denounced for lying", which she further describes as an "embarrassing process" due to a person's face loss in public, which then projects shame onto the entire family. Restoring face-loss of a person who has publicly violated the verbal taboo of poisoning by attributing blame to potential poisoners and their practices, is almost impossible: While third-party face is commonly 'repaired' through two persons' (person A and person B) interaction indirectly circling around person C's *fauxpas* (thus attenuating his/her shame and motivating him/her to regain face; see Nassenstein 2018), the fear of being poisoned is far too severe for speakers to risk their own situation in order to restore person C's public face after he/she violated the verbal taboo.

In spite of this, there are narratives around poisoning which are secretly shared among friends, colleagues or family members. Seemingly arbitrary stories around *karuho,* or actual references to another incident can fulfil the pragmatic strategy of indirectly warning a person. These negative politeness strategies avoid direct confrontation with seemingly harmless stories, which enable people to express concern, to educate children and to instrumentalize fear and insecurity – e.g. when threatened by the police or military. The following account of such a poisoning incident (narrated in French) was a popular story in Goma in 2017 (narrated by Bose, p.c. 2017; my translation).

> Francis, a young man from the neighborhood, was said to have attended a function with his girlfriend. They were invited to a birthday party. When they arrived there, everything was normal; they cut the cake and drank with others. As the party went on, people started dancing, when Paul, one of the hosts, called Francis. "Francis, I have kept a special wine for you, only for you and your girlfriend. I don't want everyone to drink it. Follow me to the room, and try some." Francis followed Paul. Upon entering, a small amount of wine was left, they drank a bit, after which Paul asked: "How is it? Is it nice? Sweet?" They were enjoying the drink. The party ended and they went back home. Sometime later, Francis started feeling an ache in his stomach, became feverish and then went to hospital for treatment. After the first tests, they said it was typhoid, then malaria. He was given medication but when, after four days, his state had not changed, he went back. Yet, still nothing was found. In the region, there is always an alternative: Francis decided to see a traditional doctor. The healer poured a small amount of water into two halves of a calabash, added two small leaves, and

made Francis spit into the split calabash. When the secret leaves are dipped into water, they turn red. When you visit the traditional doctor, you have to come in the early morning before breakfast. That's what he did. After spitting into the calabash, it is put in the early morning sunshine. If one is poisoned, the water turns dark. The darker the water, the more poison. If it remains red, you are fine. The test was positive, he had been poisoned. Francis was given some leaves to brew for four days to one week. Alternatively, when having swallowed strong poison, he could have chosen to take a strong powder to make him vomit and cause diarrhea. After one or two weeks, he was back, they tested him again, he was cured from the *karuho* he had been given.[5]

While some of the stories are purely fictional, others are based on true incidents. The taboo character of poisoning narratives becomes further evident in Goma's bars, restaurants and nightclubs, where food and drinks are served. In order to avoid all suspicions that a drink may contain poison targeting a specific customer, customers' complaints about a drink having been potentially already opened are always taken seriously, and drinks are quickly replaced. When attending functions, guests very often wait for their hosts to publicly try the food (in a symbolic act of showing that eating is safe), a practice that was described by one interlocutor as a representation of "no secrets, it is supposed to be made public" (A.M., 2017). Likewise, gifts are nearly always offered unwrapped, so that everybody can see what has been brought to a public function.

Speakers of Kivu Swahili explained that there are several kinds of poison which can be mixed into one's food, with each carrying a different label: While the general *karuho* is said to affect the victim within a short time and can eventually be lethal, the poison labeled *twivanire* (Kinyarwanda, lit. 'let us stay with you') is understood to work more insidiously and to affect the body slowly. At first its symptoms are mainly heavy headaches, whereas it can – when not treated properly – also lead to one's death. In contrast, *gutongera* (lit. 'speak strange words about it') constitutes a kind of poison that works on the basis of spells, e.g. when two people share a plate but the poison will finally only affect the addressee. A speaker explained this as:

> We can share the same plate, or drinks, but I can say 'let this poison only get Joseph!' Even when we are sharing with Joseph, since it's specifically for Joseph, it won't harm me or anyone else. The only thing it can do [to others] is: a little rush, two or three days, then it goes, or a slight food poisoning.

3. Poisonous words: Linguistic strategies of avoidance and indirect threats

The 'poisoning register' in Kivu Swahili, apart from saving a speaker's negative face and reducing the risk of face-threatening acts, fulfills a second major function: Euphemistic terms can be used in order to threaten another

[5] One of the reviewers expressed his/her astonishment about the direct mentioning of the taboo term *karuho* in this narrative. This can be explained with the fact that even though stories of that type are more widespread nowadays, they can only be shared among friends or family members who trust each other. In these cases, also taboo terms may eventually be uttered. In public speeches or in front of broader audiences, such a narrative would not be shared.

person or to exert negative pressure, which can often result in somebody's sickness, or even death. "Poisoned language", i.e. speaking in concealed terms about *karuho* that necessarily leads to the targeted person taking notice, constitutes a form of poison that does not rely on actual toxic mixtures, and can neither be tasted, evidenced nor entirely cured. The flexible boundary between actual substances, i.e. poisoning somebody's drink, and metalinguistic acts, i.e. speaking about poisoning as a threat, turns the use of the avoidance register into a powerful tool of social control and intimidation.

Due to reasons of trust and in-group security, metaphorical and euphemistic speech is mostly held in the speakers' local languages, such as Kinyabwisha, Kinande or Kihavu. However, whenever conversational partners do not share the same ethnolinguistic background, the metaphors are translated into Kivu Swahili; the most widespread lingua franca. The discrepancy between secret whispers, spoken in local languages that are less likely to be understood, and public references, revealed in Kiswahili, which is understood by everybody, addresses what Storch (2011: 9) calls a "huge and powerful secret dramatization". The basis of a taboo's power is also in the requirement for brief, limited exposure and revelation in order to show its enormous strength.

Building on Taussig's (1999) "public secret" concept (initially found in Benjamin's work), Storch (2011) further states that special vocabularies and secret terms etc. often enter "ordinary language"; as is also the case with the eastern Congolese discourse surrounding poison. Firstly, highly tabooed, negative topics in society find constant mentioning in narratives, stories and songs as a semi-secret form of "Chinese Whispers". On the other hand, in order to deal with horror and devastating effects, the topic is discussed as a strategy of control, while conversely simultaneously being employed as "verbal poison" and powerful threats.

The euphemistic strategies, which are supposed to (partly) conceal the act of poisoning, often deal with the preparations that are undertaken before somebody is targeted; the fact that someone was already 'calculated' (in a plan, ex. 1); that (s)he is under surveillance (2); that the elders have already been contacted (3); or that something has already been done (4). While example (4) serves largely as a euphemistic term of avoidance, examples (1) and (2) are equally commonly used as threats; for instance when somebody is addressed with the words *balishakucalculé!* ('they have already planned you in').[6] While some of the verbal references to poison(ing practices) as listed below seem to be very face-threatening and reveal a high degree of positive politeness, they still help to save interactants' group face due to the fact that the discourse around poisonous substance is, at least partially, concealed (through the use of euphemisms or based on synonyms).

[6] As stated by various interlocutors, in some cases verbal threats do not even have to be as specific as shown in the listed examples; someone's accent alone may even spread fear. Respondents explained that utterances with a Lingala accent would not be perceived as dangerous, while a Kinyarwanda accent, replacing [l] in Kiswahili with the tap [ɾ] and a specific intonation, could even cause an addressee to leave his/her home as a precautionary measure. Poisoning somebody is often understood as a very "Rwandan practice", thus a realization of Kivu Swahili with emblematic phonological features from Kinyarwanda can increase the listener's fear of being potentially targeted.

(1) *ule balishamucalculé zamani*

u-le ba-lisha-mu-calculé zamani

PP1-DEM2 SC2-PRF-OC1-calculate long.ago

'for long they have planned him/her in (for poison)'

(2) *batamuangaliliya balishamuraisonné*

ba-ta-mu-angaliy-i-a ba-lisha-mu-raisonné

SC2-FUT-OC1-look-APPL-FV SC2-PRF-OC1-reason

'(s)he will be under surveillance, they have already planned to poison him/her'

(3) *balishamuendeya ku bazee*

ba-lisha-mu-end-e-a ku ba-zee

SC2-PRF-OC1-go-APPL-FV LOC NP2-elder

'they have already gone to the elders for him/her'

(4) *balimufanyiya*

ba-li-mu-fany-i-a

SC2-PST-OC1-do-APPL-FV

'they did it to her/him' (i.e. '(s)he was poisoned')

The euphemistic (or threatening) strategies of "public secrets" are also based on other semantic fields, for example a relation to medicine. In these cases, poison can be referred to as 'sweet medicine' (ex. 5), 'vitamine' or 'vitamine k(aruho)' (6-7). All of these terms belong to the 'poisoning register':

(5) *balimupa dawa ya buroho*

ba-li-mu-p-a dawa i-a bu-roho

SC2-PST-OC1-give-FV [NP9]medicine PP9-CONN NP14-candy

'they gave him/her sweet medicine'

(6) *ule voisin wetu balimupa kavitamine*

u-le	voisin	u-etu	ba-li-mu-p-a	ka-vitamine
PP1-DEM2	[NP1a]neighbor	PP1-POSS1PL	SC2-PST-OC1-give-FV	NP12-vitamin

'they gave our neighbor a bit of vitamin/some vitamin'

(7) *balishamupa vitamine k*

ba-lisha-mu-p-a	vitamine k
SC2-PRF-OC1-give-FV	[NP9]vitamin.k[aruho]

'they have already given him/her vitamin K (karuho)'

Other semantic strategies of (partial) concealment and avoidance are achieved through food metaphors. This is not surprising, due to the fact that *karuho* is commonly mixed into one's drink or plate of food. Speakers of Kivu Swahili are very acquainted with the metaphors of 'turning the plate around' (ex. 8), 'make somebody lick something' (9), 'giving somebody flour' (10) or 'leaves' (11); the latter having a special connotative relation to the healers' practices of indicating toxicity with the help of specific (secret) leaves.

(8) *balimugeuziya saani*

ba-li-mu-geuz-i-a	saani
SC2-PST-OC1-turn-APPL-FV	[NP9]plate

'they turned the plate around for him/her'

(9) *balimulambulisha*

ba-li-mu-lambul-ish-a

SC2-PST-OC1-lick-CAUS-FV

'they made him/her lick (something)'

(10) *balishamupa bunga*

ba-lisha-mu-p-a	bunga
SC2-PRF-OC1-give-FV	[NP9]flour

'they have already given him/her flour'

(11) *balimupatiya mayani*

ba-li-mu-patiy-a ma-yani

SC2-PST-OC1-give-FV NP6-leaf

'they gave him/her leaves'

The last set of common metaphors make use of non-edible and often harmful concepts to which the poison is compared, including 'that which is not eaten' (12), 'insecticide' (13), 'gum' (14), or a 'thorn' (15).

(12) *balimupatiya byenye habimezekake*

ba-li-mu-patiy-a bi-enye ha-bi-mez-ek-ak-e

SC2-PST-OC1-give-FV PP8-REL NEG-SC8-swallow-STAT-IPFV-NEG

'they gave him/her what is not to be swallowed'

(13) *balishamupa tiyoda*

ba-lisha-mu-p-a tiyoda

SC2-PRF-OC1-give-FV [NP9]insecticide

'they gave him/her insecticide'

(14) *alishakula caoutchouc*

a-lisha-kul-a caoutchouc

SC1-PRF-eat-FV [NP9]rubber

'they made him/her eat rubber/gum'

(15) *alishameza mwiba*

a-lisha-mez-a mw-iba

SC1-PRF-swallow-FV NP3-thorn

'(s)he has swallowed a thorn'

In all of the above-mentioned examples, the "impersonal" third person plural *ba-* (a common form in Bantu languages, see for instance Watters 2003: 252 for Grassfields Bantu) is used in order

to avoid mentioning a perpetrator (agent) of the action in question. Fleisch (2005: 108) explains this as "alternative passive which is based on a generalized subject construction involving the third person plural marker" and as a "supposedly more recent passive strategy" than morphological passive markers, giving examples from Cilubà. It can be assumed that this periphrastic structure occurs more often in morphologically simplified language varieties: In periphery Kiswahili dialects, this strategy is more frequently used by speakers than the morphological passive, while ECS makes regular use of the passive voice. Furthermore, neighboring contact languages that have undergone processes of pidginization, such as Lingala and Kituba, also reveal the possibilities of this passive strategy.

Interestingly, all euphemisms lack the use of the common Kiswahili hear-say marker *ati*, which is generally placed sentence-initially when marking the information as a hear-say (see Yahya-Othman 1994), or (secondary) when marking a lack of reliability or hedging. I would argue that the indication of a speaker's involvement in the event, even as a listener or observer (as in *ati alimesha karuho* meaning 'I heard (s)he swallowed poison'), already suffices to put him/her in danger. The use of a hear-say marker intertwines a person to some extent in the taboo(ed) practices such as poisoning.[7] The omission of *ati*, achieved through the use of a third person plural, eradicates the speaker's positionality whether (s)he assumes that somebody has been poisoned or whether (s)he has heard/seen this, in the sense of using *ati* as an evidential. It may thus only be used in cases of quoted or reported speech, when it is absolutely clear that the hear-say assumption is based on other people's judgment and is not grounded on the speaker's opinion.

While there is a wide range of lexical strategies used to avoid the danger or stigmatization of directly addressing a topic and, at the same time, exert destructive power, there are no specific morphological means through which the language is manipulated. While the 'poisoning register' is based on x-phemistic metaphors, another common strategy is code-switching; which is used in order to turn a "public secret" into something less clear, more obscure and to limit the circle of those who possibly understand the uttered statement. In example (16), the speaker intertwines Kiswahili, French and Kinande. The essential statement, 'they gave it to him', is held in Kinande, which makes it clear to the listeners that the given object was actually poison. This highlights how a change of language can determine the delicate meaning of the utterance.[8] In example (17), Lingala and French are intertwined in a Kiswahili structure. The term *ngangakisi* is often used in the Kivus as a broad term for a 'healer' (Lingala) and does not differentiate, as in the finer defined Kiswahili equivalents, between *mulozi* ('good healer') and *mufumu* ('bad sorcerer'): It may therefore be understood as a more general term.

[7] This may require an additional explanation: The use of *ati* always indicates a certain – even minimal – involvement of the speaker in the process of judging whether poison was actually used or not, which is to be avoided by all means as (s)he might otherwise be accused as preparer of poison him/herself.

[8] This sentence is taken from a conversation between four speakers of Kivu Swahili, among them two of whom also spoke Kinande. In the conversation, an older speaker switched from Kivu Swahili to Kinande when he was asked to list synonyms for poison, whereafter he first hesitated and then uttered the presented example.

(16) *hm iko simple, ile... umuntu bamuhére basi*

hm	i-ko	simple	i-le...	u-mu-ntu	ba-mu-p-er-e	basi
INTERJEC	SC9-COP	easy	PP9-DEM2	AUG-NP1-person	SC2-OC1-give-APPL-SUBJ	then

'well it's easy, that... they give a person [something] and that's it'

(17) *ngangakisi alimusauvé*

ngangakisi	a-li-mu-sauvé
[NP1a]healer	SC1-PST-OC1-save

'the healer saved him/her (from being poisoned)'

4. On language, poison and witchcraft: Intertwined dimensions

While poisoning through the use of a specific toxic substance causes, once swallowed, specific negative reactions in the human body, witchcraft beliefs (*bulozi* or *madawa* in Kivu Swahili) are often understood from a psychological and/or religious-mythical perspective; at least according to Western thought, they are separated from physical substance and the body. In Goma, however, both concepts (poison and witchcraft) are neatly intertwined, and often symbiotically interact in poisoning and healing practices.

With a focus on language and poisoning practices in Buganda, where women have a certain control over men by using "ambiguous" ingredients when preparing meals, Storch (2011: 171) argues that "witchcraft and real toxic substances are not separated [which] is partly expressed in the strong accentuation of mimetic terms for magic and poisonous ingredients". Also Trovalla (2016), in her work on urban Nigeria, argues that there is no clear differentiation between poison as a harmful substance and as a spell or talisman: It is spiritually working and, as such, the way in which it is administered is not the crucial aspect. She states that the central characteristic is "its obscurity – how its maker, path, and presence were veiled" (p. 182-183), explaining that one only knows that a meal was poisoned at the moment that (s)he feels sick. She compares the "brute presence of the other" during an assault with a knife, to the "striking absence of the other" in poisoning, concluding that "through its ability to move beyond the physical limitations of the other, poison brought an absent to a presence" (ibid.). The fear of *karuho* as a pervasive phenomenon in eastern DR Congo can therefore be explained with its absent other, its invisible power and its potentially ubiquitous after-effects which vaguely hint at poison; stomachache, organ failure, or sudden death. Ramsay (2016: 115) summarizes this insecure fear of the absent in his paper on Congolese refugees with the statement "[w]e could not eat, we could not sleep. The

poison was there. It could not be fixed. The poison was stuck in us" (Ramsay 2016: 115).

The close interrelationship between poison and witchcraft also becomes evident in the listed effects of *karuho* poisoning, which are not all biochemical reactions but also affect the poisoned person's psyche; causing behavior change, depression and neurological changes in general (Kyolo et al. 2018). The close connection between the spiritual world (of being cursed, or bewitched) and substance poisoning is "chillingly concrete", as observed by Comaroff & Comaroff (1993: xxvii), who explore the roots of witchcraft in the real world. When individuals are bewitched, verbal curses combine their role with concrete items belonging to the person. Photographs are an especially common link through which someone can be affected by witchcraft in the city of Goma (as stated by my interlocutors), especially in combination with somebody's name. One's name can be regarded as being "linked to the person, according to the ancestral code", as explained by one interview partner (P.B.B., 2017). Using a photograph and the depicted person's name in a ceremony can either heal a person's sickness, when used by a *mulozi*, or can cause bodily impairment and physical problems, when misused by a *mufumu*.[9] The entanglement of concrete possessions and the possessors' bodies is also expressed by Douglas (1984[1966]: 89), who states that "[p]hysical forces are thought of as interwoven with the lives of persons" and stresses that "[t]hings are not completely distinguished from persons and persons are not completely distinguished from their external environment". One of my main interlocutors explained, in regard to the power transmitted through words and the diffuse boundary between language and witchcraft, that words can exert at least as much negative power as a physical poison:

> Culture can be poison, it can bring curses to us, good luck, bad luck. In ethnic groups, paternal aunties have strong power in their nephews' lives. You hurt her, she will tell you "you will die without having children". You can have treatment but it won't work. Only if you bring some cows, goats, and ask for forgiveness, and she has to call back and say something opposite ("now you have the power to produce [children]!"), it is transmitted like that. Saying words can be very effective. (P.B.B., 2017)

Spells that circle around witchcraft often make use of the metaphor of "crossing waters" (i.e. Lake Kivu) or "going to the island of Ijwi" (examples 18-19). This island is inhabited by ethnic Bahavu who are said to have expertise in the use of witchcraft; thus, crossing Lake Kivu can be understood as consulting Havu witchdoctors who can prepare evil spells for those who intend to bewitch their adversaries. While the island is fairly inaccessible, with only one regular ferry stopping there between the major cities of Goma and Bukavu, people mainly visit the place in order to obtain spiritual advice.

[9] As to my knowledge, the photographs are not manipulated, burnt nor pierced, as this is the case for instance in some Australian Aboriginal communities. I am grateful to one reviewer's critical question.

(18) *ndakuenda Ijwi*

ni-ta-kuend-a Ijwi

SC_{1SG}-FUT -go-FV I.

'I am going to bewitch you (lit. 'I will go to Ijwi')

(19) *ndakuvukiya mayi*

ni-ta-ku-vuk-i-a ma-ayi

SC_{1SG}-FUT-OC_{2SG}-CROSS-APPL-FV NP_6-water

'I am going to cross water for you / bewitch you'

In witchcraft, around two or three days after the addressee gets to know about the spell that is intended to hit him/her, the person is said to show the first symptoms. In one narrated example, the symptoms began with a slight stomachache and then worsened; a process which was also said to have occurred when a person did not witness the spell him/herself, but was told by a third party that a spell had been prepared to hit him/her. Due to the uncontrollable power of words, witchcraft is considered to be more powerful than poison in eastern DR Congo. While poison strictly depends upon the effects of the mix of ingredients and can thereafter be commonly treated by a traditional healer, a bewitched person cannot be easily cured. Furthermore, *karuho* is often understood to cause a range of predictable effects based on the toxic components that are used; in contrary, spells or curses are more diverse and contain the possibility to cause a wide range of negative effects. Finally, speakers stressed the ambiguity of such symptoms as the stomachache felt by the addressee of an evil spell; which can have a natural cause, or be related to a witchdoctor's curse prepared on the island of Ijwi. This further builds the fear surrounding spells and the awareness that witchcraft is the source of one's health problem may come too late if the person's state has already begun to worsen.

5. Concluding thoughts

Poisoning constitutes a powerful practice in the eastern parts of the DR Congo, as does the language relating to these taboo practices. As has been shown, the increased use of *karuho* in the conflict-affected Kivu provinces has led to a broad range of euphemistic terms, which are either used in order to warn somebody, to threaten an interlocutor, or as a strategy of concealment. The taboo surrounding poisoning in Kivu Swahili leads to the use of euphemisms in often very vague discussions of the topic. This is not only to prevent the speakers' face-loss, but also due to the serious and constant fear of being affected by toxic substances. Speakers of Kivu Swahili usually stress that words exert positive and negative power, and can cause harm when used by a practitioner of witchcraft. These are either abstract threats (ex. 1-4), or specific references to witchcraft ("crossing waters", see ex. 18-19). Altogether, the discussed examples show how neatly witchcraft and toxic sub-

stance are interconnected, which also becomes evident through the polysemous patterns of numerous local languages. One example is *erilóga*, in Kinande, which refers to both toxic substances used against people and to witchcraft (Kavutirwaki & Mukama 2012: 85). The 'poisoning register' can be partly understood as the unveiling of a "public secret": While direct mentions of *karuho* are socially unacceptable, inhabitants of Goma frequently share stories and rumors about perpetrators, victims, toxic ingredients and new lethal mixtures. In further linguistic anthropological studies, the examination of poison in discourse should preferably be extended to the neighboring nations: Rwanda and Burundi.

List of abbreviations

1SG	first singular
APPL	applicative
AUG	augment
CAUS	causative
COP	copula
DEM	demonstrative
ECS	East Coast Swahili
FUT	future tense
FV	final vowel
INTERJEC	interjection
IPFV	imperfective
NEG	negation
NP_1	noun class prefix 1
OC	object concord
PP	pronominal prefix
PRF	perfect aspect
PST	past tense
REL	relative
SC	subject concord
STAT	stative
SUBJ	subjunctive

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