



## Capturing the informal at the heart of the state: A methodological trajectory of qualitative research on the civil registry in Kinshasa

Eugène Ngabu Mvudi<sup>1</sup>, Raoul Kienge -Kienge Intudi<sup>2</sup>, Joël Nzampungu Imbole<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Lawyer and Learner in criminology, peace and conflict management, University of Kinshasa

<sup>2</sup>Doctor of Criminology and Ordinary Professor, Raoul Kienge-Kienge is Director of the school of Criminology at the University of Kinshasa

<sup>3</sup>Doctor in communication and PhD student in criminology, Joël NZAMPUNGU is a professor-researcher at the school of criminology of the University of Kinshasa

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**ABSTRACT:** This article analyzes the methodological trajectory of a qualitative research study dedicated to the functioning of the civil registry in Kinshasa. The study examines the conditions of data production and the strategic choices that made it possible to capture administrative practices in their daily "thickness."

### Corresponding Author

Eugène Ngabu Mvudi

The approach is based on a rigorous triangulation: participant observation at the heart of the offices, semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, and an in-depth documentary analysis. This prolonged immersion helped unveil the interactions between agents and users of Civil Registry of the City of Kinshasa", as well as the practical logics that structure the "real bureaucracy" beyond official organizational charts. The article demonstrates that this methodological framework is essential for documenting the gap between legal norms and effective practices. By directly addressing the ethical challenges of field access and the management of proximity with respondents, this reflection contributes to the sociology of public action and proposes survey tools adapted to African administrative contexts.

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### INTRODUCTION

The study of public administrations in African contexts has long focused on the analysis of legal frameworks, institutional reforms and public policies. If these approaches have allowed a better understanding of the formal orientations of public action, they make it more difficult to grasp the concrete practices that structure the daily functioning of administrative services and the interactions between agents and users. However, it is often at this level, that of ordinary practices and counter relations, that the effective modalities of access to rights and the forms of experience of the State by citizens are at stake. In this perspective, qualitative methods, and in particular participant observation and semi-structured interviews, are privileged tools to apprehend administrations "from below", starting from concrete situations and daily interactions. These approaches make it possible to analyze not only the formal rules, but also the practical arrangements, organizational constraints and social logics that guide the action of agents and users. The civil status service is particularly relevant for this type of analysis. Central institution in the production of legal identity and access to many rights, civil status is also a place of intense interaction between the administration and the population. The procedures that take place there, whether it is a matter of registration of births, marriages, deaths or the issuance of documents, involve legal standards, administrative practices and strategies of actors which do not always coincide. It is in this perspective that we present our field research experience on the interactions between agents and users within the civil status service in the city of Kinshasa. This contribution is part of the efforts made by the school of criminology of the University of Kinshasa to develop empirical studies that reflect situations of social exclusion or marginality experienced by the populations of the Democratic Republic of Congo. At the same time, as Kienge -Kienge (2008) says, "these studies are also supposed to extend to the management practices of these situations by certain public services, notably the police, justice, civil status, etc.". This survey is based on a field immersion within a municipal administration, combined with interviews with agents and users of

the civil status service, as well as a documentary analysis. The objective of this article is not to present the empirical results of this research, but to explain the methodological choices that allowed for the production of data and the analysis of observed practices. By reporting on the conditions of access to the field, the methods for conducting interviews, the use of participant observation and the use of source triangulation, it is a question of contributing to a more general reflection on survey methods adapted to the study of public administrations in African contexts. Such a reflection appears all the more necessary as empirical research based on prolonged immersion in administrative services remains relatively scarce in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, particularly due to difficulties in accessing institutions, the sensitivity of certain information and the ethical constraints specific to this type of terrain. Sharing methodological experience is therefore a way of contributing to the consolidation of qualitative research practices and facilitating the conduct of future surveys. Our reflection revolves around three major axes. The first is devoted to the construction of the research object, a pivotal stage thought as a moment of epistemological rupture necessary for scientific distancing. The second part presents the empirical deployment of the study, detailing the implementation of our methodological protocol in the Kinshasa field. Finally, the third part analyzes the ethical considerations as well as the inherent limits of this investigation. By way of opening, the conclusion discusses the methodological contributions of this field experience and outlines the prospects for scientific valorization of our results.

## **1. THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE RESEARCH OBJECT AS A MOMENT OF EPISTEMOLOGICAL RUPTURE**

This section revolves around four analytical axes: it examines, first of all, the methods for managing the tensions inherent in distancing efforts. She then exposes the epistemological rupture made with previous research, emphasizing the imperative to reinscribe the object of study in its historical and sociopolitical depth. Finally, this point aims to justify the choice of a criminological reading grid able to capture the complexity of the observed dynamics.

### **1.1. Management of tensions related to the distancing effort**

This research is located at the confluence of multiple tensions, imposing a triple effort of distancing: during the construction of the object, during the collection of data and during their analysis. In the first place, particular vigilance has been given to distancing from our own subjectivity. Civil society activists having worked for a long time on the issues of civil status, it was necessary to neutralize the notions to stabilize a researcher's posture. To this tension was added that of interdisciplinarity, requiring a coherent articulation between political science, sociology and criminology. Finally, the transition from Lingala to French raised significant conceptual translation issues, language being the first vector of observed social reality.

#### **1.1.1. The deconstruction of preconstructed knowledge**

The construction of our object required a break, both with common opinion and with pre-established scientific knowledge. If, in contemporary states, civil status is a structuring governance mechanism that produces legal existence and organizes the readability of the population, the reality of the city of Kinshasa reveals a structural paradox. On one hand, civil status is legally central (pivot of nationality, schooling and mobility); on the other hand, it is socially peripheral. A significant segment of the population is permanently evolving outside the administrative registers without this triggering any criminal-law reaction. This service is not limited to a technical function: it constitutes an area of selection and standardization where delays, informal demands and the use of intermediaries redefine social trajectories and civic inclusion.

#### **1.1.2. Towards a break with criminal morality**

In the African scientific landscape, civil status remains a marginal object of criminology. Dominant analyses often confine themselves to three registers: the deficit of registration, institutional weakness, or corruptive practices perceived as individual deviance. Although useful, these approaches prove to be limited because they tend to moralize practices. By freezing the agents in the figure of the "corrupt" and the users in that of the "victim", they obscure the production structures of these behaviors.

Our work is therefore part of an epistemological and ethical vigilance (Kienge-Kienge, 2008), aiming to eliminate these normative biases. Our field observations demonstrate that so-called "corruptive" behaviors are, in reality, embedded in the routine functioning of the administration. The heart of the problem is not so much the transgression of the rule as the personalization of administrative power. Access to the law is transformed into an interpersonal relationship and illegality, far from being a rupture, becomes a routine mode of operation. From then on, we operated an analytical shift: abandoning moral judgment to question the real functioning of the service and the lived experience of the users.

#### **1.1.2. The break with previous African research**

Although the literature devoted to civil status is quantitatively abundant, it remains largely dependent on normative, legal, historical or institutional approaches, focused either on the exegesis of official texts, or on the pathology of the system. This work focuses primarily on the analysis of what civil status should be (the ideal model), what it has been (the historical genesis) or its failures (the registration deficit).

On the other hand, this literature abandons the black box of ordinary functioning: the daily reality of service as it is shaped by agents and endured by users in the Kinshasa space. Our research marks a break with this tradition by favoring an empirical and comprehensive approach, centered on the «practical standards», the logics of actors and lived experiences. The challenge is no longer to evaluate the administration in terms of abstract compliance, but to decipher how it operates under constraints, how it

generates differentiated modes of access to legal identity, and through which mechanisms agents and users negotiate, from day to day, the distance between the official prescription and the actual practice.

### 1.1.3. Contextualization of the study object

The historical and sociopolitical context of our subject allowed us, by relying on the sociology of the State in Africa, to distance ourselves from the theories of the failing «institutional graft». The thesis of the "imported state" (Poncelet, 2008) posits that the inefficiency of civil status would result from the artificial character of institutions transposed from colonial Europe to African social structures devoid of bureaucratic anchorage. This perspective, which has long irrigated the evaluation standards of international institutions, projects a deficit vision of Africa, essentialising its institutions as permanent failures.

In response to this normative paradigm, we are part of the hybridity paradigm (Bayart, 2019), which apprehends the African state as a dynamic construction where formal norms and local practices intersect and recombine. In this perspective, the effectiveness of the State is no longer measured by its capacity for institutional mimicry alone, but by its ability to negotiate the social order through networks, clientelism and practical arrangements. The contribution of this paradigm is twofold for our research:

1. It highlights the plasticity and resilience of the Congolese State, capable of functioning despite the failure of the texts.
2. It legitimizes a micro-analysis of real governance, shifting the focus from legislative texts to the concrete practices of civil registry offices.

### 1.1.4. Registration of research in criminology

Research in criminology is inevitably imbedded with the contributions of other disciplines in the humanities (Pires, 1995: 58). For Alvaro Pires, "the criminologist must not lock himself in artificial disciplinary barriers; the essential thing lies in the theoretical interest of objects for the activity of knowledge and the elucidation of the 'criminal question' in the broad sense."

In this perspective, criminology identifies two major objects: situations-problems and social control. «The situation-problem refers to a configuration experienced or perceived by at least one actor as unacceptable, negative or undesirable» (Pires, 1995: 62-63). Social control, on the other hand, "represents the social reaction or management modality of these situations. It is a form of societal governance encompassing the mechanisms, devices, and institutions put in place to regulate social problems" (Kienge-Kienge, 2022). From then on, civil status is analyzed as a non-penal mode of social control. In line with work describing regulatory mechanisms beyond the strict criminal field, civil status does not "punish", but it organizes and prioritizes. By producing legal identities, it conditions access to fundamental rights (education, health, voting, etc.) and, through the effect of a mirror, makes invisible those who escape registration. It constitutes a mode of state control based on legal and discursive instruments. However, if the penal system displays a certain procedural coherence, the civil status in Kinshasa reveals a fragmented system, where the absence of bureaucratic synergy gives way to contradictory local logics.

### 1.1.5. The break through the choice of a relevant criminological reading grid

To grasp this complexity, we mobilize a double reading grid: the strategic analysis of Crozier and Friedberg and the approach by practical standards of Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan.

#### 1.1.5.1. Civil status as a system of concrete action

By adopting strategic analysis, we consider the civil status service not as a rigid bureaucratic machine, but as a concrete system of action. The actors, endowed with margins of freedom, interpret and negotiate the rules according to their interests (Crozier & Friedberg, 1977). Here, power is born from mastering areas of uncertainty. In Kinshasa, faced with the shortage of resources and the inadequacy of texts, agents cannot mechanically apply the official standard; they are forced to prioritize and adapt their actions to maintain a minimum continuity of service. As Durand (1990) points out, "the organization is a construct of collective action that holds through local compromises rather than strict obedience."

#### 1.1.5.2. The institutionalization of practical standards

Where strategic analysis sheds light on power games, Olivier de Sardan helps understand how these strategies crystallize into practical norms, shared informal regularities that guide daily behaviors (2008). These norms are not simple transgressions, but pragmatic responses to a context of institutional deficiency. This approach allowed us to integrate three essential dimensions:

1. *Co-production of the service*: Users are not passive victims; they are co-producers of practical standards. They anticipate the networks to be mobilized and the informal costs to be accepted to obtain their actions. The experience of civil status becomes a social test where criticism of the State coexists with forced participation.
2. *The identity conflict of agents*: In a system governed by informality, the civil status agent navigates between his function as a public servant and his role as an "arranger". He develops moral justifications to make his practices acceptable in his professional world.
3. *The production of unequal identities*: Access to legal identity is neither automatic nor universal. It is dependent on the ability of individuals to navigate these practical standards. This system favours users with social or economic capital, while the most vulnerable risk legal invisibility.

## 2. THE IMPLEMENTATION OF FIELD WORK IN KINSHASA

### 2.1. Choice of qualitative and inductive approach

As part of our research, the qualitative and inductive approach was chosen for its relevance. Indeed, it allowed us to understand how the actors, that is to say the agents of the civil status service and the users, interpret and negotiate the rules, and what practices concretely influence the functioning of the service. It was a matter for us to give voice to the less visible people. For Paillé & Mucchielli (2016: 13), "qualitative research involves personal contact with the subjects of the research, mainly through interviews and by observing practices in the very environments where the actors evolve." The research is said to be qualitative mainly in two senses. First, in the sense that the instruments and methods used are designed to collect and analyze qualitative data, i.e. extract meaning rather than transform it into a percentage or statistics. In a second sense, qualitative research means that the entire process is carried out in a natural way without sophisticated devices or artificial scenarios, according to a logic close to people, their actions and their testimonies in a logic of proximity. It is in this perspective that Paillé & Mucchielli (2016) believe that "the qualitative allows access to meaning and practices". It also helps to shed light on the meanings, justifications and practical standards of actors in their real context, which the quantitative does not know how to capture correctly.

### 2.2. Choice of sites and actors: from planning to saturation

Initially, our protocol provided for a sample of eight communes, structured around a logic of spatial representativeness: the selection of two communes per district was intended to ensure territorial and institutional diversity representative of the Congolese capital. The selection criteria were based on population density, accessibility and service attendance. Among these sites, a commune has been the subject of an in-depth ethnographic immersion lasting two months, allowing us to grasp the administrative routines in their continuity. However, in keeping with the flexibility inherent in qualitative approaches, our sample has evolved over time. We finally limited the conduct of interviews with agents to four municipalities, due to one municipality per district. This readjustment should not be interpreted as a reduction in the ambition of the study, but as a reasoned methodological choice dictated by the principle of empirical saturation. At this stage of the survey, the redundancy of discourse and the recurrence of observed practices indicated that the inclusion of additional sites would not bring significant analytical added value, as the data tended to stabilize.

### 2.3. Reasoned sampling: a diversification of trajectories

Regarding the users, we have opted for a reasoned (or intentional) sampling. The civil status of Kinshasa has been apprehended not as a static structure, but as a space of interactions where users, agents and norms are articulated to produce legal identity. To avoid any homogeneity bias and capture the plurality of citizen trajectories, we have made sure to diversify the profiles of the respondents, ensuring maximum variation in the experiences lived at the counter. The inclusion criteria were based on the existence of direct contact with the civil status service in one of the municipalities studied, for various reasons: obtaining a birth or death certificate, solemnization of a marriage or any other official administrative procedure. The interviews were conducted gradually until reaching a total of 17 users. This volume had not been fixed a priori: it imposed itself over the course of the field, in accordance with the principle of thematic saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This threshold was reached when the new interviews no longer provided original analytical elements. Thus, this number is justified by the qualitative and interpretative nature of the research: our objective was not statistical representativeness, but a detailed understanding of how users interpret and negotiate their relationship with the institution.

### 2.4. The data collection device

Regarding the data collection, semi-structured interviews were combined with open participant observation and documentary analysis. This triangulation scheme aimed to cross-check sources and compare discourses with actual practices.

#### 2.4.1. The maintenance policy: between know-how and interaction

According to Benoît Gauthier (2010: 342), «the semi-structured interview makes explicit the universe of the other through direct and personal contact». For Olivier de Sardan (2008: 54), "it remains the most economical way to access emic representations (the indigenous point of view)." In this research, the interviews constituted the heart of our corpus. They were conducted according to the following axes:

- The oscillation between consultation and experience: Our interlocutors acted alternately as consultants (holders of institutional knowledge on procedures and the Family Code) and as narrators (witnesses of their daily experiences). We were thus able to collect both the formal rules and the stories of personal trajectories.
- Interview as invisible interaction and negotiation: Interview is a social interaction where everyone deploys strategies (Olivier de Sardan, 2008). Agents sometimes sought to present the service in a favourable light, while users justified the use of "unofficial charges" by urgency. These speeches were not perceived as biases, but as data revealing the strategic posture of the actors.
- The strategy of conversation and symbolic realism: To reduce the artificiality of the investigation, we favored a flexible style, close to conversation. By giving a symbolic realism to the statements, that is to say, by taking seriously even contradictory statements, we were able to understand the internal logic of the actors: for example, why an agent justifies a deviation from the rule by the need to keep his office running.

- Recursion and temporality: Maintenance is not a punctual extraction but a recursive process. Several major themes, such as the role of informal intermediaries or the situation of unpaid "new units", gradually emerged, forcing us to reformulate our initial questions. The long-term nature of the survey has made it possible to establish a climate of trust that is essential for addressing the sensitive topics of 'real bureaucracy'.

#### 2.4.2. Participant observation: an immersion at the heart of the «real bureaucracy»

Participant observation constitutes the pillar of our ethnographic immersion. It goes beyond the mere physical presence to become an active method of knowledge production through which the researcher is involved in the daily life of a community to decipher its codes, standards and interactions. In the context of civil status in Kinshasa, this method aimed to capture the 'real work', what the actors actually do as opposed to the 'prescribed work' by the texts (Olivier de Sardan, 2008). The challenge was to document the thickness of routines, local categories and informal arrangements that allow the service to function despite structural precariousness.

##### A. The choice of posture: ethical and strategic transparency

The researcher in an administrative environment is often faced with the dilemma between concealed observation (incognito) and open observation. We have opted for the open posture, which, according to Benoît Gauthier (2010: 320), "has the major advantage of minimizing ethical tensions while allowing greater physical and social mobility." This transparency allowed us to ask systematic and exhaustive questions that the concealment would have made suspicious.

However, this posture requires active neutrality. To ensure the reliability of our data, we have tried to remain outside the power stakes and financial interests of the service, while demonstrating methodological empathy towards our interlocutors. It was about finding the balance between observation (reflexive distance) and participation (social immersion).

##### B. Negotiate access and integrate into the service

Access to public administration in the DRC is never a given; it must be negotiated. The insertion took place in a pyramidal manner: an official presentation by the personnel officer, followed by a pedagogical explanation of the research objectives to the department manager. This phase of 'building trust' was the security lock allowing to open the doors of a service often wary of outside eyes. The integration was facilitated by a "sponsorship" figure: the municipal councillor in charge of civil status. The latter, acting as our main referent, played the role of «facilitator» (gatekeeper). By entrusting us to him, the department manager granted us a de facto legitimacy, allowing smooth circulation between offices.

##### C. Pragmatism and proximity strategies

Kinois terrain, marked by a strong material precariousness, imposes on the researcher a pragmatism of methodological survival (Kienge-Kienge, 2008). We have deployed two strategic levers:

1. The language strategy: The smooth transition from French (the language of law) to Lingala (the language of negotiation and emotion) has made it possible to break down the bureaucratic barrier. Speaking the vernacular language transformed the formal interview into an ordinary conversation, indispensable for capturing the collaboration of agents subject to intense survival constraints.
2. The strategy of shared identity: Proximity crystallized through a professional mirror effect. By revealing our status as a lawyer to the communal councilor (himself a jurist), an intellectual companionship relationship has replaced the investigator/investigated relationship. This complicity between "people of dress" has lifted the last reservations, opening access to confidences about the informal workings of the commune.

This insertion required total time flexibility. Pragmatism is also knowing how to «waste time»: arriving at 8:00 am to observe morning tensions, linger for ritual greetings or wait for a chance encounter. It is in these moments of apparent 'emptiness' that the most revealing interactions take place, such as heated exchanges between agents and disappointed users despite the payment of informal fees.

##### D. The determination of observation posts and data triangulation

To obtain a holistic vision, we circulated between the different segments of the service:

- Birth and death registration: Places of emergency management and legal evidence.
- The wedding service: A space of social visibility where crowds are at their peak and where financial stakes are the most significant.

Observation of the user's journey revealed the hidden face of the administration: extended waiting times, requests for technical explanations and intense negotiations around costs. The days of great affluence (celebrations) were privileged moments to observe the segmentation of the service and the discreet circulation of donations or money («motivation fees»).

##### E. Towards an analysis of capitalization logics

Participant observation has revealed the mechanisms of internal and external capitalization: arbitrary price setting, channels for the redistribution of informal revenues, and the pivotal role of intermediaries "without an office". It also revealed an implicit hierarchy of users: the intervention of authorities or security services guarantees preferential treatment, creating a multi-speed citizenship. Finally, to discipline our subjectivity, we kept a rigorous logbook. This field notebook allowed us to record not only the facts, but also our impressions and the emotions of the actors. This written trace has become the indispensable tool of distancing, transforming the raw material of observation into exploitable scientific data.

### 2.4.3. The literature review

In addition to the primary data collected in situ, this research was based on a rigorous and multidimensional documentary analysis. Far from being a mere preliminary step, this approach was conceived as a permanent support device intended to contextualize the observations and interviews, while reinforcing the scientific validity of the results through a process of triangulation of sources. While the primary empirical materials from interviews with agents and users as well as observations within the municipalities offered us access to the 'real bureaucracy', the secondary data from the documentation have shed light on the structures of the « formal bureaucracy ». The analysis focused on three major documentary areas:

#### A. The institutional and international pole

The analysis focused on the reports and strategic publications of international organizations that play a pivotal role in the regulation and reform of civil registration systems. We particularly examined the work of UNICEF, UNFPA, the International Organization of la Francophonie (OIF) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA). The examination of these documents made it possible to situate the local realities in Kinshasa in a global and comparative framework. These reports have highlighted the crucial issues related to birth registration and child protection, revealing how public policies for identifying people are now central to development agendas. They helped us to understand the normative standards towards which the Congolese State tends, and to identify the performance indicators used to evaluate administrative efficiency at the continental level.

#### B. The legislative and regulatory pole

To grasp the gap between rule and practice, the analysis integrated the national legal framework, in particular the Family Code, the organic decrees governing the functioning of decentralized territorial entities (ETD) and the ministerial circulars relating to the pricing of acts. This work of decoding the official texts served as a normative reference: it allowed to measure with precision the "thickness" of the informal arrangements observed at the counter by systematically confronting them with legal prescriptions.

#### C. The academic and theoretical pole

Finally, a thorough review of the scientific literature was conducted to place the analysis in contemporary debates. We have mobilized articles from peer-reviewed journals, reference works, as well as theses and dissertations dealing with the sociology of administration, the criminology of public action, and the governance of public services in Africa. This research work provided the reading keys necessary to interpret the behaviors observed in the field. The concepts of «practical norms» (Olivier de Sardan), «concrete action system» (Crozier) or «non-penal social control» have allowed to go beyond the descriptive observation to access a comprehensive analysis. They have notably shed light on the survival strategies of agents, the resilience of users in the face of bureaucratic complexity, and the construction of legal identities in a context of institutional precariousness.

Ultimately, the documentary analysis constituted an essential epistemological pivot. It made it possible to compare field data often marked by informality and orality with written normative frameworks and pre-existing scientific analyses. This dialectical confrontation facilitated the transition from raw data to the constructed research object, ensuring a holistic and nuanced understanding of the real functioning of the civil registry service in the city-province of Kinshasa.

## 3. DATA TRIANGULATION: OBSERVATION, INTERVIEWS, AND DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

In order to ensure the internal validity and heuristic depth of our results, this research is structured around a rigorous principle of methodological triangulation. This approach, far from being a simple juxtaposition of techniques, consists in a dynamic crossing of several sources and methods of information collection in order to neutralize the biases inherent in the use of a single tool and to saturate the understanding of the object of study. The heart of our approach consisted in systematically confronting three types of materials: field notes from observation, verbatim records of interviews and data from documentary analysis. This dialectical confrontation has allowed to grasp the functioning of the civil status service in Kinshasa in all its complexity, by putting into tension institutional frameworks, justificatory speeches and daily practices.

### A. The "Say": Representations and logics of actors through interview

The semi-structured interviews, conducted with both civil status agents and users, constituted the gateway to the subjective universe of the actors. They made it possible to gather not only facts, but especially representations and lived experiences.

- For the agents: The interview shed light on the structural constraints (lack of regular salary, lack of work tools) that motivate the use of arrangements.
- For users: It revealed administrative navigation strategies and the feeling of ambivalence towards the institution.

These stories have been fundamental to understand how informal practices are perceived by those who make them live. In the course of the meetings, informality no longer appeared as a simple marginal deviance, but as the very framework of real bureaucracy, a coherent system endowed with its own rules of functioning and legitimation.

### B. The "Do": Unveiling practices through participant observation

The participant observation acted as a critical counterpoint to the collected speeches. It has allowed access to effective practices, which the actors concretely do behind the counter, often masked by the politeness of the interview or the formalism of the texts. This immersion made possible the identification of underground organizational logics: the actual course of marriage procedures, non-verbal interactions during financial negotiations, and the modalities of file processing according to the user's social capital.

Observation has thus revealed arrangements which, although structuring, are never explicitly formulated in organizational charts or official speeches.

### C. The "Duty-to-be": The normative framework through documentary analysis

The documentary analysis, for its part, provided the comparative basis necessary to situate field data in a macro-social and legal framework. The reports of international organizations (UNICEF, OIF) and national legislative texts (Family Code) provided the normative reference. These sources made it possible to compare the observations with international standards and republican obligations in terms of personal identification. Without this documentary pillar, the analysis of gaps between law and practice would have lacked legal precision.

### D. The highlighting of "practical standards"

The strength of triangulation lies in highlighting significant differences between official standards, legitimization discourses and actual practices. The table below summarizes the added value of this crossing:

| Object of Analysis | Documentary Source                       | Interviews (The Saying)                                    | Observation (The Doing)                                         |
|--------------------|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Pricing            | Prices fixed by decree/circular.         | Justification of "motivation fees" as a means of survival. | Direct negotiation of the fee at the counter based on the user. |
| Procedure          | Rigid steps defined by the Family Code.  | Affirmation of compliance with legal procedures.           | Use of informal intermediaries to expedite the process.         |
| Revenue            | Payment to the public/communal treasury. | Discourse on the service's lack of financial resources.    | Immediate sharing of surpluses among the agents present.        |

This methodological device has allowed to document the existence of robust practical standards, such as the principle of tariff negotiation or informal redistribution mechanisms. By crossing these three perspectives, we were able to demonstrate that civil status in Kinshasa operates on a logic of permanent hybridity, where respect for legal forms (the official birth certificate) is obtained through channels that escape traditional accounting and administrative frameworks. This approach reinforces the credibility of our research by offering a true and nuanced picture of the real governance of public services.

## 4. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND LIMITS OF RESEARCH

Immersion within a public administration, place of exercise of state authority and management of sensitive citizen data, imposes absolute ethical rigor. The conduct of this field survey was not limited to simple data collection; it required constant negotiation between the imperatives of research and respect for the integrity of actors and institutions. Respect for the fundamental principles of ethics in social sciences has guided each step of our approach, articulated around three major axes:

- Free and informed consent: Whether it is the civil status agents or the users, no interview was conducted without prior agreement. Each interaction started with a transparent presentation of our academic goals. We have taken care to specify that the data collected was intended exclusively for scientific exploitation, dissociated from any administrative or judicial control.
- Radical anonymization and confidentiality: To avoid any risk of retaliation or professional prejudice (especially for agents reporting informal practices), we have opted for complete anonymization. This protocol does not concern only the patronyms, but extends to the names of the communes studied and to the biographical details that are too specific. In this report, sites are designated by codes and actors by generic functions, ensuring that no statement can be attributed to an identifiable individual.
- The posture of "proximity vigilance": Participant observation inevitably creates familiarity with the respondents. This proximity gave us access to 'off' information, sometimes confidential or compromising. Our ethics as researchers have required us to treat this data with extreme caution, favoring the analysis of systemic logics and organizational mechanisms rather than the questioning of individual responsibilities. The objective being not to denounce, but to understand.

Nevertheless, any qualitative research involves methodological boundaries that need to be clarified to ensure the intellectual honesty of the work. The survey focused on a limited number of Kinshasa municipalities during a defined period. Although we have reached a threshold of thematic saturation, the results cannot be mechanically transposed to the entire Democratic Republic of the Congo. The dynamics of 'informal' can vary according to provincial contexts, local resources and administrative cultures specific to each territorial entity. Furthermore, despite our gradual integration, the presence of a researcher can induce a social desirability bias. Some agents were able, occasionally, to modify their speech or smooth their practices in our presence. However, the duration of our immersion and the multiplication of informal observations have made it possible to mitigate this professional "mask" to reveal the bureaucracy in its routine operation. Finally, as the civil status service is a strategic revenue-generating pole (formal and informal), access to real accounting documents and unofficial revenue registers has remained partial. This shadow zone constitutes a limit in the analysis of the quantification of financial flows. Nevertheless, the triangulation of sources made it possible to compensate for this shortcoming by crossing user testimonies on the prices paid with direct observations of transactions at the counter. Despite these constraints inherent to any complex terrain, the combination of long-term participant

observation, the richness of collected verbatims and the rigor of the documentary analysis gives our results a strong heuristic validity. This methodological device allows us to propose a nuanced and in-depth understanding of the «real bureaucracy» of civil status in Kinshasa, grasped in the permanent duality between its legal frameworks and its daily negotiation practices.

## CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to restore, with a rigorous transparency, the methodological architecture that supported our field investigation on the civil registry service in Kinshasa. By explaining the conditions of production of our data and the singularity of our collection techniques, this research was not limited to a simple technical description; it worked towards the construction of criminal knowledge-sociological rooted in the complex reality of African administrations. The transparency deployed here is not only a guarantee of scientific quality, but an ethical necessity to account for the "real bureaucracy" as it appears in the thickness of daily life in Kinshasa. The primary interest of this reflection lies in demonstrating the heuristic power of participant observation and semi-structured interviews for the study of public institutions in a postcolonial context. While classic institutional analyses are too often confined to the exegesis of normative texts or the processing of statistical data, which sometimes prove disconnected from the realities of the service, the qualitative approach adopted here has made it possible to break this formalism. By immersing ourselves in the offices of the communes, we were able to capture what official documents silence: the strength of daily interactions, the weight of tacit negotiations and the logics of survival or resistance that structure public action. This work proves that to understand the state in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, it is necessary to observe it not only from its legislative summits, but also from its administrative "margins", where the legal identity of the citizen is negotiated day by day. In addition, this article values qualitative research through the systematic use of source triangulation. By crossing the legislative «duty-to-be» (documentary analysis), the «say» of the actors (interviews) and the bureaucratic «do» (observation), we were able to document accurately the seismic discrepancies between official standards and actual practices. This prolonged immersion allowed us to navigate between the methodological challenges inherent in such a field: the complexity of access to administrative services perceived as opaque, the management of emotional proximity with agents in precarious situations, and the analytical processing of sensitive data related to informality and corruptive practices. The methodology presented here does not content itself with overcoming these obstacles; it transforms them into objects of knowledge, considering each difficulty of access or each actor's silence as an indicator of power issues within the institution. On the academic level, this article constitutes a significant contribution to the criminology of public action and the governance of social control systems. By providing empirical insights on survey methods adapted to African public services, it offers an alternative to theoretical frameworks that are sometimes too euro-centric. It proposes a methodological "toolbox" for researchers engaged in the study of public policies and administrative practices in crisis or transition contexts. In the background, this work argues for a criminology that is not limited to the study of crime *stricto sensu*, but extends to the analysis of institutional deviations and normative arrangements that redefine legality within state services. Finally, beyond the academic circle, the methodological reflections and results presented here are of paramount importance for practitioners, policy makers and international partners (UNICEF, UNFPA, OIF). By revealing the concrete conditions for the production of citizen identity in Kinshasa, this article questions the need to develop reforms that are no longer merely "cosmetic" or purely legal. Understanding the logics of internal capitalization and informal revenue sharing mechanisms is an essential prerequisite for any improvement in civil registry services. By making the invisible bureaucratic visible, this research indirectly contributes to reflection on a more transparent local governance, fairer and, above all, closer to the fundamental needs of populations. She recalls that behind every birth certificate, every marriage or every registered death is the recognition of human dignity and the full integration of individuals into the social contract.

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