Congolese Military Cultural Change:

A Necessary Condition For Peaceful Democratic Transition

Mambo Tabu Masinda

Abstract: I postulate in this paper that military culture is a critical factor in explaining the success or failure of peaceful democratic transition. Attention is focused on the Congolese military culture from its inception to the present. The Congolese experience demonstrates that it requires a shift in military culture, from authoritarian and exploitative behaviour to a set of human rights principles, in order to successfully implement peaceful political transition. The conclusion of this paper suggests policies for a peaceful democratic transition.

UniversitéCatholique du Graben

Réublique Déocratique du Congo

Butembo/Nord-Kivu

E-mail: mmasinda@telus.net

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Introduction

Present day Congolese military culture is the result of an accumulated experience of military violence from colonial times to its post-colonial state. During the colonial period, the Congolese colonial army, or the Force Publique, had three missions: to conquer the country, to conscript for economic development, and to forcefully restrain any Congolese resistance[1]. After independence, while under Cold war limitations, Congolese military culture remained the same, however to continue the justification of violence, citizens were labelled communist instead of uncivilised, as they had previously been.

Empirical studies of military culture reveal that dictatorial systems require a shift in military culture in order to successfully embrace democracy and create conditions of peace. In this context, it is necessary to understand the evolution of the Congolese military culture from its inception during the colonial period to its current status in a post-colonial state. In this way, we can better understand why peace and democratic transition will remain elusive for the Democratic Republic of Congo if there is not a fundamental change in military culture.

In this paper I investigate the impact of Congolese military culture on democratic transition and peace building. I state that military culture is a critical factor in explaining the success or the failure of peaceful democratic transition. The ultimate objective here is to identify the Congolese military mentality in order to obtain a better interpretation and identification of barriers and assets to a peaceful political transition. I describe continuity in military culture in colonial and post-colonial states.

Section one briefly presents military mentality in relation to peaceful democratic transition. Section two focuses on the emergence and evolution of Congolese military culture from the colonial to the post-colonial period. Section three concludes by presenting policy implications arising from this study.

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[1] Slade, R. (1960). Belgian Congo. Some Recent Changes. London, New York and Cape Town: Oxford University Press.

I Military Mentality Conversion and Peaceful Democratic Transition

At the end of the Cold War a period of democratic agitation commenced that brought hope for many people in Africa. Dictators were astounded by the popular will for change in daily economic, political and social life. This multiplicity of political transitions provides a new context in which to examine peace-building prospects in Africa.

Most studies conducted on African armed forces focus on military intervention in politics, with an objective of predicting the likelihood that a military will seize state power.[2] Another line of inquiry into African military expenditures has focused on examining military spending impacts on economic development[3]. A further line of investigation has studied the impact of elitist attitudes on political transition, indicating that a better explanation of peace building can be found in a nation's political culture.[4]

Few studies have tried to examine military attitudes toward civilians in relation to peaceful political transition[5]. Indeed, a study on the roots of violence following 102 successions in Africa (from 1963 to 1988), showed that about a third of all successions were regulated[6]. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, military leaders chose to repress ethnic demands in the interests of nation building. In actuality, this military culture of repression has undermined the process of

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[2] Johnson, T. H. , Slater R. and McGowan P. (1984). "Explaining African Military Coups d'Etat, 1960-1982". American Political Science Review, 78: 622-640 and Jackman, R. (1978). "The Predictability of Coups d'état: A Model with African Data". American Political Science Review 72: 1262-1268.

[3] Gymah-Brempong, K. (1989). "Defense Spending and Economic Growth in Sub-Saharan Africa: An Econometric Investigation". Journal of Peace Research 26: 79-90 and Nabe, O. (1983). "Military Expenditures and Industrialization in Africa". Journal of Economic Issues, 18:257-587.

[4] Evans, P. (1995). Embedded Autonomy: States and Industrial Transformation. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Isham, J. and Kaufman, D. (1997). "Civil Liberties, Democracy, and the Performance of Government Projects". The World Bank Economic Review, 11: 219-242; Williame. J. C. (1970). Congo-Kinshasa: General Mobutu and Two Political Generations. In C. E. Welch (ed.). Soldier and State in Africa. A Comparative Analysis of Military Intervention and Political Change. Evanston: Northwestern University Press and Odunsi, B. (1996). "The Impact of Leadership Instability on Democratic Process in Nigeria". Journal of African and Asian Studies, 31: 66-79.

[5] Conteh-Morgan, E. (1994). "The Military and Human Rights in the Post-Cold War Africa". Armed Forces & Society, 21: 69-87.

[6] Gershoni, Y. (1996). "The Changing Pattern of Military Takeovers in Sub-Saharan Africa". Armed Forces and Society, 23: 235-48; Bratton, M. and van de Walle, M. (1997). Democratic Experiments in Africa. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and Anene, J.N. (1995). "Military Coups and Redemocratization in Sub-Saharan Africa". Journal of Third World Studies 12: 181-200.

nation building. The Congolese felt themselves to be unwanted in the nation that Mobutu, the second president of Congo, was aspiring to build[7].

Despite widespread recognition of political elitist culture, little attention has been paid to the relation between military culture and peaceful democratic transition. The concept of military culture, mentality or doctrine is used here to describe a combination of values, customs, traditions, and philosophical underpinnings that provide shared attitudes about role and missions to a military. Broadly, it may be said that it is what soldiers think they represent to society and, accordingly, how they act. Peace building is a voluntary process that aims to create the conditions needed to transform volatile environments into humanistic societies, equipped with ways of dealing with socio-economic realities. Therefore, peace building requires a transformation of military attitudes or mentality to ensure that civilian security, as opposed to human rights abuse, is central in military education.

Bearing the above definitions in mind, why is it important to focus on military culture to effectively understand political transition and the success or failure of peace building? In a study on the impact of culture on economy, North concluded that:

"It is essential to change both the institutions and the belief systems for successful reform since it is the mental models of actors that will shape choices… Informal constraints – norms of behavior, conventions and codes of conduct – are a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for good economic performance…"[8]

Many facts support the idea that armed forces constitute a very strong sub-group in African countries. African soldiers perceive themselves as the only group able to govern, build up a homogeneous society, and create the conditions necessary for a modern society. If military mentality is so important in foreseeing the direction of democratic transition the question that follows is: how does military culture change? As coined by Posen, military culture affects the security of the state that it holds and is also critical in identifying security threats to a state and its allies[9]. Military doctrine, culture or mentality consists of the fundamental principles by which

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[7] Meditz, S. W. and Merrill, T. (1994). Zaire. A Country Study. Washington DC: Library Congress.

[8] North, D. C. (1991). "The New Institutional Economics and Third Word Development", In Harris, J., Hunter J. and Lewis C. M. (eds. 1991), Institutional Economics and Third World Development, London, New York: Routledge.

[9] Posen, B. (1993). The Sources of Military Doctrine. France, Britain, and Germany Between the Two World Wars. London: Cornell University Press.

military forces guide their actions,[10] just as political culture is constituted by attitudes, beliefs and feelings that shape and structure the political process[11].

Empirical studies tend to support the fact that military forces play a critical role in political change and peace building. For example, analysing the cooperation between political and military elites while educating the South African military about the principles of democracy, Nathan demonstrated that the South African military helped to pave the road for democratic transition[12]. In support of this, Gutteridge argued that the South African military has converted its military doctrine from a focus on civilian oppression to one in which integration into civilian society is a primary concern[13]. It was also observed that democratic transition has been successful in Chile since its military and political elites effectively balanced the power between military and civilian institutions[14].

How military culture emerges, evolves, and shifts from banditry and repression to human rights protection is at this point a critical question as we try to foresee the future. Scholars have a propensity to support the inability of military to independently innovate or change its mentality. Change in military culture can only be achieved under external pressure. Arguments used to support this position suggest that armed forces are large, specialised, and hierarchical organisations. Consequently, they look out only for their own interests, seek to maximise their institutional prestige, and seek autonomy from external control[15]. Other scholars claim that change in military mentality is driven from inside the military itself[16]. My opinion is that military cultural change in favour of civilian military control and human rights protection will most likely come from a combination of domestic and international pressure, bearing in mind that in many violent societies, political transition and peace building centre around attitudes, behaviours and

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[10] United States Air Forces (1997). Air Force Basic Doctrine. September 1997, 47, Retrieved from the World Web Site https://www.doctrine.af.mil/Main.asp?. September 2002.

[11] Schemeil. Y (1985)."Les cultures politiques". In Traité de Science Politique. L'action politique. Third edition. Paris: Press Universitaires de France.

[12] Nathan, L. (1996). Civil-Military Relations in the New South Africa. In W. Gutteridge (ed. 1996), South Africa's Defence and Security into the 21st Century. Singapore, Sidney: Dartmouth.

[13] Gutteridge, W. F. (1969). The Military in African Politics. London: Methuen.

[14] Pion-Berlin, D., & Arcenaux, C. (1998). "Tipping the Civil-Military Balance. Institutions and Human Rights Policy in Democratic Argentina and Chile". Comparative Political Studies, 31: 633-661.

[15] Posen, 1993. Op. Cit.

[16] Huntington, S. P. (1969). Soldier and State: Political Order Change in Societies. New Haven: Yale University Press.

actions espoused by elites[17]. At this point, peace building necessitates a deep military cultural shift to the promotion of human rights values and the primacy of civilian rule as opposed to a military culture of banditry and cruelty[18]. Although the debate on the ability of military culture to positively affect the destiny of nations is still divisive, peaceful political transitions around the world strongly support the argument that militaries can effectively play a key role in democratic transition, depending on the degree of the shift in their attitude toward civilians.

II   Congolese Military Culture: Emergence, Evolution and Continuity

Understanding that military history is the principle source of doctrine is enlightening. The Congolese military indoctrination has seen few changes since its inception. It justified violence against the Congolese population based on the assumption that the army's role was to convert uncivilised Africans to European ideals during the colonial era[19]. After independence, violence against civilians was justified as a tool for fighting communism and building up the nation against ethnic particularities[20]. It can be assumed that the Congolese military culture of violence is an intrinsic part of its social fabric[21].

The Congolese army has not been studied in depth because Congolese scholars feared reprisals from the military government, therefore few studies exist to aid in examination of this topic[22]. The Force Publique was created in 1888 by Belgian colonisers in order to conquer the territory, suppress Congolese resistance, and mobilise people for economic development [23]. The importance of the use of force to realise these goals formed the nucleus of the colonial military culture.

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[17] Desch, M. (1995). "What is the Mission of a Democratic Military in the Post-Cold War Era?" In Civil-Military Relations and the Consolidation of Democracy. Washington, D.C.; International Forum for Democratic Studies and the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies and Goldsworthy, D. (1981). "Civilian Control of the Military in Black Africa". African Affairs, 80: 70-81.

[18] Nathan (1996). Op. Cit and Farell (1998). Op. Cit.

[19] Slade (1960). Op. Cit.

[20] Young, C. (1965). Politics in the Congo. Decolonization and Independence. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

[21] Farrell, T. (1998). "Culture and Military Power". Review of International Studies, 24: 407-416.

[22] Schatzberg, M. G. (1988). The Dialectics of Oppression in Zaire. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press; Williame (1970). Op. Cit. and Kisanagani, E. (2000). "Explaining the Rise and the Fall of Military Regimes: Civil-military Relations in the Congo". Armed Forces & Society, 26: 203-227.

[23] Lefever (1970) Op. Cit. and Torimoro (1996). Op. Cit.

Analysing the genesis and the nature of African militaries, William Gutteridge postulated that colonial militaries had been coloured by their system of colonisation[24]. Indeed, as Young noted, the Force Publique was the first avenue to modernity for the Congolese. Society was divided into two classes: soldiers, who espoused modern values, and natives, who were largely seen as uncivilised. Soldiers considered themselves as a separate and distinct elite group, close to the white colonisers, and viewed civilians as savages subject to violence[25]. The Belgian King Leopold II imposed one of the most exploitative and ruthless political-military and economic systems ever seen on the continent[26].

During the first decade of its existence, the Congolese army consisted mostly of mercenaries from East and West Africa. Until 1895, recruitment in Congo was carried out on a voluntary basis. At the beginning of the 20th century, the colonial government resorted to conscription, and asked traditional chiefs to offer their slaves and criminals for military services. After World War I, recruitment targeted the so-called warrior tribesmen such as the Azande, Batetela and Bangala. Unfortunately, this recruitment combined individuals with criminal, slave, and mercenary backgrounds with tribes that valued violence. This could not allow for the sustainability of a human rights based military culture.

In the Belgian colony, Congolese citizens did not possess equal status as their colonisers. Congolese culture was considered pathological by the colonists, and was to be destroyed by any means, including force, if there was any resistance[27]. Congolese were labelled "bashenzi" (monkey) or a "barbarous people" who had to be educated in order to eradicate traditional culture. This formed the fundamental basis of military education. As a consequence, Congolese soldiers acting as policemen employed intimidation, undisguised coercion, and violence to transform the Congolese natives. To illustrate the intensity of violence waged against the population, the Congolese natives referred to Belgian colonizers as "Bula Matare" (breaker of rocks)[28]. The colonial military promoted violence against the population as a method of securing

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[24] Gutteridge, W. (1997). South Africa's Future Defence and Security. Identifying the National Interest. London: Research Institute for the Study of Conflict and Terrorism.

[25] Young (1965). Op. Cit.; Lefever (1970) Op. Cit. and Torimoro (1996). Op. Cit.

[26] Hochschild. A. (1998). King Leopold's Ghost: The Plunder of the Congo and the Twentieth Century's First Great Human Rights Movement. Houghton Mufflin.

[27] Slade (1960). Op. Cit.

[28] Musambachime, M. (1990). "Military Violence Against Civilians: The Case of the Congolese and Zairian Military in the Pedicle". International Journal of African Historical Studies, 23: 643-664.

economic productivity. The viciousness of this violence is demonstrated by the fact that the colonial military used the strategy of mutilation to ensure people would not resist working under any circumstances. Indeed, it was reported that 10 to 20 million people were killed during the Belgian colonial period[29].

After independence, the Congolese army functioned to secure the Congo against external threats, to preserve the state's sovereignty and territorial integrity, to manage internal order, and to provide the usual range of police services such as prison management, guardianship of public buildings, and the enforcement of civilian obedience. Under the context of the Cold War, the Congolese military doctrine defined ethnic group demands, political opposition, and leftist countries as threats to state security.

To quash internal threat, the military political system created a single party regime. Differing political opinions were repressed and a strategy of supporting political sabotage was implemented to destabilise countries like Tanzania, Angola and Uganda, which were labelled as socialist. Ethnic and regional political demands were meant as a refusal to adhere to the nation building and modernisation process[30]. Clearly, independence did not bring an end to military brutality directed against civilians. The Congolese, once categorized "non-civilised people" during the colonial era, were relabelled "communist", "tribalist", or "regionalist" to justify the use of force and brutality against them.

In the early 1960s, with support from the United States, the Congolese military received tremendous foreign military support, which created in the Congolese military mentality a sense of legitimacy in using brutal violence against civilians. The Congolese military opted for capitalism, thus any political opposition or foreign countries adhering to different ideologies became enemies.

To neutralise ethnic demands, unions, and political opposition, the Congolese army officers were trained in Belgian military schools and received military support both from the United States and France with the objective of making the army more professional[31]. In the 1970's and 1980's, Israelites trained the Presidential Special Brigade, also known as the Division Spéciale Présidentielle (DSP); Belgians trained the 21st infantry brigade; and the Chinese trained the 41st

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[29] Hoshschild (1998). Op. Cit.
[30] Williame (1970). Op. Cit.
[31] Meditz and Merill (1994). Op. Cit.

commando brigade. At the same time, political resistance was organised and supported by the Soviet Union, Cuba and China. Simply put, the Congolese army has evolved under the political context of halting Soviet expansion in Africa. From this perspective, Congolese opposition groups and neighbouring countries that did not share Mobutu's political vision (liberalism) were considered enemies. This stance was used as a justification for enlisting military support from France, Belgium, Germany and the United States. The logic behind Mobutu's new army could be summarised in the use of domestic repression as a mode of conflict management, and intervention into neighbouring countries to prevent communist aggression.

In addition, various wars following independence have affected the Congolese military culture. Different wars have instilled strong ethnic loyalty in the Congolese armed forces[32]. For example, the Katanga and Kasai wars, waged in 1960, demonstrated that soldiers were loyal to their ethnic and regional leaders, rather than to the state. In early 1964, the Kwilu rebellion broke out and was successfully implemented in the Eastern part of the Congo, using ethnic recruitment strategies. The Lunda ethnic group mainly fought the consecutive Shaba I and II wars in 1977 and 1978. The Moba war in 1984 also was an ethnic-based war fought by the Babembe. The common denominator during all of these wars lies in the fact that the military government used these insurgencies to justify mass killing of innocent people and political dissidents.

In sum, the unpaid military role has become one of continuous looting and violence against the population. However, it should be mentioned that Mobutu has carefully retained the loyalty of key units by paying them regularly, with the objective of using them to suppress ethnic and regional demands during his rule. In this context, the Congolese military completely lost its coherence. The official mission of the Congolese military changed from protecting the nation against external threats to protecting the regime against internal threats. Indeed, loyal, paid military units were regularly deployed to suppress popular demonstrations and to harass and intimidate political opponents and newspapers critical of his regime[33].

The so-called war of liberation in late 1996 succeeded in toppling Mobutu's government, and Laurent Kabila took power on May 1997. A major hope among the Congolese was the renewal of human rights based military conduct and the unification of different factions that survived the

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[32] Lefever, W. E. (1970). Spear and Scepter. Army, Police, and Politics in Tropical Africa, Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution and Meditz, S. and Merill T. (1994). Op. Cit.
[33] Meditz and Merill (1994). Op. Cit.

military divisions of earlier wars. Unfortunately, the government wasn't strong enough to curb privately sponsored violence. In August 1998, the anti-Kabila rebellion started and produced a proliferation of armed groups, all of whom claimed to be fighting for democracy and the respect of human rights. On the contrary, all of them have been accused of mass killing, rape and the recruitment of child soldiers[34]. Indeed, international agencies have succeeded in documenting the fact that "child soldiers are still present in all armed groups in DRC, in some cases representing up to 35 percent of troops and are being sent to the front lines[35]. Massive occurrences of rape in the Congo have been described as 'a war within the war'[36].

Armed groups have developed ethnic-based military recruiting attitudes. To illustrate this case, let me refer to the armed groups in the East of the Congo. The Hema ethnic group forms the Union of Congolese Patriots (UPC), the Party for the Unity and the Safekeeping of the Integrity of Congo (PUSIC). The Nationalist and Integrationist Front (FNI) is constituted by the Lendu ethnic group. The Armed Forces of the Congolese People (FAPC) and the Popular Forces for Democracy in Congo (FPDC) are primarily formed by the Alur ethnic group, and are opposed to the Lendu and Hema ethnic groups[37]. Members of neighbouring ethnic groups are labelled "foreigners" or "invaders". These new labels indicate that there is a tendency toward ethnic or regional allegiances in the army, allegiances that were formed from a variety of armed groups during the political transition.

Under these circumstances, it is crucial to start investigating whether or not the military is willing to change its culture. Looking at transitional constitutions prepared successively by governments since 1990, it is interesting to note progress in the search for legislating civil military control over the army. For example, the 1992 constitution produced by the Conférence Nationale Souveraine – the national assembly that obliged Mobutu to democratise the political system during the early 1990's – remains silent on the matter of army leadership; whether it falls

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[34] Human Rights Watch (2003). Ituri Covered by Blood: Ethnically Targeted Violence In Northeastern DR Congo. Washington DC:, Human Rights Watch.

[35] Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict (2003). The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). New York: Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict. Retrieved from the World Wide Web http://www.watchlist.org/reports/dr_congo.report.pdf.. August 17, 2003.

[36] Read the Human Rights Watch (2002) report. Retrieved from the World Web http://www.hrw.org/reports/2002/drc/ July 2003.

[37] Agence France Press (2003). Main Armed Groups in DR Congo's Ethnic Fighting. Retrieved from the World Wide Web Site http://wwww.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf/s/8FF49A1F30257DD749256D94000FEB23 on March 10, 2004.

under civilian control, or the army itself. Article 186 of this constitution stipulates that soldiers are non-partisan and that military service is mandatory[38]. Conversely, the second transitional constitution, produced by President Laurent Kabila in 1998, clearly indicates in Article 245 that armed forces are under the responsibility of civil authorities. It also specifies in Article 250 that military service is mandatory[39].

The actual transitional constitution that emerged from the Inter-Congolese Dialogue, which gathered all armed forces into the ongoing war, states in Article 181 that armed forces are under the control of civil authorities. It also adds to the common mission of the armed forces the idea of protecting people and their property. A second innovation in Article 184 states that nobody should be recruited to the army before he reaches 18 years of age[40]. In all three transitional constitutions it is stated that military recruitment should be balanced ethnically and regionally. It should also be mentioned that even though all three transitional constitutions mentioned the role of the Congolese military in social, economic and cultural development, nothing appears to clearly demonstrate the commitment of the army to human rights.

III   Conclusion and Policy Implications

This paper establishes that peaceful Congolese democratic transition has been disturbed due to the Congolese military culture, inherited from the colonial state and prolonged in the post-colonial period. The paper suggests that from the colonial period to the post-colonial state, Congolese military culture has been characterised by violence toward civilians. The Congolese army missed opportunities offered at the end of colonisation to initiate its cultural shift toward civilians. Colonisers justified human rights abuse because native Congolese were to be culturally transformed and forced to work for economic development. During the Cold War and at the time of independence, the label "basenzi" became "communist" in order to justify violence against political opposition, ethnic demands and neighbouring countries that didn't share the Congolese capitalist ideology. Presently, there is a war in the Congo. New labels are emerging, such as 'foreigner' and 'invader', in order to justify violence. What changes are considered necessary to triumph over this state of affairs?

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[38] Article 186 is from the first transitional constitution drafted in 1992
[39] Articles 245 and 250 are from the second transitional constitution drafted in 1998
[40] Articles 181 and 184 are from the third transitional constitution drafted in 2003

The above debate indicates that military culture change is a necessary condition for peaceful political change. Without a strong military eager to embrace fundamental cultural change, peace and democracy implementation is elusive. To achieve long-term peace and security in the Congo and neighbouring countries, the Congolese military must be a partner in democratic and peace building processes. More attention needs to be paid to the education of the Congolese military, concentrating on the transformation of existing negative attitudes toward the domestic population and the security of neighbouring countries. There is a need for closer relations between soldiers and civilians so that the military realises that civilians are an essential and equal part of societal transformations. Special attention must also be paid to the military's perception of the new civilian democratic leadership.

Issues such as granting amnesty or pursuing those in the military who are responsible for human rights crimes must be approached with caution, as has been the case in the "so-called" South African miracle through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission[41]. The military should not be made to feel it is giving up too much too quickly, otherwise it will be resistant to changes needed by the civil society. At the same time, the Congolese military needs strong leadership in order to open up a new way of perceiving the Congolese future. Finally, the culture of peace must be promoted at all levels of the education system so that recruited soldiers already have a sense of the importance of human rights and of being a good citizen, and hence of being a good soldier.

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[41] Darton, D. (1998). La truth and reconciliation commission: le miracle sud-africain en question. Revue Française de Science Politique, 6 : 707-724.