



# Wheels of Fortune

## *The chukudus of Goma*

The sound of progress does not have a regular rhythm. Moving in the shadows of those for whom the old adage about 'what goes up, must come down' has both an economic and personal security impact, this is a story of one Congolese concept cart that gives the idea of environmentally-friendly another spin; the laws of gravity, rather than oil prices per barrel, determining its passage.



text and images TEUN VOETEN

They look like scooters straight from the Flintstones. However, the chukudu is in fact an ingeniously designed means of transport, just as typical for the mountainous region of Goma as yellow cabs are for New York. In other parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo, and for that matter other parts of the world, they don't exist. This funny looking contraption is onomatopoeia on the move, named after the noise its wooden wheels make when they brave the lava-rock ridden roads of Goma: Chu-Ku-Du, Chu-Ku-Du.

### Ups & Downs

Half an hour outside Goma, where the jungle that covers the mountains of the Parc des Volcanoes nature reserve begins, local craftsmen produce the chukudus on demand. Made of tropical hardwood, the crucial element is the horizontal beam. It must be able to withstand heavy loads and a driver – aptly called the chukudeur - and a co-pilot. It also suspends the steering mechanism, which is hung by springs or pieces of rubber and has the brakes on the back wheel. Except for the ball bearings, everything is made from natural or recycled material. Even the little knee cushion for the driver is made from a discarded flip-flop.

What makes the chukudu so special is that it is able to carry huge loads. The maximum freight is around 1500 lbs, that's 10 bags of cement and two people. Sure a handcart could take the strain, but a chukudu can roll downhill once it is pushed up. And most cargo – bananas, charcoal, construction wood – originate up in the hills but are traded downtown in Goma, which lies at a low altitude. And of course, a chukudu needs neither fuel nor expensive maintenance.

### A Way to Security

Unlike a Hummer crawling around the average urban gridlock, the chukudus make sense in what is undeniably a harsh setting, and even more important is the economic freedom that they provide: an experienced chukudeur can make 15 US dollars a day, quite a fortune in dirt poor Goma. But there are other potentials. When Anna Husarksa, a senior policy advisor with the International Rescue Committee, reported\* in 2008 on Congo's 'war on women', she observed that 'while Congolese women do a lot of fetching and carrying, it is only the men who have motorbikes, bicycles and locally made wooden scooters called chukudus...If men took on more carrying work, women's





exposure to sexual violence while travelling long distances would be reduced. Sponsoring chukudu-making workshops would help more families have them.' A tool for change then? When the mayor of Goma wanted to ban chukudus in the city centre, a wave of protests emerged. The plan was shelved. The United Nations peacekeeping contingent also recognised the importance of the wooden scooter and a few years ago organised a chukudu rally. The prize? A brand new chukudu, custom-made for the lucky winner...

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\*Congo's sex crimes rage on, The Guardian Weekly, 27/03/08



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