University of Toronto

PRECOLONIAL IMAGINARIES AND COLONIAL LEGACIES
IN MOBUTU'S "AUTHENTIC" ZAÏRE

Daviel Lazure Vieira

TRN411Y1: Decolonisation in Africa, 1944–1994

Professor: Mairi S. MacDonald

Tuesday 5 April 2016

Walking from the Place Royale on rue de la Régence in Brussels, one cannot evade the perspective of the Palais de Justice, located in the opposite direction with the *ville basse* at its feet. Beyond the peristyle of the main entrance, there is the colossal *salle des pas-perdus* underneath the dome, supported by four pillars of more than 40 metres high, with grandiose staircases and seemingly endless rows of galleries. Designed by architect Joseph Poelaert in 1861 and completed in 1883, the Law Courts of Brussels is a striking example of nineteenth century monumentalism—but it was also mired in controversy. Chief engineer Clément Labye criticised the “particular measures” surrounding the adoption of the final blueprint and the choice of Poelaert, an architect whose propensity to excess was also reflected in his inability to provide accurate estimates. The building, commissioned by Léopold I and unveiled by his successor Léopold II, had to reflect Belgium’s peculiar history and its newly found “national distinctiveness,” as Silverman notes:

The attempts to characterise the *Palais* by its contemporaries revealed how it lay outside the canon of traditional forms of European eclecticism and its inventory of historicist associations. Here style reverted to a pre-history or primal periods in a distant past, appropriate to the Belgians’ search for architectural types untainted by the evocation of French, Austrian, Spanish, or Dutch legacies, all linked to rulers and conquerors before Belgium’s emergence as a sovereign power in 1830–31.¹

It was the concrete illustration of a larger attempt to define Belgian identity in spite of the heterogeneity of this small country divided along linguistic lines between Flemish and Walloon peoples, later accompanied by a reform of the legal system in the early 1890s aimed at “knitting together a myriad of local, communal, regional, and municipal particularisms and precedents into a workable central structure.”² Belgium’s quest for expansion outside Europe, and in particular, the King’s sole proprietorship of a territory about 76 times the size of his dominion—the Congo Free State—was another expression of Léopold II’s efforts to cement his reputation and solidify his rule. A typical exercise in nation-state building, it was

¹ Debora Silverman, “‘Modernité sans frontières’: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of the Avant-Garde in King Leopold’s Belgium, 1885–1910,” *American Imago* Vol. 68, N° 4 (Winter 2011): 717.

² Silverman, “Modernité sans frontières,” 718.

supported by a propaganda machine at home that took the form of monuments, expositions, museums, and public education initiatives that successfully convinced the Belgians of their renewed sense of purpose, among other European imperial powers as well as abroad.

The Congo Free State was an obstinate and bloody business, and international pressures against the numerous abuses committed by the King's gendarmerie, the *Force publique*, eventually forced Léopold II to relinquish his forceful grip. The colony came under direct state rule in 1908 and was known as the "Belgian Congo" until the proclamation of its independence in 1960. The end of Belgium's imperial adventure in the Congo in the wake of the struggle for self-determination on the part of the colonised—an impulse that swept the whole African continent in the aftermath of the Second World War—was both hastily prepared and reluctantly executed, to say the least. Whereas a few months earlier the Belgians had envisaged a long path towards independence for the Congolese, the roadmap to freedom was drastically curtailed following riots in Léopoldville in 1959. Shortly after the first democratically elected prime minister Patrice Lumumba assumed power on 30 June 1960, he dismissed Belgian officers from the *Force publique* who refused the change in command, and replaced the gendarmerie with the *Armée nationale congolaise* (ANC) under an African leadership. The resulting outbreak of violence prompted a Belgian intervention on the pretext of protecting its nationals, and troops remained on the ground in defiance of UN resolutions demanding their removal. The crisis put to the test the feverish, newly independent state of Congo-Léopoldville: Not only was Lumumba faced with calls for secession from the provinces of Katanga and South Kasai in July and August of 1960 (supported by Belgium), he also became entangled in Cold War calculations that hastened his demise. The careful interplay between the American and Soviet rhetorics of an increasingly bipolar world, in every sense of the word, had been upset and ultimately cost him his life. After staging a first coup on 14 September 1960, Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, Lumumba's former

secretary and the ANC's chief of staff, seized power in November 1965. On 17 April 1967 Mobutu's party, the *Mouvement populaire de la révolution* (MPR), was created.³

A little less than a century after Léopold II's bid for "national distinctiveness" in his construction of the Belgian body politic thus began the process of decolonisation in the former colony and the establishment of a sovereign Congo. In the era of the nation-state, the only model deemed legitimate by the international system, the right to self-determination necessarily entailed the reconceptualisation of African societies in light of this paradigm shift. It is in this context that Mobutu provided a supply of ideas informed by precolonial times and African traditions by appealing to a doctrine named *recours à l'authenticité*—an attempt to discard or efface the colonial legacy and reconcile these ideas of the past with the modernity of his era. Congo was turned into Zaïre, Joseph-Désiré Mobutu became Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu Wa Za Banga, streets and monuments were stripped of their imperial attributes and carried names *à résonnance zaïroise* starting 1 January 1972.⁴ *Authenticité* was meant as a reaction against colonialism that reaffirmed the nation's "African" or "Zaïrian" character. As Pauwels and Pintens note, it constituted

moins un retour en arrière, vers des valeurs historiques, qu'une prise de conscience de l'être propre de l'Africain zaïrois, qui se rend compte qu'il veut réfléchir et surtout agir au départ d'un point de vue propre, en délaissant les usages, les valeurs, les opinions et les préjugés qui lui avaient été imposés par la colonisation.⁵

The novelty of *authenticité* lies less in its insistence that Africans should liberate themselves through a *prise de conscience* rather than a strict *retour en arrière*, as other movements like *négritude* already advocated, but in the totality of its application to all fields that govern life,

³ This abridged account of the transition from the "Belgian Congo" to the establishment of Mobutu's Second Republic owes much to the work of Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem, who provides a detailed and exhaustive overview of this troubled period in the Congo's history. In particular, see *Sixième partie : Vers le Congo contemporain*, Chapitre 2, "Dans la mouvance de l'indépendance," *Septième partie : Le Congo contemporain*, Chapitre 1, "L'essor" and Chapitre 2, "L'invention de la société congolaise contemporaine," in Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem, *Histoire générale du Congo. De l'héritage ancien à la République démocratique* (Brussels: Duculot, 1998), 521–804.

⁴ Johan M. Pauwels and Walter Pintens, *La législation zaïroise relative au nom. Droit et authenticité africaine* (Brussels: Koninklijke Academie voor Overzeese Wetenschappen/Académie royale des sciences d'outre-mer, 1983), 10.

⁵ Pauwels and Pintens, *La législation zaïroise relative au nom*, 11.

from law to politics, from economics to culture. In Mobutu's view, *authenticité* was an all-encompassing "African philosophy," even though it appeared to most as the instrument of legitimisation of a mere political programme—and a particularly brutal one at that. It is little surprising that current scholarship is often consistent with this approach, with historians, anthropologists, and political scientists treating *authenticité* either as a fetish, by examining the history of the Mobutist state through cultural expressions that reflected this strange "philosophical" anomaly, or as a hollow concept, a piece of propaganda—which it *also* partly was. It seems necessary, however, to take *authenticité* at face value in order to confront its claims, namely that it represented a departure from the ferocity of the colonial experience and provided a cohesive and comprehensive value system (cultural, political, legal, and economic) to harmonise the past with the present. On both accounts *authenticité* failed, not least because the language it spoke was anything but "authentic"—nor truly "new" for that matter—but also because its archetypes reproduced the colonial violence it insisted on refuting. These tropes were neither the end nor the beginning of something but the extension of history itself, with its inescapable colonial past. Such encounter with *authenticité*, according to its own terms, may allow us to mediate these different perspectives found in Zaïrian historiography with regards to Mobutu's legacy, and reveal patterns of subjugation that never ceased to exist.

Examining the president's speeches, interviews, and memorandums, I first assess the level of authenticity of *authenticité* itself, exposing its motives as well as its inconsistencies. If *authenticité's* kinship to the colonial precedent is clearly apparent in words, it is too in practice. These words become an essential component of the state apparatus, as I demonstrate in the second part; the rhetoric is employed to justify Zaïre's cultural, political, legal, and economic programme, and in all cases parallels can be drawn with the colonial period and Belgium's own peculiar history. This "postcolonial potentate," to borrow

Mbembe's expression,⁶ may have been imbued by its precolonial and colonial antecedents—having internalised elements of both—but this did not necessarily mean Zairians responded passively to the reappropriation of their African heritage and its perversion by the Mobutist regime. I conclude by suggesting some authentic features of Congolese society, such as the notion of *kindoki*, can be interpreted as forms of resistance against oppression, be it framed in colonial terms or disguised as a liberating vernacular.

L'État, c'est nous: *Authenticité* according to itself

When Mobutu explained the tenants of *authenticité* six years after establishing the Second Republic in 1965, he used the following terms before the Congrès national de l'Union progressiste sénégalaise in Dakar, on 14 February 1971:

Tout le sens de notre quête, tout le sens de notre effort, tout le sens de notre pèlerinage sur cette terre d'Afrique, c'est que nous sommes à la recherche de notre authenticité et que nous la trouverons parce que nous voulons, par chacune des fibres de notre être profond, la découvrir, et la découvrir chaque jour davantage. En un mot, nous voulons, nous autres Zaïrois, être des Zaïrois authentiques.⁷

Before being conceived as a totalising structure articulated by the state as a “philosophie politique,” Mobutu's *authenticité* was to be understood as a principle that withstood the test of time, a *drive* rather than a mere ensemble of customs, beliefs, and traditions—something that *was*, that *is*, that *forever will be*, something that could be taken away but that nevertheless persisted, regardless of political regimes or social identities. According to Kangafu-Kutumbagana, the party's main theorist, it is “not a dogma or a religion, but a manner of action designed to serve the nation and its citizens,” whose purpose was to “[lead] away from borrowed ideas and aspirations towards an increased consciousness of indigenous cultural

⁶ Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 42–44.

⁷ Mobutu Sese Seko cited in Kangafu-Vingi-Gudumbagana, “Allocution du Commissaire politique, Secrétaire général à la formation des cadres, le citoyen Kangafu-Vingi-Gudumbagana,” in *Authenticité et développement : Actes du Colloque nationaux sur l'authenticité*, eds. Union des écrivains zaïrois (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1982), 46.

values.”⁸ When he addressed the UN General Assembly two years later on 4 October 1973, he echoed this description of *authenticité* by associating the colonial period with the beginning of a “processus de déshumanisation” through occupation and subjugation that stripped the colonised of this *drive*, stating: “Le noir doit abandonner sa personnalité, ses structures mentales et sociales, en un mot, son authenticité.”⁹ The search for *authenticité* was thus the search for this personality, these mental and social structures that had disappeared with the colonial encounter. As White correctly observes, the portrayal of *authenticité* as a leitmotiv placed *above* the means of governance “[convoque] une notion occidentale d’un soi essentiel qui serait en quelque sorte contaminé par le contact avec d’autres cultures.”¹⁰ The main objective of the postcolonial subject was therefore to retrieve his *authenticité* (*retrouver son authenticité*), and Mobutu’s project was to translate this concept into a practical framework. The politicisation of *authenticité*, the defining of its terms within the realm of the state apparatus, appeared as the mere corollary of the adoption of the nation-state as the *de facto* model of the postwar international system; if the measure of legitimacy of the postcolonial subject’s claims to freedom was the establishment of a sovereign state, the search for *authenticité* was therefore inextricably linked to the fostering of a distinct national identity and the achievement of statehood.¹¹ Mobutu explicated the relation between *authenticité* and nationalism in the same speech given on 14 February 1971, stating: “À partir

⁸ Kangafu-Kutumbagana cited in Kenneth Lee Adelman, “The Recourse to Authenticity and Négritude in Zaïre,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* Vol. 13, N° 1 (March 1975): 134.

⁹ Mobutu Sese Seko, “Address to the UN General Assembly” (speech, New York, NY, 4 October 1973).

¹⁰ Bob W. White, “L’incroyable machine d’authenticité : l’animation politique et l’usage public de la culture dans le Zaïre de Mobutu,” *Anthropologie et Sociétés* Vol. 30, N° 2 (2006): 50.

¹¹ The inescapability of the nation-state model as a condition for freedom in the postwar era is acutely described by Schatzberg: “Since the imposition of the grid-like structure of the contemporary international system of states, Zaïre and other states in Africa are no longer faced with a choice between adaptation and extinction. They will continue to exist as territorial units whether or not they change with the times. Consider this counterfactual proposition. Had the Zaïrian state existed prior to colonial rule, it probably would not have lasted as long as it has because precolonial states did not have the international system to provide ready made legitimacy in the form of international recognition of preset territorial boundaries.” Michael G. Schatzberg, *The Dialectics of Oppression in Zaïre* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), 139.

de notre expérience, nous avons mûri une doctrine, une doctrine qui devait répondre à notre souci d'authenticité ; nous avons adopté le nationalisme zaïrois authentique."¹² This political reinterpretation of *authenticité*, that is to say Zaïrian nationalism, was also referred to as "Mobutism" by the president himself, and was adopted as the official ideology of the MPR in 1974.¹³

Although Mobutu situated *authenticité* within the intellectual landscape of the 1950s and 1960s, in adequation to other movements such as Senghor's and Césaire's *négritude*, he also established a clear distinction between his doctrine and their work. In an address given during the *Culture et développement* symposium to mark Senghor's 70th anniversary in Dakar on 8 October 1976, Mobutu explained the difference between *négritude* and *authenticité* by stating that "les chantres de la négritude réagissaient en France contre l'environnement culturel occidental du milieu de ce XX^e siècle," whereas "nous, nous réagissons au Zaïre contre nous-mêmes d'abord, ensuite contre les multiples tentatives de recolonisation sous toutes ses formes," before concluding that "chez eux, le verbe passe avant l'action ; chez nous, l'action passe avant le verbe."¹⁴ Implicit in this assessment is an understanding of *négritude* as essentially an intellectual discourse rather than an applicable governing structure, and the suggestion that the former is concerned with reforming the racist, superior European responsible for the horrors of colonialism, whereas *authenticité* aims to reform African Zaïrians themselves. "On a donc presque tout dit et tout écrit ; ce qui nous reste, c'est d'agir,"

¹² Mobutu Sese Seko cited in Kangafu-Vingi-Gudumbagana, "Allocution," 46.

¹³ Mobutu Sese Seko, *Mobutu : Dignité pour l'Afrique. Entretiens avec Jean-Louis Remilleux* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1989), 99. See also Thomas M. Callaghy, *The State-Society Struggle: Zaïre in Comparative Perspective* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1984), 305.

¹⁴ Mobutu Sese Seko, "Message à l'occasion du colloque 'Culture et développement' organisé à Dakar dans le cadre du soixante-dixième anniversaire du Président de la République du Sénégal, M. Léopold-Sédar Senghor (8 octobre 1976)," in *Discours, allocutions et messages*, 67.

Mobutu reiterated during the Conseil des Ministères de l'Organisation de l'unité africaine in Kinshasa on 6 December 1976.¹⁵

What then, were *authenticité's* modes of action? Before turning to their concrete application in Zaïre, let us further analyse the modalities of Mobutu's discourse. Externally, *authenticité* was framed as an inoffensive ideology of freedom, which would not threaten the interests of Mobutu's allies and supporters, namely the West and the United States, so that the regime could receive the tacit approval of the international community. In a conversation with Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in 1973, Mobutu stated that "nonalignment is Zaïre," explaining this with the fallacious reasoning of a sophism: "We are neither left nor right. We are authentically Zaïrian."¹⁶ The opposition between *left* and *right* Mobutu dismissed as invalid in Zaïre because it would be "inauthentic" closely resembled his rhetorical explanation for the supremacy of "democracy" within his one-party state:

Pour décrire nos sociétés traditionnelles négro-africaines, ethnologues et sociologues ont inventé le concept de « démocratie existentielle ». Chez nous, la discussion – la palabre – a pour objectif de faire émerger l'unanimité. Vous vous émerveillez actuellement, en France, de découvrir le « consensus » ; permettez-moi de vous faire remarquer que c'est une invention africaine ! Au Zaïre, on discute, on parle, on palabre et la décision n'intervient qu'une fois l'unanimité faite sur le problème étudié. Vous vous étonnez souvent des scores obtenus à nos élections ou à nos référendums, de cet unanimisme mis en lumière par nos consultations. L'explication est simple. C'est que, chez nous, le peuple rejette la notion de majorité et de minorité qui s'affrontent.¹⁷

The quote illustrates Mobutu's didactic role, "teaching" the "Other" about African society—in this case, a French journalist—by evoking an authentic feature of Congolese society—the "palaver tree," a traditional assembly of elders who gathered together to discuss important issues pertaining to their community—despite the fact he discarded this very feature in Zaïre as backward and incompatible with the "modernity" he put forward ("Il est grand temps de

¹⁵ Mobutu Sese Seko, "Discours d'ouverture de la onzième session extraordinaire du Conseil des Ministres de l'Organisation de l'unité africaine à Kinshasa (6 décembre 1976)," in *Discours, allocutions et messages*, 85.

¹⁶ United States Department of State, Bureau of African Affairs, Office of Central African Affairs, 5 October 1973, "U.S.-Zaïre Relations, [Conversation with President Mobutu]" confidential memorandum of conversation, DNSA Collection: Kissinger Transcripts, accessed 5 April 2016.

<http://search.proquest.com/docview/1679126007?accountid=14771>.

¹⁷ Mobutu Sese Seko, *Mobutu : Dignité pour l'Afrique*, 98.

mettre fin à cette ère dominée par la tradition orale.”¹⁸) *Authenticité*’s “African” rhetoric was projected onto the outside world, as a reminder of the “African heritage” that supposedly disappeared during the colonial era, but reestablished thanks to Mobutism. Mobutu recast this “African heritage” precisely by relying on Congolese collective memory in order to instil a sense of Zaïrian “national distinctiveness,” in pursuit of a similar goal as Léopold II in late nineteenth-century Belgium. In both cases, it is “a discourse on the past [that] imposes itself essentially as a function of the power it legitimates,” as Jewsiewicki remarks.¹⁹

There was therefore a gap between the “African” rhetoric projected onto the “Other,” and the way Mobutu conveyed these images at home; and oddly enough, within Zaïre this discourse borrowed as much from precolonial precedents as it did from the colonial legacy. Indeed, the contribution of *authenticité* to Zaïrian society was sometimes framed in terms eerily similar to Belgian propaganda and the language of Catholic missions in the heyday of colonialism. In the *argument de base* of the national symposium on *Authenticité et développement* organised by the Union des écrivains zaïrois and held from 14–21 September 1981 in Kinshasa, one finds this unsettling line about the approach guiding the proceedings: “Croire en soi pour une nation, c’est se charger d’une mission, poursuivre un idéal, faire dans le monde une irruption civilisatrice.”²⁰ The confluence of *authenticité* and *civilisation* was not confined to the realm of academia, and is reflected in the attitudes of other parts of Zaïrian society. From 1973 to 1974, Tshibumba Kanda Matulu created a series of one hundred paintings depicting the most important events in Congolese history, simply titled *Histoire du Zaïre*. Matulu met with anthropologist Johannes Fabian to discuss his work, and their encounter was recorded; the transcript now serves as a second iteration of his history of

¹⁸ Mobutu Sese Seko, “Discours d’ouverture au deuxième Congrès ordinaire du MPR à la N’Sele (25 novembre 1977),” in *Discours, allocutions et messages*, 185.

¹⁹ Bogumil Jewsiewicki, “Collective Memory and the Stakes of Power: A Reading of Popular Zaïrian Historical Discourses,” *History of Africa* Vol. 13 (1986): 197.

²⁰ Badi-Banga ne Mwine et al, “Argument de base,” in *Authenticité et développement*, 21.

Zaire, augmented by yet another version, a 73-page document Matulu wrote himself in 1980, also titled *Histoire du Zaïre*. Asked to describe one of his paintings illustrating the precolonial “civilisation” of the times of Banza Kongo, Matulu answers the following to Fabian’s question:

F: Mm-hmm. But you said that Banza...

T: ... Kongo ...

F: ... Kongo and others had civilisation. What is civilisation?

T: Civilisation?

F: Mm-hmm.

T: It’s that we have—it is authenticity. [It means that someone] is at home when he eats, dresses, lives, and builds.

F: Mm-hmm.

T: To build one’s home, that is what civilisation is like. And to drink at home, all that was civilisation.²¹

The official palaver conceived Mobutism as a “civilisational intrusion” in opposition to “tribalisme et sa cohorte de maux,”²² which had to be abandoned as it did not promote the state centralisation effort of the Second Republic, regardless of its degree of authenticity; meanwhile, many Zaïrians responded by equating *civilisation* with *authenticité*, be it in the past tense or in the present, and practically every aspect of daily life could be defined as such. It is not dissimilar to Belgian thinking towards her possessions in the African continent. In Belgium the word *civilisation* was used *ad nauseam* in order to restore the kingdom’s image after the brutality of the Congo Free State—suffice it to recall Arsène Matton’s allegorical sculptures adorning the Royal Museum for Central Africa’s rotunda entrance hall in Tervuren (including *La Belgique apportant la civilisation au Congo*) commissioned by the Ministry of Colonies to “[symbolise] the beneficial results of Leopoldian and Belgian imperialism in central Africa.”²³ Even in the late period of Belgian imperialism, when the Colonial Minister Louis Franck began to favour adaptationism over assimilation policies—a

²¹ Tshibumba Kanda Matulu and Johannes Fabian, “The History of Zaïre as Told and Painted by Tshibumba Kanda Matulu in Conversation with Johannes Fabian,” *Archives of Popular Swahili* Vol. 2, N°2 (1998), accessed 5 April 2016, <http://www.lpca.socsci.uva.nl/aps/tshibumba1a.html>.

²² Badi-Banga ne Mwine et al, “Argument de base,” 30.

²³ Matthew G. Stanard, *Selling the Congo: A History of European Pro-Empire Propaganda and the Making of Belgian Imperialism* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 116.

view shared by the missionaries who sought to “found new, fairly isolated, communities of pre-industrial, rural Christianity, safeguarded from the detrimental vices of modern Western and urban civilisation”²⁴—the aim of the colonial state in the Congo recalls the objectives of Mobutu’s *authenticité*, less concerned with “[creating] an imitation European, a Black Belgian, but rather a better Congolese, that is, a robust, vigorous and hard-working Negro, proud of a consciously accomplished task, respectful of the collectivity to which he belongs,” in Franck’s words.²⁵

The infantilisation of the postcolonial subject is a “pervasive metaphor” in continuity with Zaïre’s political imaginary, as Schatzberg argues in his study of the Mobutist regime. It is no accident that Mobutu relied on traditional attributes—the leopard skin being a prime example of such reprocessed precolonial symbols—to establish himself as the omnipotent, generous “Father/Chief” whose benevolence would lead the “national family” on the road to peace, justice, and dignity.²⁶ In case of improper behaviour, rebels received fatherly indulgence, with Mobutu offering to guide them back on the straight path: “Il faut réintégrer dans la nation tous ses enfants perdus, savoir oublier, pardonner.”²⁷ The metaphor extends to the benefits provided by the President-Founder to his people, as De Boeck notes:

By means of a perverted interpretation of the traditional “gift logic,” in which debt becomes positive, offering a source of social cohesion, the notion of “gift” (gifts from the “father of the nation” to his children) creates a “debt” and a dependence of the people upon their leader.²⁸

This relation of dependence based on the gift/debt analogy also permeated the attitudes of the Belgians towards their African counterparts, with the Minister of Colonies Albert de

²⁴ Michael Meeuwis, “The Origins of Belgian Colonial Language Policies in the Congo,” *Language Matters* 42:2 (2011): 192.

²⁵ Crawford Young, “Zaïre: The Shattered Illusion of the Integral State,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* Vol. 32, N° 2 (June 1994): 255.

²⁶ Schatzberg, *The Dialectics of Oppression*, 71–82. See also Filip De Boeck, “Postcolonialism, Power and Identity: Local and Global Perspectives from Zaïre,” in *Postcolonial Identities in Africa*, ed. Richard Werbner and Terence Ranger (London: Zed Books, 1996), 80–83.

²⁷ Mobutu Sese Seko, *Mobutu : Dignité pour l’Afrique*, 64.

²⁸ De Boeck, “Postcolonialism, Power and Identity,” 80.

Vleeschauwer declaring that “parents may expect their children to contribute as much as possible to maintaining the household.”²⁹ Colonial rhetoric pertaining to familial imagery is a constant in historical accounts of European imperial history, but Schatzberg insists that the Belgian model differed “in the degree to which paternalism and paternal roles became deliberate aspects of colonial policy,”³⁰ citing education and religion as the cornerstone of Belgium’s legitimisation of colonial rule in Congo, mirrored in the *métropole* by a school curriculum which emphasised the successes of the nation’s “civilising mission.”³¹

Another expression of this dialectic between the “Father/Chief” and the postcolonial subject can be found in a *Mémoire de réflexion, d’action et d’information* published by the Cabinet du Département de la Défense nationale in 1972, intended to provide guidance to the *Forces armées zaïroises* and explaining the need for political integration between the FAZ and the MPR. The section dedicated to the Chief’s duties in combat makes extensive reference to Machiavelli, using it to highlight the importance of persuasion in overcoming resistance:

Machiavel notait déjà aux XVI^{ème} siècle [sic] “Il faut donc savoir qu’il y a deux manières de combattre : l’une par les lois, l’autre par la force : la première sorte est propre aux hommes, la seconde propre aux bêtes ; mais comme la première bien souvent NE suffit PAS, il faut recourir à la seconde. Ce pourquoi est nécessaire aux princes (c’était eux qui commandaient à l’époque) de savoir bien pratiquer la bête et l’homme.”³²

It is striking how the document perpetuates the dichotomy between *man* and *beast* that pervades the imperial discourse, encouraging Zaïre’s military to fight “unconscious tribalism” through a recourse to “social and psychological action, which should prevail over armed action.”³³ It seems obvious that Mobutism and *authenticité* were part of this counterinsurgency strategy. More surprisingly still, the pamphlet describes the evolution of

²⁹ Albert de Vleeschauwer cited in Guy Vanthemsche, *Belgium and the Congo, 1885–1980*, trans. Alice Cameron and Stephen Windross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 162.

³⁰ Schatzberg, *The Dialectics of Oppression*, 85.

³¹ Stanard, *Selling the Congo*, 131.

³² *Mémoire de réflexion, d’action et d’information. Préface du général d’armée Mobutu Sese Seko, commissaire d’État chargé de la Défense nationale, commandant suprême des Forces armées zaïroises*, ed. *Forces armées zaïroises* (Kinshasa: Cabinet du Département de la Défense nationale, 1972), 61–62.

³³ *Mémoire de réflexion, d’action et d’information*, 64–65.

the relationship between the head of state and the army by recalling France's *Ancien régime* under Louis XIV, offering a new rendition of his famous “L'État, c'est moi” to account for the democratisation of the state apparatus: “Depuis le XIX siècle [sic], l'État s'est démocratisé ‘L'État c'est tout le monde’ c'est tous les nationaux – et en paraphrasant LOUIS XIV, il est possible de dire ‘L'État c'est nous.’”³⁴ It is certainly in line with Callaghy's comparative analysis of Mobutu's rule and the European absolutist state, in which he revisits the process of state formation in Zaïre in correspondence with the “organic-statist orientation,” “highly bureaucratised” and “personalised” monarchical style of government in seventeenth-century France.³⁵

The expression *L'État, c'est nous* beautifully captures the essence of Mobutism: its apparent (but contradictory) democratic purposes, its strange borrowings from European intellectual foundations and facile shortcuts when moulding precolonial history to the present. It would be wrong to assume that *authenticité* was nothing but a deceptive proposition. A careful look at its contributions shows that it could be a sincere, if imperfect Afrocentric ideology; it remains outside the scope of this article, but one can find such example in Zaïre's challenge of the European conception of *terra nullius* at the International Court of Justice in the dispute opposing Spain, Mauritania and Morocco in Western Sahara in 1975.³⁶ It is when considering its usage in practice by the Mobutist regime that one is inevitably confronted to its failings, the subject of inquiry of the following section.

³⁴ *Mémorandum de réflexion, d'action et d'information*, 83.

³⁵ Callaghy, *The State-Society Struggle*, 147.

³⁶ Bayona ba Meyu Muna Kimvimba, the President of Zaïre's Supreme Court, provides the following rationale in support of an “authentically” African conception of land occupation: “Pour l'Africain, ce n'est pas le critère purement matérialiste de l'effectivité de l'occupation de la terre qui crée le droit de propriété foncière. Il importe peu que la terre ne soit pas momentanément habitée ou cultivée. . . . Dès l'instant où l'on est né sur une terre et surtout quand cette terre a recueilli en son sein les dépouilles des parents, il se crée entre les vivants et les morts une communauté de vie à telle enseigne qu'en dépit de l'absence des signes extérieurs, signes visibles d'occupation de la terre, celle-ci ne peut jamais être considérée comme *terra nullius*.” See 1982 I.C.J. Pleadings, Western Sahara, Vol. IV, Oral Statements, “Exposé oral de M. Bayona-ba-Meyu, représentant du gouvernement zaïrien,” 439–447.

Ruling authentically by decree: Mobutism in practice

As we have seen, although *authenticité* was articulated as faithful to the “African heritage” it purported to invoke, using a language that it insisted was radically new based on Mobutu’s emphasis on *l’action* over *le verbe*, it nevertheless replicated the colonial rhetoric at discourse level, particularly when addressing Zaïrians themselves. Nevertheless, Mobutu intended to deliver on its promise with tangible propositions for change, hence the “Zaïrianisation” of Congolese society began in 1972. In addition to the name changes discussed above, the initiative also took the form of a new dress code stressing the need to abandon colonial fashions, with the introduction of the *abacost*, a short or long-sleeved light jacket which supposedly expressed the rejection of foreign manners despite its resemblance to a Mao suit—*abacost* is an abbreviation for *à bas le costume*, or “down with the suit.” One can hardly deny the effectiveness of such venture in the public eye; here too, Matulu’s enthusiasm for the abacost as an expression of *authenticité* in a painting titled *Bonheur – Tranquillité – Joie de vivre en paix* testifies to the success of this incarnation of Mobutism in practice. (“That . . . is what our authenticity looks like. It is an African idea. Just because the whites brought the material does not mean we follow their ideas when we dress. We arrange our dress the way we see fit.”³⁷)

Authenticité’s cultural applications have been well documented and carefully analysed by scholars. Bob W. White examined Mobutu’s recourse to popular music, traditional songs and dance performances in order to reinforce identity politics in the postcolonial state, describing how *animation* became a fundamental component of the regime’s process of political consolidation. *Animation* included TV programmes, public demonstrations, and artistic manifestations inspired by folkloric traditions, yet whose mythical content was

³⁷ Johannes Fabian, *Remembering the Present: Painting and Popular History in Zaïre* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 175.

replaced with words of praise towards Mobutu and the MPR. As White notes, *animation* became a civic duty present in the public and private spheres of every Zairian's life, a performative requirement mandatory from the time of rising until retiring to sleep.³⁸

Another of *authenticité's* cultural claims was the formal request that traditional Congolese artefacts found in Belgian art collections, most notably in Tervuren, be returned to Zaïre; this policy is described in detail by Sarah Van Beurden, who highlights the interdependence of Zaïre's repatriation demands and the need for the independent state "to create itself as the guardian of its cultural heritage, which would enable it to construct a cultural legitimacy that underwrote its political legitimacy."³⁹

The connection between culture and politics is a constant in the works of White, Van Beurden, Fabian, and others. What is less explored is how this relationship recalls Belgium's own nation-state building effort, heavily reliant on imperial undertakings to affirm its cohesion at a later stage,⁴⁰ but originally manufactured by the country's elites rather than being the expression of an "organic or spontaneous" sense of belonging to the great "Belgian" nation on the part of its inhabitants, as Lecours argues. He further adds: "The Belgian nation was created following a revolution that may hardly be described as the product of a popular movement." Lecours traces the creation of Belgium's "territorial identity landscape" to institutional change in the 1830s that allowed the French-speaking bourgeoisie to erect linguistic homogenisation as the *raison d'état* of the Belgian sovereign state, which eventually fostered the creation of a Flemish identity in response to these "centralised, unitary and *de facto* unilingual structures."

The specific nature of elite power struggles is a crucial variable in the creation of territorial identities. More specifically, the dynamic of elite competition constitutes a motor of identity formation and transformation. In sum, institutional development and

³⁸ White, "L'incroyable machine d'authenticité," 55–56.

³⁹ Sarah Van Beurden, "The Art of (Re)Possession: Heritage and the Cultural Politics of Congo's Decolonisation," *Journal of African History* 56 (2015): 145.

⁴⁰ Stanard, *Selling the Congo*, 248–249.

change trigger mechanisms of territorial identity formation not only through direct boundary setting but also by shaping elite relationships, competition and behaviour.⁴¹

The parallel with Mobutu's Zaïre is obvious. State centralisation through Mobutism and *recours à l'authenticité* was instituted by a few—though the state apparatus was not defined by ethnic or linguistic affiliation, Lingala-speaking Equateurians from the same region as Mobutu dominated the upper levels of the government and the military⁴²—just like the French-speaking bourgeois attempted to achieve linguistic hegemony in nineteenth-century Belgium. In the early, predominantly French-speaking Belgian state, the absence of diversity in the state apparatus encouraged the fragmentation of society and the construction of distinct territorial identities (Flemings, Walloons, Brusselers, etc.); in Zaïre, Mobutu's choice of a pluralist orientation was a deliberate policy decision to avoid increasing cleavages within Congolese society—cleavages that brought him to power, after all—a careful move to prevent the repetition of a pattern similar to the Belgian case.⁴³ Callaghy argues that Zaïre could never be defined as “bourgeois” and that the legacy of the colonial administration can be better described as “political aristocracy,” based on the fact Zaïrian political elites never seemed interested in the collective good, preferring instead to maintain a strictly authoritarian order while extracting resources that could benefit only themselves.⁴⁴ The regional dissensions Mobutu faced during his reign were maybe not mere repeats from the Congo Crisis that followed independence, but attempts at forging similarly distinct

⁴¹ André Lecours, “Political Institutions, Elites, and Territorial Identity Formation in Belgium,” *National Identities* Vol. 3, N° 1 (2001): 54–56.

⁴² Schatzberg, *The Dialectics of Oppression*, 23 and 66. See also Crawford Young and Thomas Turner, *The Rise and Decline of the Zaïrian State* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 152.

⁴³ Mobutu himself drew parallels between Zaïre and Belgium, stating for example: “Ne comparons pas l'incomparable, mais relevons simplement que la disparition des tentations tribales est toujours plus lente qu'on ne le croit. Ce ne sont pas les Belges des Fourons qui me démentiront.” In Mobutu Sese Seko, *Mobutu : Dignité pour l'Afrique*, 91. The Voeren/Fourons commune is a disputed enclave in the Walloon region attached to the Limburg province (Flemish); its Flemish residents have insisted that the local dialect is closer to the Dutch language, while French speakers have sought administrative annexation with Francophone Liège ever since Belgium's linguistic borders were defined in 1961.

⁴⁴ Callaghy, *The State-Society Struggle*, 186–188.

territorial identities by competitive elites with conflicting interests, as in the cases of South Kasai and Katanga.

Interestingly, these divisions that the Belgian state sought to nullify within its newly drawn borders from the onset of the Belgian Revolution in 1830–1831 up to the *Belgique en éveil* movement that Poelaert's Palais de Justice in Brussels stunningly typified,⁴⁵ they allowed in their extended empire, when they did not overtly resort to particularism in dealing with indigenous communities. As Schatzberg observes, in Congo “the colonial state forbade the formation of political parties but tolerated elitist cultural organisations constructed around ethnic identities.”⁴⁶ Meeuwis argues that Franck's attempt to instigate informal rule in the Congo (1918–1924) can be understood as a reaction against the process of “Belgianisation” (and by extension, “Frenchification”) that took place less than a century before in Belgium, and duplicated three decades later by Léopold in the Congo Free State. A Flemish nationalist himself, Franck might have feared that assimilation in the Congo would result in the “emergence of an African elite, who would arrogantly tend to turn their backs on the masses, and, armed with knowledge and competence, would become capable of threatening the coloniser's authority.”⁴⁷ In the end, a few years of adaptionist rule under Franck could not overcome preceding—and opposite—Belgian assimilationist policies already firmly encroached within the Congo. In retrospect, Franck's words appear oddly prescient, except this “African elite” turned their back on the masses not simply prior to independence, but long after as well.

It was all the more convenient for Mobutu to authentically reject this aspect of colonial rule by brandishing the threat of national disarray should federalism prevail, while casting himself as the traditional “Bantu chief” responsible for restoring the country's unity. One

⁴⁵ Silverman, “*Modernité sans frontières*,” 709.

⁴⁶ Schatzberg, *The Dialectics of Oppression*, 22.

⁴⁷ Louis Franck cited in Meeuwis, “The Origins of Belgian Colonial Language Policies in the Congo,” 196.

may as well consider the public execution of four politicians accused of plotting against him in 1966 as a reiteration of such motif. In his detailed study of Kongo political culture, MacGaffey posits the “objectification” of the chieftain, to be understood as similar to *minkisi* or *nkisi*, that is, in Kavuna’s words, the process of “[incorporating] in [an object] the spirit of some man who in his lifetime killed much game, owned much livestock and many slaves, one who was wily, wealthy, virile and successful in fighting other clans.”⁴⁸ The “objectified” chief, everywhere represented as a “leopard” with powers over life and death, is thus

part of the material apparatus of a ritual which objectively represented and confirmed the truth of general principles fundamental to the constitution and continuity of social life, while at the same time the ritual was central to the political and economic processes.⁴⁹

MacGaffey was referring to the MuKongo tradition, but his analysis can extend to the way power was exercised in Mobutu’s Zaïre. Mobutu seems to have purposely perverted chiefly heritage to his advantage, which allowed him to reproduce its characteristic violence—repressing dissent and stifling all opposition—due to the ubiquity of these beliefs in this part of Africa; moreover, *authenticité* proved useful in asserting the validity of this image while insisting that the reform of certain aspects of the chiefly tradition was needed—conveniently, those that were deemed inappropriate in the age of modernity also happened to be unsuitable to the deformation imposed by the Mobutist state.

The realm of law became the field of predilection to institute such amendments. As Young and Turner note, starting 5 January 1973 with the introduction of the 73/015 legislation, “collectivities lost all autonomy and became simple territorial subdivisions,” “distinctions among chieftaincies, sectors, and centres was abolished,” and “collectivity chiefs were integrated into the regional administration.”⁵⁰ Ironically, this initiative designed under

⁴⁸ Wyatt MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture: The Conceptual Challenge of the Particular* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), 112.

⁴⁹ MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture*, 136.

⁵⁰ Young and Turner, *The Rise and Decline of the Zaïrian State*, 236–237.

the guise of a return to “traditional African values” was more in line with Belgian colonial policy, as De Boeck remarks, further explaining that

the repression of traditional chieftaincy, so characteristic of the regime's policy in the mid-1970s, was not confined to a strictly political level, but was also accompanied by a repressive attitude towards the precolonial cultural heritage as a possible source of resistance against the regime.⁵¹

Only in the later years of Mobutu's reign, from 1982 and well into the 1990s, did the state contemplate the idea of working with traditional power structures instead of simply abolishing them, probably as mounting criticism against the Mobutist regime undermined its legitimacy both at home and abroad.⁵² Even before then, the judiciary had been altered to such degree that it verged on the grotesque. The revised Constitution of 15 August 1974 announced the incorporation of “le Bureau politique, le Congrès, le Conseil législatif, le Conseil exécutif [et] le Conseil judiciaire” into the MPR, and the decision was supported by *authenticité's* rhetoric insofar as it could serve the regime's purposes:

Ainsi se trouvent traduits de manière conforme à notre conception politique traditionnelle, le principe du dialogue, l'esprit de la palabre dans le souci non de contraindre, mais de persuader ; la plénitude des pouvoirs reconnue dans la personne du Chef du Mouvement populaire de la révolution [Mobutu] traduit, à son tour, une autre réalité politique traditionnelle, à savoir l'ignorance de la pluralité des chefs et de la séparation des pouvoirs.⁵³

The concentration of authority in the hands of the chief had already been made effective with a legislation passed on 15 February 1972, proclaiming that the words of the head of state had legal force in Zaïre (*les paroles du Chef de l'État ont force de loi*).⁵⁴ An analogy can be made with Léopold II's rule of the Congo by decree through 1908, the king having arranged through legal means his sole ownership of a territory of 20 million people.⁵⁵ The notion of *terra nullius* that Zaïre contested in 1975 through the outlining of a new definition based on

⁵¹ De Boeck, “Postcolonialism, Power and Identity,” 82.

⁵² De Boeck, “Postcolonialism, Power and Identity,” 83.

⁵³ Bayona ba Meya Muna Kimvimba, “Le recours à l'authenticité dans la réforme du droit au Zaïre,” in *Dynamiques et finalités des droits africains : Actes du colloque de la Sorbonne “La vie du droit en Afrique,”* ed. Gérard Conac (Paris: Economica, 1980), 232.

⁵⁴ Pauwels and Pintens, *La législation zaïroise relative au nom*, 13.

⁵⁵ Silverman, “Modernité sans frontières,” 738.

authenticité is somewhat reminiscent of Léopold's utilisation of the term *terres vacantes* in order to assess his right to land in the Congo. As Silverman aptly demonstrates, he relied on a team of judicial advisors, among whom was jurisconsult Edmond Picard, who declared in 1885 that "all open and unclaimed land, or *terres vacantes*, was the property of the state, that is, the king's property." A judgement drafted on 15 November 1892 by Picard, then a lawyer at the Brussels Supreme Court, "asserted the sound legal basis for the definition of the domainal *terres vacantes*" and concluded that "the king's property rights superseded requirements for free trade as stipulated in the 1884 Berlin Conference."⁵⁶

Those *terres vacantes* constituted a major source of capital that had to be leased, since Léopold did not possess the resources to exploit his entire domain.⁵⁷ Between 1876 and 1889, a number of private companies were created to make the Congo Free State profitable through the collection of ivory and rubber extraction; some like the *Association internationale africaine* (AIA) were motivated by laudable humanitarian intentions, despite being essentially front organisations. Léopold reserved himself the right to a majority of shareholdings, leading Hochschild to describe the king's pursuit in the following terms:

In setting up this structure, Léopold was like the manager of a venture capital syndicate today. He has essentially found a way to attract other people's capital to his investment schemes while he retained half the proceeds. In the end, what with various taxes and fees the companies paid the state, it came to more than half.⁵⁸

When Léopold was forced to renounce his claims to the Congo in 1908 after reports of ruthless massacres committed in the African heartland started to appear in European newspapers, the economic workings of the Belgian colony did not fundamentally change; Léopold received some 50 million francs "as a mark of gratitude for his great sacrifices made for the Congo,"⁵⁹ individual investors held onto their portfolios and private corporations

⁵⁶ Edmond Picard cited in Silverman, "Modernité sans frontières," 753–754.

⁵⁷ Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem, *Histoire générale du Congo*, 323.

⁵⁸ Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 117.

⁵⁹ Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 259.

retained a firm hand on the colony's sizeable resources. After independence, the former colony attempted to reverse the trend by promulgating the Bakajika Law in 1966, which "stipulated that all public land was a domain of the Zaïrian nation-state, and formally extinguished all land grants and concessionary powers delegated by the colonial state."⁶⁰

Under the Second Republic, Mobutu affirmed his intention to continue this process through the "Zaïrianisation" of the economy, a platform vaguely described on 30 November 1973 before the National Legislative Council. Here again, the seizing and redistribution of agricultural, commercial, and manufacturing foreign assets by the state was promoted with the language of *authenticité*, whose interpretation of land ownership summoned the "African tradition" in support of its pretensions. In the words of Bayona ba Meya Muna Kimvimba, the President of the Supreme Court:

Il est une constante en honneur dans la plupart sinon dans la totalité des coutumes africaines, selon laquelle, la terre n'a jamais fait l'objet d'appropriation individuelle ; la propriété foncière est et a toujours été collective ; jamais la terre ne pouvait faire l'objet d'une aliénation, car vendre la terre eût équivalu à vendre son âme, ses forces propres, ses forces cosmiques.⁶¹

The "collective good" that was land had to be made more efficient since it was Mobutism's objective to put the country's resources to good use. On 26 December 1973, the Bureau politique, Conseil des Ministres and a number of deputies reunited to discuss the practical application of Mobutu's call to action. In effect, they bartered slices of the "magnificent Zaïrian cake," to paraphrase Léopold's own reading of the Scramble for Africa; the acquisition of these newly nationalised businesses was made by the ruling political elite and Mobutu's close entourage. There was public outcry in Zaïre following the implementation of these measures: Mobutu responded by bureaucratising his "Zaïrianisation" plan, in an effort to appear transparent while officialising neopatrimonial practices through paperwork. Theoretically, any Zaïrian could therefore buy a plantation or a business from the state by

⁶⁰ Young and Turner, *The Rise and Decline of the Zaïrian State*, 288.

⁶¹ Bayona ba Meya Muna Kimvimba, "Le recours à l'authenticité dans la réforme du droit au Zaïre," 232.

filling out a form, and after the conduct of a solvency check was performed. This did not prevent members of the Bureau politique to be awarded plantations, and deputies to be exempted from the painstaking application process. As Young and Turner note:

The cement of clientage was access to resources. The sudden takeover of this huge zone of the economy offered a vast new pool of goods for patrimonial distribution to deserving members of the political class. . . . Potentially lucrative assets were to be acquired as virtually free goods; the political capital of proximity to power could be thus converted into solid material equity with the promise of effortless accumulation. Among other things, the Zaïrianisation measures were a class action by the politico-commercial bourgeoisie.⁶²

The “Zaïrianisation” initiative was obviously a failure, marred by the incompetence of corrupted *acquéreurs* with no previous experience or knowledge of whole swathes of Zaïre’s economy—but with a penchant for tax evasion—whose actions led to massive layoffs, rampant shortages and inflation. The subsequent “radicalisation of the Zaïrian revolution” heralded in 1976 in light of the disastrous state of the Zaïrian economy was yet another smokescreen; while publicly reiterating the need to declare “war on the bourgeoisie” by forcing various industries like transportation, petroleum, mines, agriculture, metallurgy, financial institutions and tourism to come under state control, Mobutu limited the scope of his reform programme and only a handful of enterprises were concerned by the empty piece of legislation.⁶³ These voluntary mistakes were only made worse by the fall in copper prices and the rise of oil towards the end of the 1970s, which prompted Mobutu to announce the “Mobutu Plan” in 1977—despite its name, none of it was the work of the leader himself, since the plan in question was to seek foreign aid and turn to Western creditors for help.⁶⁴ The relation of dependence that Mobutu fiercely condemned and combated through his *recours à l’authenticité*—but never truly expunged and, on the contrary, perpetuated in his conception of the state apparatus—appeared to have been solely reforged in postcolonial Zaïre, the same

⁶² Young and Turner, *The Rise and Decline of the Zaïrian State*, 328 and 338.

⁶³ Young and Turner, *The Rise and Decline of the Zaïrian State*, 354–356.

⁶⁴ Young and Turner, *The Rise and Decline of the Zaïrian State*, 361 and 391–395.

way the “African tradition” Mobutu obstinately upheld became a rhetorical instrument at the service of an oppressive potentate whose very origins may be confounded with those of the imperial father figure itself.

There is a tendency in academic literature about the Mobutist state to cast Zaïrians as “helpless spectators” in the face of the countless abuses committed by the regime, as Young and Turner suggest;⁶⁵ Schatzberg insists that Mobutu succeeded in the “occupation of all available political space and ideological obfuscation” through strategies of dominance and coercion;⁶⁶ Callaghy, comparing the fate of the Zaïrian citizen to that of the Frenchman under absolutist rule, contends that centralisation weakened the power of traditional communities and destroyed their sense of identity while increasing their dependence on the totalitarian state.⁶⁷ I do not mean to underplay the devastating consequences of Mobutu’s alteration of the “African heritage” to serve his own ends upon Zaïrian society; perhaps one of the reasons why the regime remained in power for so long is because of the ambiguous nature of *authenticité* and its versatility in coopting traditional features of Congolese society—patrilineal power relations or the “objectification” of the chieftain, as discussed earlier—in support of a repressive intent. After all, the *abacost* and *animation* did find a number of supporters, at least at the time when they were first introduced—supporters like Matulu, for example. Nevertheless, such understanding of the postcolonial subject as completely acquiescent or subservient seems to overlook possible strategies of insubordination that lay outside our common conceptions of resistance, time, and history.

Consider the endurance of practices like *kindoki*, *toro*, *iloki* or *evu*, whose translations as “witchcraft” oftentimes inaccurately “[allocate] the concepts to a domain, together with ‘magic,’ ‘religion,’ and ‘superstition,’ in which they are subject to analyses that question their

⁶⁵ Young and Turner, *The Rise and Decline of the Zaïrian State*, 395.

⁶⁶ Schatzberg, *The Dialectics of Oppression*, 142.

⁶⁷ Callaghy, *The State-Society Struggle*, 422.

rationality,” as MacGaffey notes.⁶⁸ Instead of approaching *kindoki* as the mere belief in occult forces—and thus positing its lack of validity as a coherent system of thought—MacGaffey highlights both its strengths and its weaknesses as a political theory, not better nor worse than the tenets upon which our democracies are built. “Opposition to Mobutu in the 1990s included scandalous and often pornographic stories,” he writes, “widely circulated in the press as well as by word of mouth, which accused him of strengthening his person and his regime by witchcraft and by occult techniques.”⁶⁹ De Boeck mentions the lingering suspicion that “nocturnal powers and forces” were a key factor in power struggles throughout the Congo’s history, noting that the Luunda king was suspected to “eat” his descendants.⁷⁰ Similarly, MacGaffey emphasises the fact “wealthy people [were] admired for their ability to consume, to ‘eat’ (*dia*) [while] witches [were] supposed literally to consume the substance of others, to ‘eat people’ (*dia bantu*),” adding that “chiefs (and in Zaïre the President of the Republic and his associates) were believed to increase their power by acquiring the vital force of their victims.”⁷¹ This was reflected in the testimony of Dominique Sakombi Inongo, Mobutu’s former Minister of Information who, once disgraced, admitted that he had been working with sorcerers and participated in meetings during which the ruling elite feasted with demons.⁷² Whether all these examples are acts of dissidence that actively worked against the regime—though Sakombi Inongo’s confessions certainly did—or simply “authentic” characteristics of Congolese society that withstood their attempted discontinuation under the “modern” terms of *authenticité*, remains to be determined. It is nonetheless interesting to note that such practices have prevailed in the Congo from precolonial times to the present day, and further research should be conducted in order to

⁶⁸ MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture*, 3.

⁶⁹ MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture*, 225.

⁷⁰ De Boeck, “Postcolonialism, Power and Identity,” 81.

⁷¹ MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture*, 34.

⁷² See Pius Ngandu Nkashama, *Les magiciens du repentir : Les confessions de Frère Dominique* (Sakombi Inongo) (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1995).

assess the political, social, and cultural role of *kindoki* in reaction to the foreign innovations of Belgian rule, or the domestic perversions of the Mobutist state.

Studying the authenticity that *authenticité* purposefully evaded would allow us to look at Congolese history itself at face value, without discarding the singularities that distinguish it from other societies—foreign as they may seem. We must do this, in part, by acknowledging the fact these terms that help us make sense of the world—words like “state,” “nation” and “government”—do not always reflect the reality they are meant to convey, whether due to the failings of an oppressive regime⁷³ or the shortcomings of their conceptual underpinnings. The persistence of *kindoki* also indicates that it is crucial to take into consideration a different time that is not our own, this “time of history and of collective memory (culturally Judeo-Christian) [which] provides the basis for the objectivisation of the world,” in Jewsiewicki’s words,⁷⁴ nor the “suspended time” calling for the effacement of a traumatic experience while establishing two separate epochs that gravitate around an impenetrable wound—a time *authenticité* exemplifies, but as the rule rather than the exception. This time permeates the way we remember the past in African and European historiographies as in political discourses, be it in the former imperial Belgium or in the Zaïrian postcolony. It remains a necessity to look at history from the perspective of yet another time, one that resists our attempts to conquer it, to subject it to the paradoxical and biased histories we tell ourselves in a desperate effort to grasp the meaning of, and retain control over, these memories that stubbornly refuse to leave us.

⁷³ As De Boeck writes: “Why is a building called ‘national bank,’ ‘university,’ ‘state department,’ ‘hospital’ or ‘school’ when the activities which take place in it cannot be given standard meanings and realities usually covered by those words? . . . Why continue the social convention of referring to a banknote as ‘money’ when one is confronted daily with the fact that it is just a worthless slip of paper?” In De Boeck, “Postcolonialism, Power and Identity,” 91.

⁷⁴ Bogumil Jewsiewicki and V. Y. Mudimbe, “Africans’ Memories and Contemporary History of Africa.” *History and Theory* Vol. 32, N° 4, Beiheft 32: History Making in Africa (1993): 6.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Mathilde Leduc-Grimaldi and Lore Van de Broeck for providing access to archival material from the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium. I am considerably indebted to Professor Mairi MacDonald for her invaluable advice, recommendations and comments throughout my research and writing process, and not least, for our numerous discussions about the peculiar case of Zaïre under Mobutu, and what it means to write history despite the imperfections of our memory of things past.

Bibliography

Adelman, Kenneth Lee. "The Recourse to Authenticity and Négritude in Zaïre." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* Vol. 13, N° 1 (March 1975): 134–139.

Bayona ba Meya Muna Kimvimba. "Le recours à l'authenticité dans la réforme du droit au Zaïre." In *Dynamiques et finalités des droits africains : Actes du colloque de la Sorbonne "La vie du droit en Afrique,"* edited by Gérard Conac. Paris: Economica, 1980.

Callaghy, Thomas M. *The State-Society Struggle: Zaïre in Comparative Perspective*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1984.

De Boeck, Filip. "Postcolonialism, Power and Identity: Local and Global Perspectives from Zaïre." In *Postcolonial Identities in Africa*, edited by Richard Werbner and Terence Ranger, 75–106. London: Zed Books, 1996.

Fabian, Johannes. *Remembering the Present: Painting and Popular History in Zaïre*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996.

Forces armées zaïroises, eds. *Mémoire de réflexion, d'action et d'information. Préface du général d'armée Mobutu Sese Seko, commissaire d'État chargé de la Défense nationale, commandant suprême des Forces armées zaïroises*. Kinshasa: Cabinet du Département de la Défense nationale, 1972.

Hochschild, Adam. *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1998.

Jewsiewicki, Bogumil. "Collective Memory and the Stakes of Power: A Reading of Popular Zairian Historical Discourses." *History of Africa* Vol. 13 (1986): 195–223.

Jewsiewicki, Bogumil, and V. Y. Mudimbe. "Africans' Memories and Contemporary History of Africa." *History and Theory* Vol. 32, N° 4, Beiheft 32: History Making in Africa (1993): 1–11.

Lecours, André. "Political Institutions, Elites, and Territorial Identity Formation in Belgium." *National Identities* Vol. 3, N° 1 (2001): 51–68.

MacGaffey, Wyatt. *Kongo Political Culture: The Conceptual Challenge of the Particular*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000.

Matulu, Tshibumba Kanda, and Johannes Fabian. "The History of Zaïre as Told and Painted by Tshibumba Kanda Matulu in Conversation with Johannes Fabian." *Archives of Popular Swahili* Vol. 2, N° 2 (1998). Accessed 5 April 2016.

<http://www.lpca.socsci.uva.nl/aps/tshibumba1a.html>.

Mbembe, Achille. *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001.

Meeuwis, Michael. "The Origins of Belgian Colonial Language Policies in the Congo." *Language Matters* 42:2 (2011): 190–206.

- Mobutu Sese Seko. *Discours, allocutions et messages*, vol. 3. Paris: Éditions du Jaguar, 1988.
- Mobutu Sese Seko. *Mobutu : Dignité pour l'Afrique. Entretiens avec Jean-Louis Remilleux*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1989.
- Ndaywel è Nziem, Isidore. *Histoire générale du Congo. De l'héritage ancien à la République démocratique*. Brussels: Duculot, 1998.
- Ngandu Nkashama, Pius. *Les magiciens du repentir : Les confessions de Frère Dominique (Sakombi Inongo)*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995.
- Pauwels, Johan M., and Walter Pintens. *La législation zaïroise relative au nom. Droit et authenticité africaine*. Brussels: Koninklijke Academie voor Overzeese Wetenschappen/Académie royale des sciences d'outre-mer, 1983.
- Schatzberg, Michael G. *The Dialectics of Oppression in Zaïre*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988.
- Silverman, Debora. "'Modernité sans frontières': Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of the Avant-Garde in King Leopold's Belgium, 1885–1910." *American Imago* Vol. 68, N° 4 (Winter 2011): 707–797.
- Stanard, Matthew G. *Selling the Congo: A History of European Pro-Empire Propaganda and the Making of Belgian Imperialism*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2011.
- Union des écrivains zaïrois, eds. *Authenticité et développement : Actes du Colloque national sur l'authenticité*. Paris: Présence Africaine, 1982.
- United States Department of State, Bureau of African Affairs, Office of Central African Affairs. 5 October 1973. "U.S.-Zaïre Relations. [Conversation with President Mobutu]" Confidential memorandum of conversation, DNSA Collection: Kissinger Transcripts. Accessed 5 April 2016. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1679126007?accountid=14771>.
- Van Beurden, Sarah. "The Art of (Re)Possession: Heritage and the Cultural Politics of Congo's Decolonisation." *Journal of African History* 56 (2015): 143–164.
- Vanthemsche, Guy. *Belgium and the Congo, 1885–1980*. Translated by Alice Cameron and Stephen Windross. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- White, Bob W. "L'incroyable machine d'authenticité : l'animation politique et l'usage public de la culture dans le Zaïre de Mobutu." *Anthropologie et Sociétés* Vol. 30, N° 2 (2006): 43–63.
- Young, Crawford. "Zaïre: The Shattered Illusion of the Integral State." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* Vol. 32, N° 2 (June 1994): 247–263.
- Young, Crawford, and Thomas Turner. *The Rise and Decline of the Zaïrian State*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.