Taming the Heart of Darkness: On Researching and Writing about Mobutu’s Zaïre

The mind of man is capable of anything—because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future. What was there after all? Joy, fear, sorrow, devotion, valour, rage—who can tell?—but truth—truth stripped of its cloak of time. Let the fool gape and shudder—the man knows, and can look on without a wink. But he must at least be as much of a man as these on the shore. He must meet that truth with his own true stuff—with his own inborn strength. Principles won’t do. Acquisitions, clothes, pretty rags—rags that would fly off at the first good shake. No; you want a deliberate belief.

— Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness

My fascination with the Congo began years ago, when I first read David van Reybrouck’s Congo: The Epic History of a People, a sweeping history of the country largely based on oral testimonies collected over the course of several years of research. Full of rich anecdotes, the book is a reminder of the beauty of the historian’s discipline; those oddities of the past often rival the most compelling fictions, and offer narratives whose theatricality nonetheless carry legions of truths. A few weeks into our TRN411 seminar on the decolonisation of Africa, I became obsessed with a sentence written by Aimé Césaire. Speaking of the African societies destroyed by imperialism, he wrote: “They were the fact, they did not pretend to be the idea.”¹ My December midterm examined the implications of this sentence in Algeria and Madagascar in the process of decolonisation following World War II; I suggested that the repression, violence, and systematic discrimination of the colonial subject forced the articulation of ideas in the anticolonial struggle as a means to achieve independence and freedom.

But what if these new “ideas” of postcolonial African societies failed in achieving those goals? Could it be that some of them also reproduced the colonial violence they insisted on refuting? These two questions permeated my thinking about African decolonisation as part of this seminar, and they became the starting point of my research on Mobutu’s Zaïre, an eloquent expression of an “idea” based on African societies understood as “facts,” yet an “idea” at the service of a brutal authoritarian regime that ruled the Congo for over 30 years. It was supported by a doctrine known as authenticité, which has rarely received the attention it deserves by scholars. After reading some of the major books and articles published on the subject, either as the result of my own research using keywords through the University of Toronto Libraries’ website in order to write my research proposal and following suggestions made by Professor MacDonald during one of our numerous conversations about the Congolese case, I carefully dissected each of their bibliographies, noting multiple occurrences of books and articles—that is, if one author was cited by three of the main texts I found useful, I made sure to look at his or her work; sometimes it was not directly linked to my subject of inquiry, but it nonetheless provided me with a more comprehensive picture of the scholarship produced on the Congo/Zaïre. I think this is crucial even if the material remains “background information” rather than actual citations on paper; it allows for a better

understanding of the literature of a particular topic and led me to ask myself questions about how I situated my work within that literature. Is my argument in continuity with someone else's work, or with a particular stream of African historiography? What are the theoretical or historical foundations underlying my research? These are important questions that I always keep in mind, even as my main argument becomes clearer and the research process unfolds.

Perhaps that’s what research does—it makes you wary of phrases that have seemingly become facts, whether in academic journals, books or articles, and you find yourself questioning the validity of these sentences. In the case of authenticity, it was the use of words like “propaganda,” “rhetoric,” or “farce” to explain the tenets of Mobutu's doctrine that raised my suspicions. It is precisely the reason why I decided to look at authenticity at face value, to revert to the original speeches, written documents and interviews left by Mobutu in order to confront its claims. I was surprised to find many of these in books that were available at the University of Toronto libraries, whether at Robarts or Downsview, which I had access to through intercampus delivery. Two collections of proceedings from colloquiums on authenticity and African law (Authenticité et développement : Actes du colloque national sur l'authenticité et Dynamiques et finalités des droits africains : Actes du colloque de la Sorbonne “La vie du droit en Afrique”) were especially useful for the first part of my essay, and having access to the memorandums of the Kissinger Collections from ProQuest's Digital National Security Archive allowed me to briefly mention the interactions between Mobutu’s regime and the outside world.

For the second part of my research dedicated to the applications of authenticity in practice and the results of Mobutu's political, legal and economic policies, I used databases such as JSTOR and Project Muse to find articles that would support my thesis. More specifically, my searches were made by combining different keywords whose relationship I wished to investigate (“ethnicity,” “government” and “Mobutu,” for example, or “identity politics,” “Belgium” and “nationalism”). I evaluated primary sources by searching for elements of continuity between colonial and postcolonial discourses, which both appealed to a certain “tradition,” either in the métropole—Belgium's imperial aims as a way to unify the newly created European nation-state still divided along linguistic lines—or in the postcolony—Zaïre's attempt at reviving the “African heritage” of precolonial times in support of its dictatorial agenda. For secondary sources, I sought analytical perspectives on the dialectic between the colonial and the postcolonial subject, as exemplified in the works of scholars such as Young and Turner, Callaghy, De Boeck and Schatzberg; I also relied on general histories or historical narratives that served as adjutants, so I could keep track of the Congo/Zaïre’s complex chronology, like Ndaywel e Nziem’s Histoire générale du Congo.

Examining the language of authenticity in order to assess its “authenticity” required me to study a variety of discourses, both officially sanctioned by the state or informally articulated by Zaïrians. In order to do so, I drew on Mobutu’s own speeches collected in different volumes and available at Robarts Library; additionally, I utilised other written documents produced by the Zaïrian government during that time—oral statements pronounced before the International Court of Justice by the country’s President of the Supreme Court, official transcripts from speeches made at the UN General Assembly, legal material cited by secondary sources. Professor MacDonald’s connections to the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium, proved an invaluable resource to access primary documents unavailable elsewhere in North America. I am particularly grateful to Mathilde Leduc-Grimaldi and Lore Van de Broeck, who were kind enough to send me digitalised copies of
archival material including an internal memorandum published by Zaïre’s Cabinet du Département de la Défense nationale, which allowed me to look at authenticié from the perspective of the military. Nevertheless, I also wanted to include the views of everyday Zaïrians as a counterpoint to the government’s public discourse; while direct criticism against the regime remained outside the scope of my essay, I did find evidence that dissention existed.²

In fact, it is precisely this aspect I wish to further examine in the upcoming months. The scope of my subject was quite large, and I wish I had more time—and more pages—to write about the various modes of resistance against authenticié within Zaïre. My conclusion briefly hinted at some of these modes, but a comparative analysis between their sustaining under colonial rule and in the postcolonial era may reveal the falseness of some of our assumptions about the Congo/Zaïre, particularly the fact that Zaïrians remained passive observers in their own drama. I firmly believe this is the goal of any historian: to bring out the ambiguities that official histories stubbornly refuse to acknowledge. And while I do not have the pretention to shed light on the complexity of such processes as remembering, forgetting, or effacing the past, at least I hope my work as a researcher may help us in taming this “heart of darkness” that lies within our collective memories.

² These sources include a discussion between anthropologist Johannes Fabian and the Zaïrian artist Tshibumba Kanda Matulu, the work of Wyatt MacGaffey on kindoki or “witchcraft” as a valid system of thought working against the “innovations” of the colonial power, and an open letter addressed to Mobutu in 1980 by a group of dissenting members of parliament, to name only a few.