

The Inextinguishable Legacy of Patrice Lumumba

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On June 20th, 2022, the Belgian government returned a gold-capped tooth to the family of Patrice Lumumba, attempting to bring his tortuous tale, which began more than sixty years ago on the eve of Congolese independence, to an end. The tooth is the only remaining body part of Lumumba, secretly kept by a Belgian police officer, Gerard Soete. Soete and his brother exhumed and dissolved his corpse in sulfuric acid to erase the last traces of his assassination in 1961. Only in 2016, sixteen years after Soete's death and more than half a century after Lumumba's murder, the tooth was confiscated from Soete's house; six years later, the tooth was finally given a proper burial by Lumumba's family. Western powers have only begun to examine their colonial legacy in the last few decades, and there is still much to unravel. The story of the first Congolese prime minister, a debacle of racial discrimination and political schemes, remains as relevant as ever.¹

A deeper look at Lumumba can reveal truths about Congolese nationalism, Pan-Africanism, and anticolonialism as embodied by one of its symbols from the 1960s.² The short life of the first Congolese prime minister also discloses a lot about the American desire to see these ideologies fail. This essay argues that the assassination of Lumumba made the African leader an undying figure that could not be erased from popular memory. The popular remembrance of Lumumba acted as the defiant stance of anticolonialists against Western powers who wished to make Lumumba unremembered. The first section of this essay describes the main reasons the Western powers, headed by the American government, opposed Patrice Lumumba. The second section focuses on the international protests that occurred in 1961 following Lumumba's death. The third section appraises the socio-political influence of Lumumba in the Congo to the present day. The fourth section is a study of Lumumba's legacy through popular art and culture. Finally, the conclusion evaluates the legacy of Lumumba and reflects on the imperialist roots of the current instability of the DRC.

The Western boycott of Lumumba

Once the date of Congolese independence had been set, Lumumba's position in the Congo was too solidified to have him removed without losing face. The process of decolonization had to maintain a veil of lawfulness to display to the international community. However, short of forcibly removing Lumumba from his position, the Western officials and business

¹ Perry, "A Grisly Souvenir of Global Oppression."

² Pan-Africanists resisted the exploitation and oppression of all those of African heritage, opposed and refuted the ideologies of anti-African racism and celebrated African achievement, history and the very notion of being African.

representatives threw everything they could at the prime minister to obstruct the path to full Congolese independence.³

The US attempted to undermine the Congolese government through the covert actions of the CIA. The international faction gathering against Lumumba was not only composed of government officials and diplomats. Businessmen along with the companies they represented were just as engaged in their efforts to overthrow Lumumba and place at the head of the Congolese government someone who would be more permissive.⁴

The Western powers fabricated innumerable reasons to justify their interference in an independent Congo. The communist takeover of the country often made it to the top of that list. The “red scare” was fueled by the ongoing Cold War, which was nearing one of its hottest periods. Studying the interventions of foreign powers in the Congo through the Cold War lens is important. However, as is often the case with international impasses occurring during this period, it is critical to keep in mind other factors as well. The Americans wished to promote a liberal ideology in the colonies becoming independent around the world and used the Cold War tensions and the red scare as a way to justify these breaches of international law.⁵

Raoul Peck, director of the biopic *Lumumba* (2000), mirrored the feeling that “the world is divided ideologically. It's not east and west anymore. It's those who have and those who don't have.”⁶ The worldwide adoption of liberalism would not only give the Americans the upper hand in the Cold War; perhaps even more importantly, it would yield enormous economic benefits for the US government, Western allies, and American businesses.

African leaders such as Lumumba were more concerned with bringing colonialism to an end than with adopting one of the Cold War ideologies. Their priority was self-determination, enabling freedom and social progress in the Congo.⁷ What was important to the Western powers was not that Lumumba may be a communist (though that fear certainly struck a chord with many). The fundamental clash between the independence movement Lumumba represented and the control the Western alliance aimed to maintain over the Congo threatened the stability of the country. Lumumba acted as a threat to the status quo the Western allies sought to maintain after independence through the steady sabotage of the Congo's autonomy. The threat of a solid independence movement bolstered by Lumumba's fiery rhetoric was too much to

³ Young, “Ralph Bunche and Patrice Lumumba,” 134.

⁴ Vanthemsche, *Belgium and the Congo*. 243.

⁵ Kent, “The Neo-Colonialism of Decolonisation” 104; For a comprehensive analysis of the use of red scare tactics in the Congo Crisis by the western alliance, read Anne-Sophie Gijs' *Le pouvoir de l'absent* (2016).

⁶ Zook, “A Decade with Lumumba,” 46.

⁷ Meriwether, *Tears, Fire, and Blood*. 7.

handle for the Western allies, thus consolidating their hostility towards the prime minister and signing off his death sentence.⁸

In contrast with the common perception of Lumumba, the Congolese prime minister was never alone in his stance against Western neocolonial policies. His popularity in the Congo and on an international level was superior to that of any other Congolese politician in 1960. However, ethnic politics in the Congo stirred up by Western intervention made it difficult for Lumumba's government to keep the Congo united.⁹ Eventually, Lumumba's foes concluded that Lumumba's political cancellation did not suffice.¹⁰ His magnetism in the Congo was too significant: Lumumba had to be permanently eliminated. The clash between his nationalist aspirations and the objectives of Western powers made this thought acceptable and even justifiable.¹¹

Patrice Lumumba was assassinated on January 17th, 1961; three weeks later, the rest of the world learned of his death. His murder had considerable repercussions on the rest of the Congo Crisis. The death of Lumumba impacted the worldwide anticolonial movement and partially inspired the demands for black civil rights and emancipation. Lumumba's posthumous reach was larger than it ever was in his lifetime, thwarting the Western desire to silence the voices and values Lumumba stood for.

The motives of Western powers in the facilitation of Lumumba's assassination have been thoroughly researched by scholars in the last few decades.¹² It has been positively demonstrated that the Belgians and the Americans cooperated with Congolese politicians to bring about the demise of Lumumba.¹³ Despite the absence of communism in Lumumba's ideology, the Red Scare played a major role in the decision to assassinate Lumumba. Communism was the scapegoat for the murder of Lumumba.¹⁴

The execution of Lumumba was only the last step of the crusade Western colonial powers engaged in against the prime minister. Not all actors in the Congo Crisis were actively involved in the decision to transfer Lumumba to the province of Katanga in 1961, which was in every way a death sentence. However, all those who had inhibited Lumumba's government and undermined the prime minister were happy to stand back once the matter was "in African

⁸ Gerits, *The Ideological Scramble for Africa*. 117-118.

⁹ Zeilig, *Lumumba : Africa's Lost Leader*. 112-113.

¹⁰ In September 1960, after being removed as prime minister by President Kasa-Vubu, Lumumba was effectively held under house arrest by Mobutu's troops. Mobutu argued this was done to ensure Lumumba's safety.

¹¹ Kent, "The Neo-Colonialism of Decolonisation," 111-112.

¹² Ludo De Witte's *The Assassination of Lumumba* and Kuklick and Gerard's *Death in the Congo* consist of two of the most comprehensive accounts of the international maneuvering behind Lumumba's death.

¹³ Gerard and Kuklick, *Death in the Congo*. 215-216.

¹⁴ Gijs, *Le pouvoir de l'absent*. 439.

hands,” and allow the execution to play out just as it did. Everyone was better off with Lumumba dead.¹⁵ Lumumba’s death mirrored his short tenure as prime minister, in that it was characterized by a tumultuous antagonism that refused Lumumba any rest. The violence he endured was the direct expression of the hatred the Katangan secessionists fostered for Lumumba, as the international diplomats and Belgian “technicians” turned a blind eye to the slaughter of the nation’s rightfully elected prime minister.

International protests and internal turmoil

The news of Lumumba’s death was broadcast internationally in February 1961. Newspapers hailed the murder as “one of the most horrible crimes that weighed on Belgian colonialists” and acknowledged the huge international and local consequences of his death.¹⁶ Protests were organized around the world, mourning the death of the African leader. Protesters gathered in front of the UN headquarters in Washington, showing that from the beginning many did not believe Lumumba’s death was solely an African affair. African-Americans drew comparisons between Lumumba’s death and that of Emmett Till.¹⁷

The brutal murder hinted at the suppression and racism black people had endured in the whole world for centuries; the association between the death of the Congolese prime minister and the racial policies that had characterized decolonization was not overlooked by anticolonial activists and political thinkers. Black activists such as Malcolm X famously recognized Lumumba as the “greatest black man who ever walked the African continent.”¹⁸ Maya Angelou also expressed her mourning of the African leader:

I knew no words which would match the emptiness of the moment. Patrice Lumumba, Kwame Nkrumah and Sékou Touré were the Holy African Triumvirate which radical black Americans held dear, and we needed our leaders desperately. We had been abused, and so long abused, that the loss of one hero was a setback of such proportion it could dishearten us and weaken the struggle.¹⁹

¹⁵ Nkrumah, *Challenge of the Congo*. 118.

¹⁶ “Assassins,” *Avghi*, February 14th, 1961; “Lumumba is dead,” *France-Soir*, February 15, 1961.

¹⁷ Clarke, “The New Afro-American Nationalism,” 285.

¹⁸ Malcolm X, “Harlem, rally for the founding of the Organization of Afro-American Unity, June 28, 1964,” 85.

¹⁹ Angelou, *The Heart of a Woman*. 107.

UN representative Ralph Bunche partly held Lumumba responsible for his own death, asserting that the Congolese politician had made bitter enemies in his career.²⁰ The UN's response to the assassination was highly criticized.

The position of the Leopoldville government did not stabilize after Lumumba's death. The international protests sparked by the murder of the prime minister brought anticolonial forces together. Lumumbist forces reorganized themselves to maintain the Congo's unity.²¹ The US government monitored Congolese politics, working hard to establish a pro-Western regime in the Congo. In 1965, the Americans backed Joseph Mobutu's *coup d'état* that kickstarted his autocratic regime.²² The American imperialist meddling in the Congo did not end with Lumumba's death.

In order to prevent the birth of a new face of Congolese nationalism, the image of Lumumba had to be wiped from the collective memory.²³ His body was unearthed and dissolved in acid. The destruction of Lumumba's body prevented the building of a grave dedicated to the prime minister, which could have become a pilgrimage destination for anticolonial and Pan-African militants. However, although his body could be destroyed, the idea of the Pan-African martyr could not be erased from the mind of Africans. Lumumba's death inspired a leftist swerve in the first generation of Congolese students to grow up in an independent Congo. The progressive movement was established in memory of Patrice Lumumba and continued to fight for the Congo's sovereignty and social progress for years after his death.²⁴ The Congolese students refused to forget their first prime minister. They demanded a governmental investigation into Lumumba's murder and his proclamation as a national hero.²⁵

The legacies of Congolese nationalism and Pan-Africanism

The assassination of Lumumba was the embodiment of the enduring violation of Congolese sovereignty by Western powers, which itself is a prime example of neocolonial action in the 20th century.²⁶ The African continent made a decisive step towards independence in 1960; nationalist movements began working together and Pan-Africanist solidarity swept through the continent.

²⁰ Hickner, "Patrice Lumumba and the Black Freedom Movement," 203; Ralph Bunche was an African-American diplomat who had received the 1950 Nobel Peace prize for his mediation in Israel in the 1940s. Bunche was sent by Hammarskjöld, the UN Secretary-General, to the Congo in the hope that he would mediate between the Congolese government, the United Nations and the Belgian authorities.

²¹ Hoskyns, *The Congo Since Independence*. 301.

²² Meriwether, *Tears, Fire, and Blood*. 97.

²³ De Witte, *L'assassinat de Lumumba*. 12.

²⁴ Monaville, "The Political Life of the Dead Lumumba," 32.

²⁵ Monaville, *Students of the World*. 123-124.

²⁶ Kendall. "Postcolonial Hauntings and Cold War Continuities," 558.

The development of postcolonial Africa suffered a terrible blow when Lumumba was killed. Frantz Fanon, the author of the influential book *The Wretched of the Earth*, famously stated that if Africa's development was compared to a revolver, the Congo represented the trigger of the gun. The emancipation of the whole continent was stunted through the murder of one of its most hopeful leaders.²⁷

Activists and politicians everywhere understood the relevance of the Congo's independence to all of Africa. The Congo was one of the largest and richest nations with a dark history of colonialism. Western powers sought to establish their continued presence in postcolonial Congo through a veil of stability. Lumumba was not willing to accept the intrusion of neocolonial interests in the Congo. His murder changed the course of decolonization in all of Africa.²⁸ The quiet stability Western powers sought to establish in Africa was no longer possible after the outcry and protests that followed his death.

Lumumba's fate enabled his swift martyrdom. Since his end was so tragic and his words so cathartic, young Congolese people linked their own suffering and lived injustices with the life and death of the Congolese prime minister.²⁹ After establishing his dictatorial rule, Mobutu himself paid homage to the first prime minister of the Congo, despite the fact that he had been one of the coordinators of his demise.

The hypocrisy surrounding the reaction to Lumumba's death is pervasive. Lumumba's legacy continues to influence Congolese politics decades after his brief stint as prime minister. The name of Lumumba is used in the DRC today to earn people's trust and gain "political citizenship."³⁰ The memory of Lumumba keeps being erased and rewritten in the Congolese imagination to muster support for current governments and social movements. That is why both Mobutu and Kabila, his successor, claimed to derive their values from the first Congolese prime minister.³¹ Despite Lumumba's omnipresence in Congolese socio-political discourse, the support for his legacy has rarely moved past the superficial at the institutional level, leaving millions of members of the Lumumbist generation disillusioned with the political class of the Congo.³²

Lumumba in the arts

Patrice Lumumba left a powerful and enduring legacy after his death that resonated both inside and outside of the Congo. Lumumba became a cultural icon to Pan-Africanists, a point of

²⁷ De Witte, *L'assassinat de Lumumba*. 16-17.

²⁸ Gerits, *The Ideological Scramble for Africa*. 185.

²⁹ Monaville. "The Political Life of the Dead Lumumba," 21.

³⁰ Gimba Magha-A-Ngimba, "Revolution, freedom, and the Congo today."

³¹ Parenti, "In Search of Lumumba," 35.

³² Monaville. "The Political Life of the Dead Lumumba," 30-31.

reference for their never-ending struggle. His martyrdom can be compared to the idolization of the *Guerrillero Heroico* (Che Guevara) within socialist movements. Through popular art, artists are able to create “counter-memories” to actively fill the gaps in the fragmented history of the Congo. The leap of the Congolese prime minister from death to martyrdom happened almost immediately after his demise.³³ The line between Lumumba the politician and Lumumba the hero has blurred. The movies, paintings, and songs dedicated to the memory of Lumumba do not only represent his canonization as a national hero. Remembering Lumumba was (and is) an act of defiance towards the institutions that aimed to erase his image and the ideas it embodied from the history of the Congo.³⁴

The 1996 book *Remembering the Present*, edited by Johannes Fabian, tells the history of the Congo through the paintings and words of Congolese artist Tshibumba Kanda-Matulu, who disappeared in 1981. The collection is an extraordinary recitation of the Congo’s history through the interpretation of an artist who was merely a teenager when Lumumba was killed. The book was published at the cusp of Mobutu’s rule and before the revelation of the events surrounding Lumumba’s death to the whole world. Thus, Tshibumba’s criticism of Mobutu is limited to concealed digs directed at the dictator. His portrayal of Lumumba is unequivocal. Tshibumba describes Lumumba as the “Lord Jesus of Zaire.”³⁵ The blood flowing from Lumumba’s deadly wounds spreads out to form the word unity, implying that Lumumba sacrificed himself in the name of the unity of the Congo.³⁶ Through this powerful imagery, Tshibumba emphatically designates Lumumba as a saint, a martyr, and a Congolese hero.

Sapin Makengele is another artist whose work is deeply embedded in Congolese history. In one of his paintings, Sapin tells the story of the Congo Crisis. Through a myriad of details, Sapin points to the corruption and interference that characterized Congolese politics at this time. The members of the Congolese government wear shoes painted with the Belgian tricolor, indicating that they still operated within a colonial mindset. The international powers formed the foundation of a staircase leading Mobutu to the throne he occupied in 1965. In this grandiose depiction of the crisis, Sapin’s portrayal of Lumumba is reminiscent of that of Tshibumba: his shoes are not painted with the Belgian tricolor, representing his stark rebuttal of colonialism; when Lumumba is shown in the back of a truck with his two faithful companions on

³³ Clarke, “The New Afro-American Nationalism,” 286.

³⁴ Ndaliko, “What remains,” 60.

³⁵ Mobutu renamed the the Republic of the Congo as Zaire in 1971. The nation was known as such until 1997, when Mobutu’s successor Laurent-Desire Kabila restored the nation’s name to the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

³⁶ Fabian, *Remembering the Present*. 122.

the way to his end, three crosses shine bright in the background, symbolizing the blend of religious sanctification and political martyrization that Lumumba underwent after his death.

The portrayal of Lumumba as a Pan-African hero extended to motion pictures. European directors resonated with the process of decolonization of Africa and, more specifically, with Lumumba's death. Italian filmmaker Valerio Zurlini produced *Seduto alla sua destra* in 1968. In the film Maurice Lalubi (the Lumumbaesque figure) is captured by government mercenaries and tortured to force him to publicly refute his ideas. Lalubi refuses to give in and he is brutally assassinated. Using different names, Zurlini chronicled the adamant resistance of Lumumba.³⁷

Renowned Haitian director Raoul Peck (who lived in the DRC for 24 years) produced not one but two movies about Patrice Lumumba. In 1992, he made a documentary, *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet*. The designation of the former prime minister as a prophet speaks for itself: Peck thought of Lumumba as a spokesperson for the Congolese population. In 2000, Peck directed *Lumumba*, a fictional enactment of Lumumba's short political career. The movie portrays primarily the Congolese actors of the period. Lumumba's ideas are depicted as a reflection of the Congolese people's desires.

This amalgamation of Lumumba and "the masses" is common in portrayals of Lumumba, but it lacks nuance. Lumumba's nationalist movement was popular, but not embraced by all Congolese people. To explain all the internal opposition Lumumba faced through the Western corruption of Congolese politics is simplistic. The picture of the Congo Crisis is complex and evades such straightforward interpretations. Moreover, the fusion of the masses and the leader is reminiscent of the dictator who in the eyes of many betrayed Lumumba: Mobutu. In *Mobutu, Roi du Zaïre*, a 1999 documentary about the authoritarian leader of the Congo, the cult of Mobutu's personality is highlighted as a key feature of his absolutist rule.³⁸ Once "the masses are presumed to be at one with their leader, it is just too easy for the leader to justify his every move as 'popular', as did Mobutu."³⁹ In telling Lumumba's story, many fall in the trope of assuming everything Lumumba did or said reflected the desires of the Congolese people, instead of acknowledging the complex essence of the African leader.

Rappers frequently tributed Patrice Lumumba and his legacy. The name of the Pan-Africanist leader is primarily featured in rap music from France, the US, Belgium, and the Congo. The Congolese heritage of French artists such as Maitre Gims makes the Congo's history and in particular Lumumba's chapter highly resonant with many French-speaking rappers. The legacy of African nationalism and postcolonial freedom was relevant to mainstream rappers

³⁷ Vanhove, "Locating Lumumba," 281.

³⁸ Michel, *Mobutu, Roi du Zaïre*. Les Films de la Passerelle, 1999.

³⁹ Moore, "Raoul Peck's Lumumba" 7-9.

around the world. In the biography of hip-hop legend Tupac Shakur, the rapper recalls how his parents told him Lumumba's story as a kid to empower him to become a voice for black people. Lumumba's own grandson is a little-known rapper by the name of Teddy L (L standing for Lumumba). In 2015, he released a song named "Patrice Lumumba" dedicated to his grandfather. In the song, Teddy L makes himself an active participant in the rewriting of the historical narrative of Lumumba's life and death. Painters, musicians, filmmakers, writers, and all artists who cited Lumumba's legacy in their work aimed not only to remind others of who he was but to willfully reshape the heritage of the prime minister and work it in the struggles of the present.⁴⁰

The saint and the devil

It is easy to resort to tales of good and evil in the construction of a historical narrative. These opposites offer a clear-cut version of events, leaving little room for interpretation and offering a sense of certainty to all involved. However, the assurance of which version of events is true comes at the cost of ignoring the plurality and ambiguity of history.⁴¹ The tale of the Congo's independence is chaotic, carrying few obvious truths. The job of historians is to unravel the complex reality of the Congo Crisis without resorting to scathing narratives of good and evil.

The prevalent conception of Lumumba during his time as prime minister is that he was a demagogical leader with dangerous communist leniencies; perhaps he was hungry for power and willing to get rid of anyone standing in his way; or maybe Lumumba was a black supremacist who hated everything related to the 'whites.' This version of Lumumba was dubbed "Satan" by the Belgians; he embodied all the worst fears of Western governments: the emancipation and self-sufficiency of the Congolese people, opening up the avenue for a third ideological space to be created beyond the dualism dictated by the Cold War.

The demonic incarnation of Lumumba is juxtaposed with the saintly figure that was forged after his assassination. Lumumba came to embody the spirits of Pan-Africanism and anticolonialism, acting not only as a memory of the past struggles but as a banner for the activists of the present. Lumumba the martyr incorporated a blend of religious metaphors and political ideas that culminate in the act of resistance against racial segregation and colonial oppression.

The truth about Lumumba lies somewhere between these two extremes of the saint and the devil. The first prime minister of the Congo was a determined politician who openly called for Western powers to respect the Congo's newfound independence. Lumumba was

⁴⁰ Goddeeris and Huskens, "Lumumba in the Hood," 24-28;

⁴¹ Fletcher, "New Perspectives on Colonial and Postcolonial Congo," 206.

inexperienced as a politician, particularly with regard to international diplomacy. His assumptions of how organizations such as the UN worked often did not match the reality of the situation. This inexperience, however, does not come as a surprise. The Belgians did not train a political class in the Congo, develop the educational infrastructure, or foster a national Congolese consciousness.

More than fifty years after Lumumba's death, neocolonial forces remain strong in the 21st century. The DRC continues to be torn up by sectarian violence and regional conflicts: the Kivu conflicts have taken place since 2004 in the eastern regions of the DRC. The Second Congo War (1998-2003), also known as the Great African War, caused an estimate of 5.4 million deaths. The ghost of Lumumba lingers amongst Congolese people and anticolonial activists fighting for peace and stability. Their militancy lives on and the legacy of the first prime minister of the Congo remains acutely palpable as historians and politicians start acknowledging Africa's massive international role in the past, present, and future. Lumumba's ideas could not co-exist with the Western desire to maintain an imperialist grip on Africa; After his death, Lumumba's ideas of anticolonialism and national sovereignty inspired generations of activists around the world to fight imperialism and neocolonialism head-on.

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