

BELGIUM AND MOBUTU'S ZAIRE: ANALYSIS OF AN EVENTFUL ERA

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Several authors have attempted to analyse the regime of Congo's Mobutu (1965-1997), but strong divergences exist between their accounts. Twenty years after the fall of Mobutu, it is still unclear whether the regime was considered a loyal ally of the capitalist West during the Cold War, or an autonomous player on the world stage. Neither do we find a clear-cut analytical model to understand the relations between Congo/Zaire and its former coloniser, Belgium. In this case, there are in fact too many deviations from the 'traditional' dependency narrative to speak of the Belgo-Zairean relations being shaped by such a context. The Belgian political world, divided by ethno-linguistic tensions, often met with severe resistance from a powerful and calculated Zairean President. Finally, the gradual erosion of the Zairean state and personal reasons of individuals such as the Belgian King's chef de cabinet, instead of the end of the Cold War, was decisive in the eventual rupture between Belgium and Zaire, and King Baudouin and President Mobutu.

I. Introduction

Almost twenty years after the President of the Republic of Zaire, Mobutu Sese Seko, fled the country in 1997, a new biography by *Le Monde* journalist Jean-Pierre Langellier attempted to assess one of Africa's most long-lasting and colourful Presidents. While Mobutu's regime was marked by crimes of blood, corruption and the shameless looting of the nation's wealth, he was not only a vulgar tyrant. As a bulwark against communism, the friend of the West played a leading strategic role during the Cold War¹.

This new publication by Langellier certainly does not reflect academic consensus, for the simple reason that there is none. Guy Vanthemsche, for instance, claimed that Mobutu "was not just a puppet on the string of the foreign powers"². It is indeed analytically more appropriate to put the Zairean President in the position of a puppeteer or, as close economic adviser to the President Hugues Leclercq imagined him: in the position of card player with four aces in his hand. The *ace of clubs* was the United States: its input, the American power, the Cold War, links with the various governments and Presidents throughout mysterious links with the CIA, State Department, amongst other ties. France functioned as *ace of diamonds*. The *ace of spades* varied between Israel, the Arab countries, or the countries of Eastern Europe such as Romania and Yugoslavia. But Mobutu's *ace of hearts* was Belgium. After all, at the heart of his diplomacy stood Belgium in general, and the personal relations with Baudouin, King of the Belgians, in particular³.

In this article, the relations between Zaire and Belgium will be at the centre of attention. A good understanding between Zaire and Belgium was advantageous for both parties: Belgian companies, such as the *Union Minière du Haut-Katanga* (UMHK) or the major holding *Société Générale de*

Belgique (SG) had important activities in the former Belgian colony. Conversely, the Zairean regime gladly made use of the expertise of Belgian advisers and CEOs, and Belgian backing of the regime strengthened its credibility in the West. The question arises how these relations were shaped exactly.

Due to the idiosyncratic way in which Mobutu managed his country's foreign and domestic politics, this study will argue that the central emphasis must be put on the agency of Mobutu in the relations between Zaire and Belgium. This brings about certain questions: the particular structure of both the Belgian and Zairean states influenced the relations between the two countries. Furthermore, because some relations between a former colonial power and former colony are characterised as patron-client relationships of dependency, it is useful to find out whether Belgo-Zairean relations were shaped in a similar manner. In addition, it is important to analyse the construction of the Zairean state with regard to the cultural and nationalist agenda of Mobutu, since that process greatly influenced the ties between Zaire and Belgium. This article is divided into three parts. Firstly, it discusses political ties with an emphasis on the personal relations between political actors. Secondly, economic ties are examined. Thirdly and finally, the cultural schemes adopted by the Mobutu regime and its relationship with the outside world are analysed.

II. Political Ties: Conjunctures and Depassionnalisation

The situation wherein one state was defined by a fractured political landscape, while another was an authoritarian and personalised state is not unique to the Belgo-Zairean case. Jean-François Obiang pointed to a paradox that existed in Franco-Gabonese relations under the latter country's President Omar Bongo: "*ce sont principalement [...] les*

1. JEAN-PIERRE LANGELLIER, *Mobutu*, Paris, Perrin, 2017.

2. GUY VANTHEMSCHE, *Belgium and the Congo, 1885-1980*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 206.

3. Testimony of Hugues Leclercq in THIERRY MICHEL, *Mobutu: Roi du Zaïre*, Bruxelles, Cinélivre, 1999.

acteurs français qui, au nom de la stabilité, se sont évertués par divers moyens à encourager le monolithisme politique au Gabon. Ce faisant, ils ont aidé le président Bongo à consolider un pouvoir fort, durable et centralisé alors que, dans le même temps, leur propre pouvoir en France devenait plus fragile⁴. Nevertheless, compared to Belgium, France had a more centralised African policy: the cell entrusted with African policy was directly located in the Élysée, and a range of highly influential civil servants such as Jacques Foccart and Maurice Robert were responsible for open and more covert manoeuvres towards African states – in spite of the relativistic tone taken by Foccart, who stated in an interview with *Le Figaro* that “[i]l n’y a jamais eu de politique Foccart” and that the so-called réseaux Foccart were “l’invention absurde de certains journalistes en quête de sensationnel, ou d’amateurs de récits d’aventures.”⁵ Belgian personae such as chef de cabinet to Minister of Foreign Affairs Henri Simonet, Alfred Cahen, never achieved the level of influence as some French advisers. Moreover, the integration of the African policy into the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not go without difficulties: in 1966, Jef Van Bilsen, chef de cabinet to Minister of Foreign Affairs Harmel entrusted with Development Cooperation, worked together with other chef de cabinet to Harmel entrusted with Foreign Affairs, Étienne Davignon. According to Van Bilsen, Davignon considered Development Cooperation to be part of Foreign Affairs, whereas Van Bilsen considered Harmel to be a Minister in charge with two relatively autonomous departments⁶. These factors led to the Belgian African policy having a relatively weaker foundation than Franco-African policy.

Mobutu managed to construct a Zairean state, according to Gauthier de Villers, but already towards the end of the sixties, and much more after the ‘Zairianisation’ measures in the first half of the seventies, this construction lost its substance and became a carcass that would break apart⁷. This disintegration of the Zairean state did not stop the new leaders in the post-Mobutu era to build the new Democratic Republic of the Congo on the foundations of the old regime. In this part, the political relations between Zaire and Belgium will be discussed. Because these relations are often explained as an attempt by the Belgian government to ‘normalise’ the political ties between the two countries, the concept of ‘normalisation’ will first be clarified and discussed. Following this, the fractured Belgian policy towards Zaire and the Zairean responses will be discussed. As personal relations between Mobutu, on the one hand, and Belgian policymakers and high dignitaries, on the other hand, are crucial, the connection between Mobutu and the King of the Belgians will also be analysed.

Normalisation

De Villers was responsible for coining the concept of ‘normalisation’ in the study of Belgo-Zairean relations. To him, it meant a growing awareness by Belgian politicians to rid Belgo-Zairean relations of the burdens of the colonial past, and an attempt to ‘depassionnate’ them⁸. This implied the maintenance of the diplomatic principle of the recognition of states instead of regimes, which also meant maintaining a certain distance from the rulers in place⁹. As we will see, this evolution was not a

4. JEAN-FRANÇOIS OBIANG, *France-Gabon: Pratiques clientélares et logiques d’État dans les relations franco-africaines*, Paris, Karthala, 2007, p. 207.

5. “Annexe 17: La réponse de Jacques Foccart au livre *Affaires africaines: “Un coup bas pour nous brouiller avec l’Afrique”*, propos recueillis et commentés par RAPHAËL TARNOWSKI, *Le Figaro Magazine* du 10 décembre 1983”, dans PIERRE PÉAN, *L’homme de l’ombre: Éléments d’enquête autour de Jacques Foccart, l’homme le plus mystérieux et le plus puissant de la Ve République*, Paris, Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1990, p. 582.

6. RIK COOLSAET, “Dekolonisatie en de geboorte van de ontwikkelingssamenwerking”, in RIK COOLSAET, VINCENT DUJARDIN en CLAUDE ROOSENS, *Buitenlandse Zaken in België: Geschiedenis van een Ministerie, zijn diplomaten en consuls van 1830 tot vandaag*, Tielt, Lannoo, 2014, p. 329.

7. GAUTHIER DE VILLERS, *De Mobutu à Mobutu: Trente ans de relations Belgique-Zaïre*, Bruxelles, De Boeck Université, 1995, p. 8.

8. Idem, “Caractéristiques et évolution de la politique belge à l’égard du Zaïre”, dans GAUTHIER DE VILLERS (dir.), *Belgique/Zaïre: Une histoire en quête d’avenir*, (Cahiers Africains 9-10-11), 1994, p. 194.

9. Idem, *De Mobutu à Mobutu...*, p. 105.

linear one as a consequence of both Belgian and Zairean processes.

Throughout the whole chronology of events, Mobutu's remarkable personality emerged as one of the most significant aspects of Belgo-Zairean relations. Therefore, important elements of the rapport between representatives of the two countries can be found in the area of personal and anecdotal modes of encounters. Indeed, in a foreword to a book on emotions in international politics, Richard Ned Lebow wrote that "[r]eason and affect are so closely entwined in formulating goals and decisions that it is almost impossible to separate them"¹⁰. Ego-documents shed more light on these instances, a source type underused by authors such as de Villers. The documentary *Mobutu: Roi du Zaïre* by Thierry Michel, which portrayed several high-ranking politicians and *éminences grises*, was called "[a]n outstanding, even formidable, introduction to Mobutu's life and work" by David Van Reybrouck¹¹. Other valuable sources where the individual materialises are memoirs from politicians and sources of oral history.

Mobutu's politics of godfatherhood is but one of many examples of his personalised approach to politics. He had twenty-one known children with

six different women¹². His first son was born in 1955 when the mother, his first wife, was only fourteen years old. That first child, Niwa, became the godchild of Belgian colonel Louis Marlière¹³. As one of the most accomplished so-called évolués¹⁴, having a Belgian colonel as the godfather of your child would have been without a doubt a prestigious affair for the évolué. Mobutu even asked King Baudouin to become godfather of one of his children¹⁵. Finally, Herman De Croo indicated that Mobutu asked him to become the godfather of another son. The Belgian Minister refused by saying to Mobutu that he is not Catholic. An agitated Mobutu responded that "you are indeed not a hypocrite, Mister Minister. Everyone would have crawled on their knees to become a godfather of my son"¹⁶.

The first Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs to attempt to orient the country's Congo policy towards a less privileged relationship and to avert it from narrow politico-personal ties, was the Christian Democrat Pierre Harmel, who held the post from 1966 until 1973¹⁷. The Minister met with resistance from the Congolese head of state and was only partly successful in his endeavour. In order to discuss the *contentieux belgo-congolais*, an issue which will be discussed further below,

10. RICHARD NED LEBOW, "Foreword", in YOHAN ARIFFIN, JEAN-MARC COICAUD and VESSELIN POPOVSKI (eds.), *Emotions in International Politics: Beyond Mainstream International Relations*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2016, p. xii.

11. For instance excerpts from the testimonies of mathematician and regime adversary Aubert Mukendi and Belgian regime ally and Colonel John Powis de Tenbossche in JEAN-PIERRE LANGELLIER, *Mobutu*, p. 149-50; DAVID VAN REYBROUCK, *Congo: The Epic History of a People*, New York, HarperCollins, 2014, p. 575.

12. "Enfants de Mobutu", *Jeune Afrique*, 10 septembre 2007. jeunefrique.com/118913/archives-thematique/enfants-de-mobutu/, consulté le 20 avril 2017.

13. FRANCIS MONHEIM, *Mobutu: l'homme seul*, Bruxelles, Éditions Actuelles, 1962, p. 30.

14. After the Second World War and towards the end of the colonial period, a "semi- or quasi-elite" emerged within the Congolese community, called the évolués, and was regulated through the *cartes de mérite civique* from 1948 onwards. On the one hand, the évolués "alienated from their own culture", and they "were not taken seriously by the metropolitans", on the other hand. MARC DEPAEPE and KAREN HULSTAERT, "Creating Cultural Hybridity by Exporting Metropolitan Structures and Cultures of Schooling and Educationalisation? The Emergence of a Congolese 'Elite' in the 1950s as a Starting Point for Further Research", in *European Educational Research Journal*, nr. 12, 2013 (2), p. 205.

15. CLAUDE ROOSSENS, VALÉRIE ROSOUX et TANGUY DE WILDE D'ESTMAEL (éds.), *La politique étrangère. Le modèle classique à l'épreuve*, Bruxelles, Pieter Lang, 2004, p. 228.

16. "Vous n'êtes pas un faux-jeton, Monsieur le Ministre. Iedereen zou op zijn knieën gekropen hebben om mogen parrain te zijn van mijn zoon bij zijn confirmatie." COLIN HENDRICKX, *Interview with Herman De Croo, Minister of State*, Brussels, 30 January 2017. Herman De Croo (°1937) is a Flemish liberal politician who held several Ministerial portfolios during his career including Foreign Trade (1985-88), served for fifty years in the Belgian and Flemish parliament, and was the President of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives. Throughout his political career, he showed a particular interest in Africa, most notably the present-day Democratic Republic of the Congo.

17. GAUTHIER DE VILLERS, *De Mobutu à Mobutu...*, p. 63.

Harmel wanted to make a Ministerial visit to the Congo. Van Bilsen advised him to go, whereas Davignon had an opposing opinion. Eventually, a letter by the King's *chef de cabinet* André Molitor persuaded Harmel to proceed with the visit. During the visit, Harmel was not received by Mobutu but by Kulamba, deputy Secretary of State to the Prime Minister. Harmel did not hide his discontent with the situation, and refused to reopen negotiations of the Spaak-Tshombe accords of 1965¹⁸.

Harmel's successor from 1973 to 1977, Renaat Van Elslande – also a Christian Democrat – , tried to put forward a new vision of dissociation and no concessions. Dissociation was also implemented through development cooperation: since taking office, Van Elslande explained, he propagated a 'multilateralization' of development cooperation and a larger transfer of financial means through multilateral channels¹⁹. Belgian political leaders would never completely succeed with this. In this instance, the Socialist Prime Minister Edmond Leburton would encumber Van Elslande's strategy, as a consequence of the close friendship between Leburton and Mobutu, as is shown below²⁰. According to then Deputy Prime Minister Leo Tindemans, Leburton made a disproportionate effort to receive Mobutu in Belgium on 29 March 1973²¹. After a dinner for Mobutu and the two Belgian Deputy Prime Ministers, Tindemans and the Liberal Willy De Clercq, at the Lambermont residence of the Prime Minister, Leburton allegedly invited his table companions to go to a Brussels night club after he already jokingly greeted them with the words "*[j]e vais vous debaucher ce soir*"²². After Tindemans' refusal,

De Clercq purportedly declined the offer as well²³. The anecdotal passage in Tindemans' memoirs demonstrates the personal and affectionate style of Leburton as an obstacle for Van Elslande in his rather impersonal approach.

Socialist Henri Simonet, Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1977 to 1980, did not proceed to depersonalise Belgo-Zairean ties either. He would serve as Minister of Foreign Affairs uninterruptedly from 1977 to 1980 under the governments Tindemans II, Vanden Boeynants II, and the first two Martens governments. They were all coalition governments of Christian Democrats with Socialists, some with the addition of the Flemish nationalist Volksunie (Tindemans II, Vanden Boeynants II), or the FDF, favourable to the language rights of the Francophone population (Tindemans II, Vanden Boeynants II, Martens I). *Chef de cabinet* of Mark Eyskens, Aloïs Van de Voorde, indicated that the duo Henri Simonet and his *chef de cabinet* Alfred Cahen "tried to maintain, as well as possible, the privileged relations between Belgium and Zaire"²⁴. Simonet was indeed considered Mobutu's "personal friend" in the period around 1974 when he was Vice-President of the European Commission and had not yet become Foreign Minister.²⁵ By contrast, De Croo has stated that "Mobutu loathed Simonet"²⁶. This changing relationship was a well-calculated move by Mobutu. When Simonet became Foreign Minister in 1977, he supplied his cabinet with two influential civil servants with plenty of experience and knowledge of Central Africa. One of his collaborators was André Onkelinx, who would become the Belgian Ambassador to Zaire²⁷. Most impor-

18. VINCENT DUJARDIN, *Pierre Harmel: Biographie*, Bruxelles, Le Cri, 2004, p. 315-6.

19. RENAAT VAN ELSLANDE, *België en de Derde Wereld*, Antwerpen, De Nederlandsche Boekhandel, 1977, p. 125.

20. Cited in ROMAIN YAKEMTCHOUK, "Les deux guerres du Shaba: Les relations entre la Belgique, la France et le Zaïre", dans *Studia Diplomatica*, nr. XLI, 1988 (4-5-6), p. 393.

21. LEO TINDEMANS, *De memoires: Gedreven door een overtuiging*, Tiel, Lannoo, 1999, p. 204.

22. *Idem*, p. 205.

23. *Idem*, p. 204-5.

24. ALOÏS VAN DE VOORDE, *Mark Eyskens: Politicus-professor tussen woord en daad: Een biografie*, Tiel, Lannoo, 2003, p. 63.

25. WALTER ZINZEN, *Il était une fois... Mobutu*, Bruxelles, Panorama, 1995.

26. "Mobutu had een hekel aan Simonet". COLIN HENDRICKX, *Interview with Herman De Croo*.

27. HENRI SIMONET, *Je n'efface rien et je recommence*, Bruxelles, Didier Hatier, 1986, p. 184.

tantly, Simonet chose the diplomat Alfred Cahen – who greatly admired Mobutu – as his *chef de cabinet*²⁸. Former Foreign Minister Pierre Harmel would later recall that this Cahen already was a personal friend of Mobutu when he was a student at the *Université Libre de Bruxelles* (ULB).²⁹ In 1953, Cahen obtained his PhD in law at the ULB, where he also would become a researcher at the department of applied economics. As a researcher at the ULB, he supervised two illustrious Congolese students, namely Justin Bomboko and André Mandi³⁰. Next to his focus on Africa, Cahen stressed the importance of the North-Atlantic partnership. For him, the “centre of power” was in Washington, and he was an acquaintance of Henry Kissinger. As Secretary-General of the Western European Union (WEU), he coined the *Cahen Doctrine*, stating that only states who are members of NATO and the EC could become members of the WEU.³¹ Simonet referred in his memoirs to “*un grand service que Mobutu aura rendu à l’Occident*”, because the President only took European interests into account. As a diplomat who safeguarded his country’s relationship with the North Atlantic world, Cahen understood Belgo-Zairean relations within this context, just as Simonet did.

Simonet and Cahen tried to maintain the privileged relations between Belgium and Zaire³². But as Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs during the Second Shaba War, Simonet found himself in the eye of the storm. During the First Shaba War, the Belgian government was an outgoing government, which made its involvement less prominent than the French one at the time. France was also less hes-

itant than the Belgians to intervene for a second time, for France wanted to tighten its ties with the Mobutu regime.³³ French President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing’s administration wanted to develop a “history of love” with African regimes close to France.³⁴ The reasons for Belgium to intervene were much more limited, according to Romain Yakemtchouk, who wrote a standard work about the Shaba wars: “*recusant toute action à caractère politique qui soutiendrait coûte que coûte le régime en place à Kinshasa, le gouvernement de Bruxelles s’en tenait à l’idée d’une intervention dite humanitaire limitée dans le temps, et encore celle-ci n’était-elle envisagée que comme ultima ratio.*”³⁵ Eventually, the Moroccan King Hassan II would reconcile Mobutu and Simonet. When the King received Simonet on 1 July 1978, the latter told Hassan that “*il ne croyait pas à “la moindre alternative de Mobutu”, et que ce dernier symbolisait pour lui l’unité du Zaïre*”³⁶.

Following Tindemans’ time in office as Minister of Foreign Affairs (1981-1989), it became more and more apparent that the special appeal Zaire had in Belgian political and foreign policy circles had diminished with the passing of time. During the debate on his Africa Note in the Chamber of Representatives in 1984, the general apathy of the Members of Parliament was noteworthy. Christian Democratic Member of Parliament Renaat Peeters remarked that he “did not even have the pleasure of greeting one Francophone member of this Chamber. Their absence is what struck me”³⁷. Louis Vanvelthoven, Socialist Member of Parliament who monitored Zaire for his party, declared in a similar vein that “probably one of the rea-

28. *Idem*, p. 183 et 185.

29. Pierre Harmel dans OLIVIER LANOTTE, CLAUDE ROOSENS et CATY CLEMENT (dirs.), *La Belgique et l’Afrique Centrale : De 1960 à nos jours*, Bruxelles, Éditions Complexe, 2000, p. 133.

30. JACQUES VANDERLINDEN, “Alfred Cahen”, *Bulletin des séances : Académie Royale des Sciences d’Outre-Mer*, nr. 47, 2001 (2), p. 189-90.

31. *Idem*, p. 190.

32. ALOÏS VAN DE VOORDE, *Mark Eyskens : Politicus-professor...*, p. 63.

33. Gauthier de Villers, *De Mobutu à Mobutu...*, p. 73.

34. Romain Yakemtchouk, “Les deux guerres”, 407.

35. *Idem*, p. 509.

36. *Idem*, p. 657.

37. *Annales parlementaires de Belgique. Chambre des représentants*, 9 mai 1984, p. 2765.

sons why the attention here today was not really great, is the impossibility to treat problems on the moment they arise"³⁸.

Interest in Zaire slowly but surely declined in the media, public opinion, and the Belgian political world. Belgian citizens who lived in the Belgian Congo, Mark Eyskens declared, had a sentimental bond with the country and fell in love with it, not in the least because they were pampered by their Congolese servants and others³⁹. Newer generations did not have this particular bond with the country, and nowadays (2017) "there is only one person from the political establishment who knows Congo very well and who is sympathetic towards it, namely Herman De Croo"⁴⁰. Moving further and further away from the colonial period, Belgo-Zairean relations lost some of its sentimentality, and a good relationship with the former colony became less self-evident, which paved the way for a more conditional political cooperation with the Zairean establishment. Eyskens would guide the Belgo-Zairean relations towards a virtual standstill when he was Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1989 to 1992. In the Protocol of Rabat of 26 July 1989, a clause on Human Rights was added. On 24 April 1990, Mobutu announced the start of a democratisation process. But less than a month later, during the night of 11 May 1990, several university students at the University of Lubumbashi were killed by Zairean authorities after students started an insurgency against other students from the Équateur region who were members of the campus security apparatus⁴¹. Belgium maintained a firm stance con-

demning the incident. The contradiction between the speech of 24 April 1990 and the behaviour of the Zairean authorities on 11 May 1990 did not go unnoticed. Due to the gravity of the situation, the events of Lubumbashi were certainly not a pretext for Belgium to break with Mobutism and choose the side of those in Zaire who wanted a truly new system, but the Belgian government did take the opportunity to proceed with it⁴². Eyskens reminded his Zairean homologue Nguza Karl-I-Bond of the content of the Protocol of Rabat, and said that the Human Rights reference was not a stylistic device⁴³. Eventually, it was Mobutu who decided to proceed with a unilateral rupture of development cooperation with Belgium⁴⁴.

Finally, in line with the US and most international institutions, Socialist Minister Willy Claes (1992-1994) regarded Mobutu as the main obstacle for the democratisation of Zaire. The US and Belgium, together with France, coordinated their stance towards the Mobutu regime through the so-called *Troika*⁴⁵. He explicitly called for "a constructive attitude, free of the sentimentality of yesteryear"⁴⁶. At the time, the Belgian involvement in Africa was more focussed on events in Rwanda when the RPF rebels invaded the country from Uganda in late 1990. President Habyarimana asked for Belgian support. Out of this experience, Christian Democratic Prime Minister Jean-Luc Dehaene (1992-1999) learned that Belgian military operations in former colonies could only make sense if they were meant to organise the humanitarian

38. *Idem*, 2773.

39. "[I]n de watten gelegd". Colin Hendrickx, *Interview with Mark Eyskens, Minister of State*, Leuven, 24 February 2017. Viscount Mark Eyskens (°1933) is a Flemish Christian Democratic politician who held several Ministerial portfolios during his career such as Finance (1980-1) and served briefly as Prime Minister of Belgium (1981). He became Minister of Foreign Affairs during a crucial time in Belgo-Zairean relations (1989-92).

40. *Idem*.

41. See for instance AMOS WAKO, *Report of the Special Rapporteur, Mr. S. Amos Wako, Submitted Pursuant to Commission on Human Rights Resolution 1991/71 on His Mission to Zaire, 8-11 May 1991*, E/CN.4/1992/30/Add.1, 28 April 1992.

42. GAUTHIER DE VILLERS, *Belgique/Zaire: Une histoire...*, p. 197.

43. MARK EYSKENS, "Témoignage: Mark Eyskens", dans OLIVIER LANOTTE, CLAUDE ROOSENS et CATY CLEMENT (dirs.), *La Belgique et l'Afrique Centrale...*, p. 179.

44. *Idem*, 179.

45. *Written Remarks of Louis Vanvelthoven*. Louis Vanvelthoven (°1938) is a Flemish Socialist politician who became a Member of Parliament (1977-99) where he followed the issues pertaining to Zaire and South Africa for his party, and Member of European Parliament (1977-9).

46. WILLY CLAES, "Krachtlijnen van het Belgisch buitenlands beleid", *Studia Diplomatica*, nr. XLV, 1992 (6), p. 9-21.

evacuation of compatriots. Belgium could not afford to make a political intervention, "unlike France", Dehaene stated, because Belgium's means were too limited⁴⁷.

As demonstrated, normalisation was oftentimes a target for the Belgian Foreign Ministers, but was never fully achieved. Reasons for this relative failure are manifold, but Rik Coolsaet pinpointed the position of the *Société Générale* in Zaire as well as in Belgium as the most important one⁴⁸. Although the holding was Belgium's principal economic factor in Zaire, Coolsaet's assessment did not take the Zairean side into account. Through its nationalist project, the Mobutu regime adopted particular cultural schemes that modified the influence that Belgium could exert via its businesspersons and political representatives. Furthermore, one of the main reasons why Belgium did not succeed in having normalised ties with the regime emanated from the Zairean President himself. Mobutu needed Belgium as a 'small partner', de Villers stated, "*sur lequel le grand Zaire pouvait exercer des pressions menaçantes et des formes de chantage*"⁴⁹. Belgian reactions were however inconsistent as a consequence of the presence of fracture lines in Belgian politics and, in a wider sense, in the Belgian society.

The Socialist's Party Congress

As shown above, the Belgian political landscape was (and is) not only divided as a consequence of ideological differences and differences related to the role of religion in society, but also of ethno-linguistic grounds. In one political party, there could be a prevailing opinion on the Flemish side which

was different to the view of the Francophone side. The communal divide in Belgium was important to understand the relations between Belgium and Zaire, de Villers summarised, but it did not correspond to a simple opposition between defenders and adversaries of special ties with Zaire⁵⁰.

During the whole discussed period of this study, the Belgian political landscape was dominated by the Christian Democratic Party PSC/CVP (which split into the Francophone PSC and Flemish CVP in 1972). They were constantly part of the federal government from 1958 until 1999, and with the notable exception of Leburton, they always provided the Prime Minister during the same period. The party strove to appeal to a broad electorate, hence their stature as a people's party. The Liberal party, on the other hand, never developed in a mass party⁵¹. The third traditional party, the Socialist BSP/PSB, will be discussed further below. During the discussed period, the Christian Democrats always governed together with at least one of the other traditional parties. The relative stability in Belgian politics at the time is often explained by the fact that cultural heterogeneity was grouped into institutionalised pillars, a system called 'consociational democracy' or 'pacification democracy' by Lijphart and Huyse.⁵² The political landscape gets further complicated by the so-called 'communal' fracture line, a conflict which reached cruising speed after the Second World War. Mobutu often made use of this divide, in the first place on a discursive level. "[R]elevons simplement que la disparition des tentations tribales est toujours plus lente qu'on ne le croit", he declared. "*Ce ne sont pas les Belges des Fourons qui me démentiront*"⁵³. By saying this, Mobutu simultaneously drew a controversial analogy between Zairean and Belgian so-called 'tribes',

47. JEAN-LUC DEHAENE, *Memoires*, Leuven, Van Halewyck, 2012, p. 320.

48. RIK COOLSAET, *België en zijn buitenlandse politiek*, Leuven, Van Halewyck, 2001, p. 507.

49. ROBIN MASANGANA, *Regards belges sur la République Démocratique du Congo*, Paris, Editoo, 2003, p. 56.

50. GAUTHIER DE VILLERS, *Belgique/Zaire: Une histoire...*, p. 193.

51. HILDE COFFÉ en PATRICK STOUTHUYSEN, "De Belgische politieke partijen", in ELS WITTE en ALAIN MEYNEN (reds.), *De geschiedenis van België na 1945*, Antwerpen, Standaard Uitgeverij, 2006, p. 239.

52. LUC HUYSE, *Passiviteit, pacificatie en verzuiling in de Belgische politiek: Een sociologische studie*, Antwerpen, Wetenschappelijke Uitgeverij, 1970, p. 162.

53. MOBUTU SESE SEKO, *Dignité pour l'Afrique: Entretiens avec Jean-Louis Remilleux*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1989, p. 91.

and put his finger on one of Belgium's sore spots, namely the communal fracture line.

Regarding the impact of fault lines within one party on the Belgian Zaire policy, the Socialist party (PSB/BSP, afterwards split up in 1978 in a Flemish and Francophone party) serves as an illustrative example. The Belgian Socialists left their biggest mark on Belgo-Zairean relations under Prime Minister Leburton, who led two governments between 1973 and 1974. Prime Minister Wilfried Martens (CVP) frankly stated that Leburton was notorious "for his alcohol consumption, his inclination towards curvaceous women and his alienating sympathy for strong leaders of totalitarian regimes: Tito, Ceaușescu, Mobutu and the Shah of Persia"⁵⁴. According to Karl-I-Bond in an interview with German banker and IMF country director of Zaire Erwin Blumenthal, journalist and Mobutu ally Pierre Davister took twenty million Belgian Francs in a suitcase from Mobutu for Leburton in 1975⁵⁵. The sympathy of the Socialists towards the totalitarian President of Zaire did not solely originate from one political leader. A Francophone-dominated group around *the big white chief*, as Leburton was jokingly called, was equally benevolent with Zaire's sole political party MPR⁵⁶. Simonet, for instance, was part of this group. In 1974, a delegation of the MPR, headed by Karl-I-Bond, was invited at the PSB/BSP's party congress. Already at that time, Socialist politicians were divided in their opinion of Zaire's sole party. Before the start of the congress, influential Flemish journalist Manu Ruys mentioned in *De Standaard* that not everyone in the Socialist party might be happy with the "Zairian intimacies", something which Ruys concluded after he

observed the "parallel diplomacy" of Leburton on his visit to Kinshasa⁵⁷. There were indeed tensions during the party congress regarding the presence of the Zairean delegations. President of the Young Socialists, the Fleming Luc Van den Bossche, told during his speech to the PSB/BSP party leaders that the MPR delegation was out of place. This sparked a big commotion in the room, provoking several leaders, including Simonet, to expressively protest and gesticulate⁵⁸. Even Flemish Socialist Member of Parliament Jos Van Eynde described the "fierce protest" of the Young Socialists in his article about the congress in Socialist newspaper *De Volksgazet*⁵⁹. It not only shows a linguistic divide of politics, but also the emergence of a new generation. Francophone Members of Parliament tended to show less interest in foreign policy and the policy regarding fundamental Human Rights, Louis Vanvelthoven noted. Flemish Socialists did not provide a government member on Foreign Affairs or Development Cooperation, something which improved the Flemish Socialists' "objective and critical stance", he continued⁶⁰. His remarks both showed that political differences existed between the two linguistic groups in the party, and that a new generation, which Vanvelthoven was affiliated with, had another stance towards Zaire. Van Den Bossche, as well as Karel Van Miert, party president of the Flemish BSP between 1978 and 1989, were other examples of the new generation of mostly Flemish representatives who emphasised more and more Human Rights.⁶¹ During the debate on Tindemans' Africa Note, Vanvelthoven criticised the note on the grounds that it kept on defending the Western industrialised world instead of the Zairean population⁶². Finally, on the Francophone side, the Third

54. "Leburton [was] berucht om zijn drankverbruik, zijn voorkeur voor volslanke dames en zijn bevreemdende sympathie voor sterke leiders van totalitaire regimes". WILFRIED MARTENS, *De Memoires: Luctor et emergo*, Tielt, Lannoo, 2006, p. 114.

55. In the annex of the *Blumenthal Report*, cited in EMMANUEL DUNGIA, *Mobutu et l'argent du Zaire: Les révélations d'un diplomate, ex-agent des services secrets*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1992, p. 163.

56. "Le grand chef blanc": Testimony of Ruddy Doom in WALTER ZINZEN, *Il était une fois...*

57. MANU RUY, "Welke ambassadeurs voor Zaire?", *De Standaard*, 29 oktober 1974, p. 2.

58. WALTER ZINZEN, *Il était une fois... Mobutu*. The documentary erroneously referred to the event as the Socialist party congress of 1975.

59. JOS VAN EYNDE, "Ideologisch BSP-Congres", *De Volksgazet*, 18 november 1974, p. 8.

60. *Written remarks of Louis Vanvelthoven*.

61. *Idem*.

62. LOUIS VANVELTHOVEN, *Handelingen van de Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers*, 9 May 1984, 2744-9.

World arms trade was not seriously criticised due to the commercial interests of the Wallonia-based arms factory *Fabrique Nationale d'Herstal*.⁶³ Although Vanvelthoven's post-factum remarks should be treated with caution, there was indeed a notable division between an older party establishment led by representatives as Leburton or Fleming Jos Van Eynde, and a new, predominantly Flemish generation represented by Vanvelthoven and Van Miert⁶⁴, and the division regarding Belgo-Zairean relations did roughly coincide with this intergenerational dispute.

The disagreement regarding Belgo-Zairean relations within the BSP/PSB was undoubtedly a signifier rather than the reason behind the Socialists from different linguistic groups growing apart from one another. At the Francophone side, for instance, there was a desire for more regional autonomy in order to develop the Walloon economy, whereas the Flemings were mostly reticent with regard to communal questions. The partition of all three traditional political families in Belgium was indeed the most important political development of the seventies in Belgium⁶⁵, and the role of Van Miert should not be underestimated in the case of the Socialists, who would convince the Flemish wing of the party to abandon their communal reluctance, a process further accelerated by the Egmont pact⁶⁶.

The Marshall and the King

The relationship between President Mobutu and King Baudouin was one of initial fondness and eventual hatred. With Mobutu's connection with Belgium functioning as his "ace of hearts", his personal relationship with Baudouin was "at

the centre of his diplomacy"⁶⁷. Multiple factors characterised the 'special relationship' between the two leading men.

At the time of the advent of the Belgian nation in 1830, the position of the Belgian King was relatively restricted. He was not granted executive powers of his own, and his ministers were fully responsible for decisions made by the government⁶⁸. Every Royal Decree and royal speech had to be countersigned by the relevant minister, and private conversations between the Monarch and his invitees were not released for the public through the so-called *colloque singulier* rule. The function of the King did not evolve into a purely ceremonial one, which meant that King Baudouin still retained relatively much *de jure* power, certainly compared to some European colleagues. He was able to appoint government *formateurs*, advised his ministers, signed Royal Decrees, and granted pardons to certain prisoners. However, Baudouin started his reign in a weak position because of his young age – he was twenty years old when he took the constitutional oath in 1950 – and the controversial behaviour of his father, King Leopold III, during and after the Second World War. According to Guido Heyrbaut, assistant to Baudouin's informal adviser Cardinal Suenens, Baudouin "*avait une trouille de mort de devenir roi*"⁶⁹.

During the Congo Crisis, however, he became more influential. When Congo's first Prime Minister, Patrice Émery Lumumba asked and obtained support from the UN in order to end the Katangese secession, Baudouin tried to prevent the blue helmets from entering the province by trying to dismiss the Gaston Eyskens IV government. In addition to this changing position, it should also be taken into account that King Baudouin was a

63. *Written Remarks of Louis Vanvelthoven*.

64. Equally mentioned in Tindemans' memoirs. LEO TINDEMANS, *De memoires...*, p. 370.

65. HILDE COFFÉ en PATRICK STOUTHUYSEN, "De Belgische politieke partijen", p. 245.

66. *Idem*, p. 252.

67. Testimony of Hugues Leclercq in THIERRY MICHEL, *Mobutu : Roi du Zaïre*.

68. HERMAN VAN GOETHEM, *Belgium and the Monarchy : From National Independence to National Disintegration*, Brussels, University Press Antwerp, 2010, p. 21.

69. VRT, *Boudewijn : Naar het hart van de koning*, Brussel, VRT, 2013.

staunch Catholic. The impact of the King's devotion to the Catholic Church on his relation with Mobutu was seemingly paradoxical. Baudouin sympathised with Mobutu because the latter was pro-Belgian, and a dam against the 'Godless' Communism. In some circles in Brussels and Washington, Lumumba was perceived as a Communist, an assertion which the employees at the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs knew was false, according to diplomats Étienne Davignon and Jean-Paul Van Bellinghen⁷⁰. Nevertheless, Baudouin received a letter of Belgian major Guy Weber of the Katangese secession army on 26 October 1960 where Weber declared that Mobutu and Tshombe made a deal that they "*neutralise complètement (et si possible physiquement...) Lumumba*"⁷¹. The King did not alert the government, but instead sent a letter to secessionist Katanga's President Moïse Tshombe where he praised his statesmanship and disapproved of Lumumba⁷². Baudouin's piety was thus a catalyst for his disapproval for Lumumba and his initial support for Tshombe and Mobutu's deal.

Conversely, the *de facto* rupture between Zaire and Belgium during the period 1990-7 was partly caused by the religious and moral convictions of the King and his entourage. During the royal visit to Zaire in 1985, the Belgian sovereign insisted on the respect of Human Rights in a speech. This conscience grew with the appointment of Jacques van Ypersele de Strihou as Baudouin's *chef de cabinet* in 1983⁷³. Regarding the events at the University of Lubumbashi in May 1990, van Ypersele was "particularly negative" and said that "it was a shame"⁷⁴. The Belgian government reacted by insisting on economic and social measures to

restore the climate of trust with the World Bank and the IMF⁷⁵. The Zairean government, through the channel of national press agency AZAP, reacted by disclosing sensitive information about the Belgian royal family, namely about Prince Albert, the King's brother. At that time, Baudouin stopped every friendly contact with the Zairean President. Eventually, two heads of state were not invited to the King's funeral in 1993: Iraq's Saddam Hussein, and Mobutu⁷⁶. In this chain of events, the role of the religious and moral convictions and personalities of individuals as King Baudouin and *chef de cabinet* van Ypersele were thus more important than the role of broader geopolitical considerations such as the decline in strategic importance of Central Africa after the Cold War.

Although ties between Mobutu and Baudouin were at times cordial, they were never openly affectionate. Baudouin was known to be someone who had a distant and regal appearance, and his reserved behaviour stood in contrast with the characters of some French Presidents vis-à-vis their Francophone African homologues. Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, Jean-François Obiang recounted, favoured "*une grande proximité (quasi affective) avec les chefs d'État africains*"⁷⁷. In *Mobutu: Roi du Zaïre*, one can watch Prime Minister Jacques Chirac make a statement after an encounter with Mobutu in 1988. He declared that "*s'agissant de moi, vous savez que j'ai pour lui des sentiments très profonds et très respectueux, mais qui sont aussi des sentiments de l'affection.*" Giscard d'Estaing declared in the same documentary that he is "*un ami personnelle du Président-Fondateur [Mobutu]*"⁷⁸. Affectionate reasons to maintain the

70. VRT, *Boudewijn: Naar het hart...*; JEAN KRASNO and JEAN-PAUL VAN BELLINGHEN, *The Congo Operation: An Interview with Jean Paul Van Bellinghen by Jean Krasno*, Brussels, 4 March 1991, p. 39-40.

71. LUDO DE WITTE, "De erfzonde van Koning Boudewijn", *De Standaard*, 23 June 2010, p. 20; EMMANUEL GERARD and BRUCE KUKLICK, *Death in the Congo: Murdering Patrice Lumumba*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2015, p. 170.

72. *Idem*; VRT, *Boudewijn: Naar het hart*.

73. *Idem*; WILFRIED MARTENS, *Memoires...*, p. 504.

74. "Bijzonder negatief" and "het was een schande". COLIN HENDRICKX, *Interview with Mark Eyskens*.

75. DIRK DE WINTER, "Zaire. Naar een eigen vorm van democratie", *Studio Diplomatica*, nr. XLVI, 1993 (2), p. 29.

76. VRT, *Boudewijn: Naar het hart...*

77. JEAN-FRANÇOIS OBIANG, *France-Gabon...*, p. 209.

78. THIERRY MICHEL, *Mobutu: Roi du Zaïre*.

relationship were thus not the principal reason: as mentioned above, Baudouin found in Mobutu an ally in the containment of 'Godless' Communism. But one must also take into account the reasons Mobutu had to befriend Baudouin. In reality, it is more appropriate to state that Mobutu *made use* of Baudouin: the closeness of the two sovereigns followed a conjunctural pattern, and this was oftentimes caused by the desires and political calculation of Mobutu. In this regard, Mobutu sometimes tried to flatter Baudouin, for instance during the King's visit to Zaire in 1985, or conversely tried to put pressure on Belgium by disclosing sensitive information about the King's brother.

III. Economic Ties

Tukumbi Lumumba-Kasongo did not eschew grand words when he wrote in 1992 that Mobutu enjoyed "massive support [...] for more than twenty years from the Belgian state and from Belgian financial interests in Zaire," and that the "persistence of colonial structures in the period of Congolese/Zairean 'independence'" was a particularly remarkable factor that determined political and economic relations between Belgium and Zaire⁷⁹. Yet, the chronological course of events seems to contradict Lumumba-Kasongo's claim. In a disposition where both parties had economic gains to preserve, provocations from both sides were more often than not answered with a lacklustre response. In his conclusion, Lumumba-Kasongo reiterated that "post-colonial relations between Mobutu, the Belgian government, and Belgian business have continued to be those of client-patron"⁸⁰. In her Ph.D., Elise Forbes Pachter admitted that a linear patron-client relationship between the US and Zaire was tempered by Mobutu's search for alternative patrons and his

initiatives that were sometimes contrary to the interests of the US⁸¹. She nevertheless compressed this research result into a short time frame of 1972-1975, namely the time of Mobutu's travels to North Korea and China, his speech at the UN in 1973, and the Zairianisation measures. There are, however, at least two other important periods that showed a certain independent decision-making power of the Zairean elite. Thus, three episodes in the economic Belgo-Zairean relations deserve to be examined in greater detail in this chapter: the discussions of the 'portfolio' of the Belgian Congo after independence, the so-called *contentieux belgo-congolais*; the three-stage acquisition process of companies, namely Zairianisation, radicalisation and retrocession; and the debt restructuring process, part of the so-called *grand affrontement*.

Independence portfolio: Spaak/Tshombe

If one event in particular could support the aforementioned statement of Lumumba-Kasongo, it would be the agreement concluded by Congolese Prime Minister Tshombe and Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs Paul-Henri Spaak in 1965, just before Mobutu displaced President Joseph Kasavubu. The first considerable conflict between Belgium and the newly independent Congo emerged out of a divergence of views of the portfolio of the Belgian Congo, consisting of financial securities, participations, and receivables that the colonial state acquired, and the allocation of the debt burdens contracted by the colony. The Congolese wanted to take over the assets but not the liabilities, whereas the Belgians wanted the independent Congo to take over the assets as well as the liabilities. Moreover, the Belgian Congo dissolved the *Comité Spécial du Katanga* (CSK), a company

79. TUKUMBI LUMUMBA-KASONGO, "Zaire's ties to Belgium: Persistence and Future Prospects in Political Economy", *Africa Today*, nr. 39, 1992 (3), p. 23-24.

80. *Idem*, p. 46.

81. In particular chapter four: ELISE FORBES PACTHER, "The Limits to Dependence", *Our Man in Kinshasa: U.S. Relations with Mobutu, 1970-1983; Patron-Client Relations in the International Sphere*, Ann Arbor, UMI Dissertation Information Service, 1987, p. 174-99.



President Mobutu and King Baudouin during the King's visit to Zaire, 1985 (Source: Belga).

which received participations in operating companies such as the UMHK in return for mining concessions that they granted in the territories allocated to the CSK⁸². Congo would only acquire a participation of 16.94 % of the shares of UMHK after independence, because CSK held 25.41 % ownership of UMHK and public authorities owned the other two thirds of CSK. Since Tshombe needed external help to maintain the country's territorial integrity, he found himself in a less powerful position towards the government-Spaak. With Mobutu in power after 24 November 1965, the Congolese negotiating position hardened considerably. The President launched a series of drastic actions in order to do away with Mobutu's competitors of the First Republic and to confirm the country's economic independence from the former coloniser. A decree-law of 7 June 1966 dictated to foreign companies whose main activities were in the Congo to have their headquarters in the country. Coinciding with the decree-law, the Bakajika law provided the state with all land, forest and mining rights conceded or granted before independence without compensation⁸³. UMHK refused to move their headquarters to Kinshasa, a point of view shared by the Belgian government. Following this, the President of Zaire forced UMHK to become a Congolese company and it was expropriated on 31 December 1966⁸⁴. A new, *de facto* state-owned company called Gécomin – later Gécamines – was founded to take over the activities. Again, Belgian diplomacy, led by Harmel, treaded carefully and appeased the Zairean regime. Instead of emphasising the questionable legality of Zaire's demarches, Brussels found a

technical solution which resulted in a cooperation agreement on 15 February 1967 whereby the *Société Générale des Minerais* (SGM), the former sales agent of UMHK and company of the SG, would take over certain activities of Gécomin such as production and commercialisation⁸⁵. In 1972, Gécamines was put under direct control of Mobutu⁸⁶. Moreover, after the 1965 coup d'état, Tshombe went into exile in Madrid. In March 1967, he was sentenced to death in absentia for high treason. One of the charges against him was that he "had acted to the detriment of the economic independence of the country when he signed the Belgo-Congolese agreement with Paul-Henri Spaak", Wolf Radmann explained⁸⁷.

Zairianisation

In this series of events, diplomatic tensions did not rise to a critical level which could be expected from such a sudden change in behaviour of the Zairean regime to the detriment of Belgian interests in the country. A second, and even more critical episode, was the Zairianisation measures of 30 November 1973. In this policy, the Zairean state confiscated enterprises and properties of foreign (Belgian, Greek, Portuguese, ...) owners and distributed them to Zaireans. This "engendered economic disaster on an unprecedented scale"⁸⁸, as one author puts it, and was characterised by improvisation and uncertainty. According to Honoré Paelinck, Belgian former CEO of Zairean national transport firm ONATRA, this set into motion the "death of the Congo", and still lingers

82. GAUTHIER DE VILLERS, *De Mobutu à Mobutu...*, p. 24-25.

83. CRISP, "L'affaire de l'Union Minière du Haut-Katanga", *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP*, nr. 350, 1967 (4), p. 13-17.

84. OLIVIER BOEHME, "Monetary Affairs in the Heart of Africa. The National Bank of Belgium and Finance in Congo, 1945-1974", *Journal of European Economic History*, nr. 36, 2007 (1), p. 38-9.

85. GAUTHIER DE VILLERS, *De Mobutu à Mobutu...*, p. 29. Cf. JULES GÉRARD-LIBOIS, "Les relations Belgo-Congolaises", dans JULES GÉRARD-LIBOIS, BENOÎT VERHAEGEN et al. (dirs.), *Congo 1967*, p. 467-503.

86. TUKUMBI LUMUMBA-KASONGO, "Zaire's Ties to Belgium...", p. 35-36.

87. WOLF RADMANN, "The Nationalization of Zaire's Copper...", p. 34.

88. RENÉ LEMARCHAND, "Historical Setting", in SANDRA W. MEDITZ and TIM MERRILL (eds.), *Zaire : A Country Study*, Washington D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1994, p. 54.

on today⁸⁹. The unusual decision-making process preceding the Zairianisation uncovers an important but unclear aspect of Belgo-Zairean relations. It shows that Belgians in the entourage of Mobutu did not always act in the interests of their native country and although Zairianisation did not go against the interests of Belgium, as shown below, it was however detrimental to the interests of certain Belgians. Mobutu needed economic advisers, as he did not have the expertise himself⁹⁰. "As brilliant a communicator as Mobutu, he was an equally great flop as an economist", Van Reybrouck explained⁹¹. Barthélémy Bisengimana, *chef de cabinet* of Mobutu and known not to be very fond of Belgium, was one of those advisers who told him to proceed with Zairianisation, together with some advisers of Belgian nationality⁹². Vanthemsche noticed that the presence of those Belgians advisers at the highest political level of Zaire might have been "counter-productive for Belgian interests." In 1974, for instance, Belgian ambassador Charles Kerremans warned Prime Minister Tindemans against "certain Belgians in Mobutu's entourage"⁹³. Hugues Leclercq, in particular, is cited as a main driving force behind the Zairianisation measures⁹⁴.

Gauthier de Villers was categorical in his assessment of Belgium's reaction: "[l]e coup de tonnerre de la zairianisation éclatera dans une période car-

actérisée par la multiplication des visites privées et le triomphe de la diplomatie de l'affection. Il ne suffira pas à briser le charme."⁹⁵. Prime Minister Leburton declared in the Senate that "our relations with Zaire are those of an independent state with another independent state" and the government "follows the evolution of the situation day by day"⁹⁶. Deputy Prime Minister De Clercq went one step further, stating that "it does not look like the Zairianisation measures affect the interests of the Belgian state"⁹⁷. Admittedly, individual Belgians were certainly affected, but the big Belgian economic players in the country seemed to be safeguarded against the lion's share of the measures. According to Socialist Member of Parliament Wim Geldolf, the "most important and wealthiest groups "negotiated" their own interests with the Zairean authorities in private." Petrofina, SGM and the *Compagnie Maritime Belge* (CMB) reached agreements with Zaire, he concluded⁹⁸. After all, Congo/Zaire "n'est pas l'affaire des belges, mais l'affaire de belges", de Villers noted⁹⁹.

After Zairianisation came the radicalisation. The obvious failure of the former policy had to be altered in order to undo the personal enrichment of the transferees. From 1 January 1975 onwards, the Zairean President decided that the state would take over all large companies, with the exemption of foreign companies¹⁰⁰. The two policies were

89. "Dat is de dood van de Congo geworden, en leeft nog altijd voort vandaag." COLIN HENDRICKX, *Interview with Honoré Paelinck, Former CEO of ONATRA*, Ekeren, 21 January 2017. Honoré Paelinck (c.1935) is a transport expert, specialised in ports and maritime transport. He performed consultancy assignments for the World Bank, acted as managing director for the Belgian train company NMBS/SNCB (1986-7), and Chief Executive Officer of Zairean national transport firm ONATRA (1977-85), which was responsible for the national waterways, among other things.

90. An example could be found at the time of the debt restructuring in 1988: Martens recalled in his memoirs that it was sometimes "too complex" for the Zairean President. WILFRIED MARTENS, *De memoires...*, p. 505.

91. DAVID VAN REYBROUCK, *Congo: The Epic History...*, p. 358.

92. MANU RUYS, *Manu Ruys: Een levensverhaal*, Tielt, Lannoo, 1999, p. 115; ROGER HUISMAN en RIK VAN PUYMBROECK, "Mijn hart klopt in Congo", *Het Belang van Limburg*, 26 juni 2010, p. 20; MARK EYSKENS, *Mijn levens...*, p. 185.

Additionally, Herman De Croo mentioned the proximity of Belgian advisers. COLIN HENDRICKX, *Interview with Herman De Croo*.

93. GUY VANTHEMSCHE, *Belgium and the Congo...*, p. 230.

94. MANU RUYS, *Manu Ruys...*, p. 115; COLIN HENDRICKX, *Interview with Honoré Paelinck*.

95. GAUTHIER DE VILLERS, *De Mobutu à Mobutu...*, p. 54.

96. *Annales Parlementaires de Belgique. Sénat*, 20 décembre 1973, p. 1065.

97. GAUTHIER DE VILLERS, *De Mobutu à Mobutu...*, p. 53.

98. *Annales Parlementaires de Belgique. Chambre des Représentants*, 6 novembre 1974, p. 282.

99. GAUTHIER DE VILLERS, *Belgique/Zaire: Une histoire...*, p. 192.

100. MICHAEL G. SCHATZBERG, "The State and the Economy: The "Radicalization of the Revolution" in Mobutu's Zaire", *Canadian Journal of African Studies/ Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines*, nr. 14, 1980 (2), p. 240-241.

comparable: neither was thought out nor carefully implemented¹⁰¹. Radicalisation also meant an unmistakable abandonment of economic liberalism and an inclination towards a Chinese and North Korean influenced economic system. Mobutu did indeed visit China and North Korea in December 1974, and was persuaded into a two-day meeting of the Political Bureau on the *Kamanyola*, the Zairean presidential ship. As a result of the meeting, ten 'scourges' of Zairean society were identified, denouncing the consumption society, individualism and egoism, inflation as being inherent in the liberal economy, amongst other 'scourges'¹⁰². The improvised radicalisation measures proved to be counterproductive. In several stages in 1975 and 1976, the policy of *rétrocession* was implemented. It was announced on 25 November 1975 that 40% of the shares of enterprises will be returned to the original owners. In September 1976, the second stage of *rétrocession* (the *déradicalisation*) provided former owners with up to 60% of shares, provided that they find Zairean buyers for the remaining 40%¹⁰³. Most original owners were "no longer interested in the least" to take over non-performing enterprises¹⁰⁴.

The Mobutu regime was not 'predestined' to introduce this three-stage process. In *Paroles du président*, a booklet outlining Mobutu's ideas and comparable with Mao's *Red Book* or the later *Green Book* of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, the Zairean President clearly and succinctly described his views on the country's economy in 1968: "*Nous n'avons nullement l'intention de transformer le Congo en démocratie populaire ou*

de contester les pouvoirs de décision et de gestion du patronat. Les entreprises privées constituent l'armature même de la vie économique congolaise et je n'ai ni l'intention, ni le désir de porter atteinte au droit légitime de propriété"¹⁰⁵. Zaire was not the only African state which took over foreign-owned enterprises. Leslie Rood recognised a veritable "tide of takeovers" in sub-Saharan Africa between 1960 and 1975, including states such as Ghana, Kenya, and Nigeria¹⁰⁶. The sheer scale and questionable legality of the three-stage operation, arguably "the most sweeping and comprehensive set of nationalizing measures yet undertaken in independent Africa"¹⁰⁷, however, contrasted with the apathetic response of the Belgian political leaders. They did not decide to push through a diplomatic rupture, and did not terminate the Belgo-Zairean friendship treaty of 29 June 1969. The first real clash between the Zairean regime and the former coloniser did not happen because of Zairianisation. Rather, it was a consequence of Mobutu's extreme sensitivity towards the Belgian public opinion¹⁰⁸. In 1974, Chomé published *L'ascension de Mobutu*. The publication was so compromising for the President that the author was assaulted by a proponent of Mobutu, according to information available in a later publication of the book¹⁰⁹. France banned the book on the grounds of outrage towards a foreign head of state for diplomatic reasons. The Belgian government expressed in a letter to the Zairean head of state that they regret the publication of the book, but do not have the legal tools to prohibit the sale of the book in Belgium. This statement provoked Mobutu to end the aforementioned friendship treaty on 10 May 1974¹¹⁰.

101. *Idem*, p. 244.

102. CRAWFORD YOUNG and THOMAS EDWIN TURNER, *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian State*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, p. 350-353.

103. *Idem*, p. 357-358.

104. DAVID VAN REYBROUCK, *Congo: The Epic History...*, p. 358.

105. JOSEPH-DÉSIRÉ MOBUTU [MOBUTU SESE SEKO], *Paroles du président*, Kinshasa, Éditions du Léopard, 1968, p. 32.

106. LESLIE L. ROOD, "Nationalisation and Indigenisation in Africa", *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, nr. 14, 1967 (3), p. 427 and 432-434.

107. CRAWFORD YOUNG and THOMAS EDWIN TURNER, *The Rise and Decline...*, p. 361.

108. GAUTHIER DE VILLERS, *De Mobutu à Mobutu...*, p. 31.

109. JULES CHOMÉ, *L'ascension de Mobutu: du sergent Joseph-Désiré au Général Sese Seko*, Bruxelles, Éditions Complexe, 1974, p. VII.

110. RENAAT VAN ELSLANDE, *Annales Parlementaires. Chambre des Représentants*, 6 novembre 1974, p. 287.

This bilateral quarrel did not have an immediate effect on Zaire's relations with the United States: during a conversation between Kissinger and a Zairean delegation under the lead of Minister of Foreign Affairs Uamba di Lutete in August 1974, the latter expressed Mobutu's concerns regarding Belgium's alleged "efforts to discredit Zaire in the eyes of foreign investors". Kissinger then reiterated the US's support for Zaire, and went on to discuss the situation in Angola. The appeasing approach from the US can hardly be dissociated from the mutual interests of the US and Zaire in Angola¹¹¹.

Debt Restructuring Talks

Mobutu's reliance on rhetoric and public opinion over sound and rigorous economic policy is shown by events in the second half of the 1980's. From the 1970's onwards, the Bretton Woods institutions and Club of Paris engaged in a series of reform plans and debt restructurings for the Congo. For instance, 1979 saw a Paris Club rescheduling and an IMF stabilisation plan; in 1980 there was a London Club rescheduling; in 1981 there was another Paris Club debt rescheduling, in addition to the five devaluations of the Zaire currency in the period¹¹². In 1988, Prime Minister Martens went on an official visit to Zaire. The conclusion by certain Members of Parliament of the Liberal opposition that the visit was ill-prepared is correct, partly because the government was incapable of formulating a coherent Zaire policy¹¹³. Debt restructuring was the 'hot topic' in particular during the visit, and Belgium's confused and muddled stance contrasted with Zaire's

well-orchestrated theatre play. In its first act, Mobutu already ventilated his grievances towards the IMF and Belgium's role in an interview with Siradiou Diallo in *Jeune Afrique*, two months before the visit. IMF director-general Michel Camdessus, Mobutu told Diallo on board of the *Kamanyola*, jumped on an airplane after encountering Mobutu in Washington, to "engage in a real complot with the Belgians, against Zaire and its chief!"¹¹⁴ During Martens' visit from 30 October until 6 November 1988, Mobutu made use of a true *gesticulation politique*, as Braeckman stipulated¹¹⁵. The President became "grumpy", Martens recalled, when the dossier of debt restructuring was tabled. Canada cancelled Zaire's debt, Mobutu explained, and West Germany promised to cancel Zaire's bilateral debt with the country. "Those are countries that have never colonised us", he said to try to convince Martens. "It is striking that the Westerners have invented Human Rights only after they were chased out of their colonies", Mobutu said, repeating his oft used strategy of putting pressure on Belgium by referencing the colonial past and its injustices.¹¹⁶ New attacks were launched against Belgium in the following months. Mobutu tried, for instance, to re-open the *contentieux*¹¹⁷. He even threatened to submit the *contentieux* to the International Court of Justice in The Hague¹¹⁸. Belgium became more conciliatory at the 1989 Francophone Summit in Dakar, proposing a full cancellation of the government bonds, and to make an effort on the guaranteed accounts payable. This was interpreted on the Zairean side as an engagement from the Belgians to cancel all debts and was framed by Mobutu as *l'esprit de Dakar*¹¹⁹. During the discussion on

111. "Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, August 13, 1974", *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, (Volume E-6, Documents on Africa, 1973-1976, Document 263).

112. WINSOME J. LESLIE, *The World Bank & Structural Transformation in Developing Countries: The Case of Zaire*, London, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1987, p. 65.

113. For instance SERGE KUBLA, *Annales Parlementaires Chambre des Représentants*, 17 novembre 1988, p. 183-5.

114. SIRADIOU DIALLO, "Mobutu: "Nous ne céderons pas aux diktats du FMI"", *Jeune Afrique*, nr. 1447, 28 septembre 1988, p. 1.

115. COLETTE BRAECKMAN, *Le dinosaure: Le Zaïre de Mobutu*, s.l., Fayard, p. 239.

116. WILFRIED MARTENS, *De Memoires...*, p. 504.

117. For a contemporary lecture of the *grand affrontement* which historicises the crisis, see JEAN-CLAUDE WILLAME, *Éléments pour une lecture du contentieux Belgo-Zaïrois*, (Cahiers du CEDAF 6), 1988.

118. WILFRIED MARTENS, *De Memoires...*, p. 508.

119. GAUTHIER DE VILLERS, *De Mobutu à Mobutu...*, p. 204.



Belgian Prime Minister Wilfried Martens and president Mobutu. In his mémoires, this picture was accompanied by the quote: "Mobutu was not a friend, but a necessary discussion partner". (Wilfried Martens, De memoires : Luctor et emergo, Tielt, Lannoo, 2006, p. 749 (Source : Belga).

the implementation of the Dakar propositions, new Belgian Foreign Minister Mark Eyskens and Zairean Foreign Minister Karl-I-Bond did not reach an agreement. Personal friend of Mobutu, King Hassan II of Morocco, mediated between the two countries, and the Protocol of Rabat was signed on 26 July 1989¹²⁰. Mobutu's eventual acquiescent attitude might have a rather mundane explanation: Eyskens recalled in his memoirs that it was only after drinking a large glass of champagne that Mobutu ordered Karl-I-Bond to finalise the agreement¹²¹. The Protocol was an "unbalanced text providing a net benefit to Zaire"¹²².

De Villers summarised that the President tried to break the front of creditors by using his weakest link, Belgium. Sometimes he blew hot, sometimes he blew cold.¹²³ Even at the time when his strong position was already severely eroded, the President still succeeded in maintaining a strong bargaining position in Dakar and Rabat. A year after Rabat, however, the events of Lubumbashi, and the personal attacks at Baudouin, as already mentioned, were miscalculations of a President in a weak position.

IV. Cultural Schemes: In Search of Authenticity

Through the concurring processes of nationalism and the construction of an alleged authentic Zairean culture, Mobutu and the nation's state ideologues tried to instrumentalise several aspects of nationalism to their benefit. Several audiences had to be balanced against one another in this endeavour: it had to appeal to the citizens of Zaire, who needed to be rallied behind the same nation, and had to be subjected to the authori-

tarian Zairean chief. Secondly, the greater African and Third World community were also watching what was going on in the country. Lastly, Western observers were a third audience.

In May 1967, Mobutu's ideology of *recours à l'authenticité* was communicated through the *Manifesto of N'Sele*. Over the next few years, the name of the country Congo, the Congo River, and the Congolese Franc changed to Zaire. People also had to assume new African names and had to abandon their original, Christian birth name. This was a deliberate strategy by Mobutu in curtailing the influence of the Catholic Church in Zaire, led by Cardinal Joseph Malula who criticised the personal enrichment of the ruling class. Furthermore, the *nationalisme zaïrois authentique*, as it was called by regime ideologue Manwana Mungongo in a different publication, justified the strong authority of Mobutu: "*Nous venons de souligner un autre trait fondamental de la conception du leader en Afrique: le caractère autoritaire. Ce trait s'explique par la philosophie bantoue. Pas uniquement. Les conditions de vie en Afrique ont rendu nécessaire un pouvoir autoritaire qui, sans être assimilé [sic] à la dictature, s'approche davantage de la contrainte que de la liberté au sens occidental du terme*"¹²⁴.

For Zairean audiences, *authenticité* was primarily meant to thwart the regime's loss of legitimacy amongst the citizens of Zaire. "Was this *recours à l'authenticité* then simply a ruse? A charming ideology meant to disguise a deeper reality?", Van Reybrouck asked himself. "Yes, it was. And that deeper reality was: Mobutu had started caring less and less about his people"¹²⁵. Other authors were equally critical about *authenticité*, with Crawford Young for instance calling the movement "high in symbolic

120. COLETTE BRAECKMAN, *Le dinosaure...*, p. 240.

121. MARK EYSKENS, *Mijn levens: Een reis in de tijd*, Tielt, Lannoo, 2008, p. 185.

122. GAUTHIER DE VILLERS, *Belgique/Zaire: Une histoire...*, p. 196.

123. Idem, *Histoire du politique au Congo-Kinshasa: Les concepts à l'épreuve*, Louvain-la-Neuve, L'Harmattan, 2016, p. 131.

124. MANWANA MUNGONGO, *Le Général Mobutu Sese Seko parle du nationalisme Zaïrois authentique*, Kinshasa, Éditions Okapi, 1967 [?], p. 77.

125. DAVID VAN REYBROUCK, *Congo: The Epic History...*, p. 355.



Belgian Prime Minister Wilfried Martens in between Karl-I-Bond and president Mobutu (Source : Belga).

connotations of Zairean culture, though low in specific content"¹²⁶. Indeed, some authors, such as Young, viewed *authenticité* as an absurdity.

Zairean nationalism resonated throughout the whole Third World. In his speech at the UN General Assembly on 4 October 1973, the Zairean President declared that his country suffered "above all because of the greed of the West and the East"¹²⁷. In 1885, he claimed, "slave-traders of the period met in Berlin and, like vultures, carved up the African continent among themselves"¹²⁸. He further praised Zairean cooperation with North Korea and China, while at the same time announcing the breaking-off of diplomatic relations with Israel¹²⁹. Afro-Arab solidarity, Young and Turner mentioned, had to eclipse "the history of amicable relations with Israel"¹³⁰. The speech also attracted attention from the West. During a discussion between Mobutu, US President Richard Nixon and his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger at the time of Mobutu's visit to the US right after the speech at the UN, Nixon was surprisingly appeasing towards his Zairean homologue. He understood that Mobutu "must maintain a position of credibility vis-a-vis [his] colleagues in the Organization of African Unity", and additionally, Kissinger stated that he will give Zaire's Ambassador the possibility to directly contact Kissinger "instead of going through the routine channels"¹³¹.

Going back to the link with the Third World, *authenticité* sought to associate Zaire with these countries on a more cultural level. Mobutu's rhetoric was aimed at African and Third World

audiences, for many Third World leaders initially viewed Mobutu "as a neo-colonial creation, put in power and supported by the CIA and other Western political and economic interests"¹³². Part of its appeal as historical phenomenon, Van Beurden claimed, lies in the ambiguous nature of *authenticité* as a legitimisation for an authoritarian state, as well as having "an intellectual appeal that connected it to a pan-African tradition"¹³³. *Authenticité* and Mobutism (the personality cult that replaced *authenticité*) were inspired by certain Third World cultural expressions. In 1973 and 1974, Mobutu paid state visits to the People's Republic of China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, respectively¹³⁴. According to Mobutu, Chinese leader Mao Zedong said to him: "Mobutu, it is you? Know well that I admire you, you are courageous... I delivered arms, munitions, money to your adversaries to fight against you. You have won. I have a lot of respect for you"¹³⁵. Apocryphal or not, the citation shows a durable partnership between the two non-aligned countries.

The sartorial side of *authenticité* linked Zaire with the rest of the Third World. A particular garment was created to replace the prevailing Western-style business attire. This two-piece suit with silk foulard, called *abacost* after *à bas le costume* was completely invented¹³⁶. Surprisingly, Mobutu did not only look at Zaire to draw inspiration for his outfit. It bears striking resemblances with suits that Mao and Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru wore. For other Third World leaders, *authenticité* functioned as an example for their nationalist projects. Similar schemes were adopted by the regimes of Equatorial

126. CRAWFORD YOUNG, "Zaire: The Unending Crisis", *Foreign Affairs*, nr. 57, 1978 (1), p. 171.

127. MOBUTU SESE SEKO, *United Nations General Assembly Twenty-Eighth Session*, 2140th Plenary Meeting, 4 October 1973, p. 9.

128. *Idem*, *Twenty-Eighth Session*, p. 10.

129. *Idem*, *Twenty-Eighth Session*, p. 12.

130. CRAWFORD YOUNG and THOMAS EDWIN TURNER, *The Rise and Decline...*, p. 138.

131. "Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, October 10, 1973, 10:30 a.m.", *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1969-1976, (Volume E-6, Documents on Africa, 1973-1976, Document 258).

132. KEVIN C. DUNN, *Imagining the Congo: The International Relations of Identity*, Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan, 2003, p. 116-7.

133. SARAH VAN BEURDEN, *Authentically African: Arts and the Transnational Politics of Congolese Culture*, Athens, Ohio University Press, 2015, p. 20.

134. CRAWFORD YOUNG and THOMAS EDWIN TURNER, *The Rise and Decline...*, p. 218.

135. MOBUTU SESE SEKO, *Dignité pour l'Afrique...*, p. 34.

136. "Down with the suit." JAMES BROOKE, "In Congo, Fashion from a Suitcase", *New York Times*, 17 March 1988.

Guinea, Gabon and Togo¹³⁷. For instance, President Étienne Eyadéma of Togo changed his original baptismal name to Gnassingbé. He expected Togolese citizens to do the same¹³⁸.

Finally, building upon Vansina and Tempels, *authenticité* projected an image to the West which they already understood and accepted as 'authentic'. Not only Aimé Césaire's and Léopold Sédar Senghor's concept of *négritude* was a source of inspiration, the standard work on African philosophy by the Belgian missionary Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy* was used in the ideology of *authenticité*¹³⁹. By all means, Tempels was a "child of his time", as one author stated¹⁴⁰, and it can be debated whether a 'Bantu philosophy' exists or existed. Applying Tempels' teachings to the Zairean case becomes even more problematic, as Mobutu originated from the Ngbandi people, who use a non-Bantu language. Nevertheless, Mungongo reconciled Tempels' notion of the *life force* in *Bantu Philosophy* with the regime's claim of hegemonic leadership. A leader is authoritarian, Mungongo claimed, because he is Bantu. Spontaneous obedience of Africans to strong authorities is not enslavement, according to the *authenticité* ideology, but is based on the Bantu philosophy of the vital force¹⁴¹. *Bantu Philosophy* is explicitly mentioned in the bibliography at the back of Mungongo's book¹⁴². Additionally, Belgian anthropologist and historian Jan Vansina wrote in 1966 that "the cultures of Congo are much alike when compared to other African cultures and even more when compared to other cultures of the world"¹⁴³. Vansina was also involved in the *authenticité* campaign on a more direct level: in 1967, during a

dinner with the President and one of his economic advisers, Belgian banker Jacques de Groote, Vansina came up with the term 'zaire' as a name for Congo's national currency as it designates in different local languages, including Kikongo, "the river which swallows all streams"¹⁴⁴. This was four years before the country and Congo-river would be renamed in the same fashion. Finally, as Dunn explained, Mobutu was accepted by the West because "he was not threatening Western notions of the self while simultaneously reinforcing their notions of the African Other"¹⁴⁵. The delicate balance between different audiences and notions of authenticity thus reveal the complexity of this exercise, which was less superficial than some authors as Van Reybrouck believed.

The ideology of 'Mobutism' followed *authenticité* from July 1974 onwards, and was defined by the teachings, speeches, thoughts and actions of the *Président-fondateur* of the MPR¹⁴⁶. Impressed by the state visits to the People's Republic of China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Mobutu notably retained the personality cult of the Communist countries. Mobutu kept on representing the nation as a whole until the very end in 1997, even when it became clear that the Mobutu regime was on its last legs from the first half of the 1990's onwards. Abandoned by Belgium and having lost its strategic position in the eyes of the US, Mobutu's position was not durable anymore. As icing on the cake, he suffered from terminal cancer. His disease became a popular trope for himself, Zaireans, and foreign observers to characterise the regime and state as a whole¹⁴⁷. "[V]oilà que les ennemis de notre peuple choisissent

137. GEORGES NZONGOLA-NTALAJA, "The Authenticity of Neocolonialism: Ideology and Class Struggle in Zaire", *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, nr. 22, 1977-8, p. 115.

138. STEPHEN ELLIS, "Rumour and Power in Togo", *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, nr. 63, 1993 (4), p. 464.

139. PLACIDE [PLACIDE] TEMPELS, *Bantoe-filosofie*, Antwerpen, De Sikkel, 1946.

140. STEPHEN O. OKAFOR, "'Bantu Philosophy': Placide Tempels Revisited", *Journal of Religion in Africa*, nr. 13, 1982 (2), p. 88.

141. MANWANA MUNGONGO, *Le Général Mobutu...*, p. 76.

142. Id., *Le Général Mobutu...*, p. 174.

143. JAN VANSINA, *Introduction à l'ethnographie du Congo*, Kinshasa, Éditions Universitaires du Congo, 1966, p. 10.

144. Interview of Jean-Pierre Langellier with JACQUES DE GROOTE in JEAN-PIERRE LANGELLIER, *Mobutu*, p. 169.

145. KEVIN C. DUNN, *Imagining the Congo...*, p. 118-9.

146. CRAWFORD YOUNG and THOMAS EDWIN TURNER, *The Rise and Decline...*, p. 215.

147. KEVIN C. DUNN, *Imagining the Congo...*, p. 139.

sent le moment où je suis terrassé par la maladie pour me poignarder dans le dos”, Mobutu told a crowd with a trembling voice in 1996, “car ils savent ce que l’intégrité du territoire représente à mes yeux”¹⁴⁸. Zaireans were so creative to dub the new zaire bills of the Kengo government of January 1997 *prostates*¹⁴⁹. Just like Mobutu’s prostate cancer was cancerous throughout his whole body, the new zaire bills spread rapidly to the point where it harmed the economy: the population could remember the hyperinflation of 600% in 1996¹⁵⁰. The Likulia Bolongo government, right before the fall of the regime, could only print extra money in order to pay clerks as well as soldiers. The new zaire bills were called *utenika’s*, after the South African war vessel on which South African President Nelson Mandela tried to mediate between Mobutu and Kabila¹⁵¹. At the run-up and conclusion of Mobutu’s fall around May 1997, Belgian newspapers began to publish cartoons which depicted Mobutu as a sick man¹⁵². Examples include Mobutu’s toque sinking in the sea¹⁵³ or being eaten by mice like a piece of Swiss cheese¹⁵⁴.

V. Conclusion

It is impossible in the scope of one article of this nature to discuss the whole political, diplomatic, and economic history of Belgo-Zairean ties *in extenso*. Rather, this article tried to provide some arguments to put Belgo-Congolese relations back on the academic agenda. Isidore Ndaywel È

Nziem already in 2006 realised that the historiographic dynamic of the years following Congolese independence with standard works such as the *Congo* series of the CRISP was completely disintegrated to the point where only the contemporary history section of the Royal Museum of Central Africa under the lead of de Villers studied the realities in the DRC, next to very few other examples¹⁵⁵. There are, however, several works written outside an academic context which consider Mobutu-era Congo/Zaire¹⁵⁶. Although most of those studies succeeded in putting certain excesses on the agenda, and firmly so, they did not provide a detailed breakdown of the architecture behind Belgo-Zairean relations. This is not to say that those excesses did not form part of this architecture: not only Zairean citizens, but the whole world took note that Prime Minister Évariste Kimba was hung in a stadium in Kinshasa, or people could read that former Foreign Minister Karl-I-Bond was tortured by confidants of Mobutu in his cell by placing clamps on his testicles, and then electrocuting him until he relieved himself¹⁵⁷.

A first concluding remark in dissecting Belgo-Zairean relations is that many instances where Mobutu acted against the interests of Belgium or Belgians were met with a lacklustre response from the Belgian side. In this regard, it would be difficult to maintain the perspective of Colette Braeckman that “*la Belgique était le tuteur de Mobutu, soutenait Mobutu mais le faisait avec l’accord et l’appui des américains*” right until 1990¹⁵⁸. As Lumumba-Kasongo noted, the “Belgian state did not develop any clear

148. THIERRY MICHEL, *Mobutu: Roi du Zaïre*.

149. “Popular Monetarism”, *The Economist*, 5 April 1997, p. 99.

150. *Idem*.

151. FRANS DE SMET, “Avondklok wordt ingesteld in Kinshasa”, *De Standaard*, 14 mei 1997, p. 6.

152. NAGEL [EDWIN NAGELS], *De Standaard*, 12 mei 1997, p. 9; ONBEKEND, *De Standaard*, 17/18/19 mei 1997, p. 13; INCONNU, *La Libre Belgique*, 20 mai 1997, p. 6.

153. NAGEL [EDWIN NAGELS], *De Standaard*, 5 mei 1997, p. 9.

154. LUDO, *De Standaard*, 20 mei 1997, p. 10.

155. ISIDORE NDAYWEL È NZIEM, “L’historiographie congolaise: Un essai de bilan”, *Civilisations*, nr. 54, 2006 (1-2), p. 247.

156. Characteristic of this literature body are works written by journalists such as COLETTE BRAECKMAN, *Le dinosaure*; JEAN-PIERRE LANGELLIER, *Mobutu*, and in the case of Franco-Zairean relations: FRANÇOIS-XAVIER VERSCHAVE, “Macédoine pro-mobutiste”, *La Françafrique: Le plus long scandale de la République*, Paris, Stock, 1998, p. 227-252.

157. NGUZA KARL-I-BOND, *Mobutu ou l’incarnation du mal zaïrois*, Londres, Rex Collings, 1982, p. 61.

158. ROBIN MASANGANA, *Regards belges...*, p. 132.

and strong opposition to Mobutu's regime"¹⁵⁹. This was partly because of the personal contacts some Belgians had with the President, certainly in the early days of influential personal friends of Mobutu such as Leburton. Although genuine personal sentiments were certainly a factor, the Blumenthal report demonstrated that corruption was a determinant in some of these relations. The economic interests of Belgium were also partly defended through separate deals with the Zairean regime of important companies such as UMHK, which tempered the economic damage Belgium and Belgians suffered by Zairianisation. Yet, the most decisive factor of this lacklustre response should be found at the Zairean side: the "*extraordinaire habileté politique*"¹⁶⁰ of Mobutu frequently made him stand out, for instance during debt restructuring talks or the re-opening of the *contentieux*.

This political dexterity was also certainly demonstrated in his ability to balance his foreign policy between different international partners. When he needed goodwill from his Western allies, he could install or re-install reputable politicians such as Léon Kengo wa Dondo or Karl-I-Bond. If the need to strengthen ties with the Communist bloc arose, the regime adapted their economy to a state-led model. Affinity with the rest of the African continent was taken care of through the instalment of a supposed authentic consciousness, a scheme which was adopted in several other African countries.

The highly personal relations between Belgian and Zairean actors were also a decisive factor in Belgo-Zairean relations. Most prominently, the relation between King Baudouin and President Mobutu was a signifier of the relations between the countries in general: initial reciprocal sym-

pathy and eventual antipathy. Through different strategies, Mobutu tried to join sides with many individuals. The personal nature of his foreign policy did not always succeed, certainly in the case of Belgium, and this eventually turned Mobutu into a pariah at the international level.

The absence of an unconditional alignment with the West did not mean that the Cold War did not play any role in Mobutu's policy. In 1970, Kissinger called him "strongly pro-Western" and called Congo "one of our policy successes in Africa", alluding to the idea that the United States cocooned the Congo and, more specifically, Mobutu.¹⁶¹

Aloïs Van de Voorde discerned around five main factors that made Belgium less interested in Zaire as time went by: the strongly declined commercial and economic relations, the foreign takeover of the *Société Générale* in 1988, the disappearance of the strategic importance of Africa and Zaire caused by the end of the Cold War, the strongly declined image of President Mobutu in his own country as well as abroad, and the influence of the Socialists in the government¹⁶². At the Zairean side, the Cold War did not play a primary role in the decline of the state in Zaire. That state developed in an autonomous way, in compliance with a proper logic. "*La fin de la guerre froide ne donnera que le coup de grâce*", de Villers summarised¹⁶³, but the contribution of the end of the Cold War seems even more minor than that. The ties between Mobutu and his Western partners already loosened considerably before 1991. With regard to Belgium, Baudouin's focus on Human Rights during his 1985 visit to Zaire, and the winding down of formal relations after the events of Lubumbashi in 1990 are exemplary cases.

159. LUMUMBA-KASONGO, "Zaire's Ties to Belgium...", p. 46.

160. MARIE-FRANCE CROS et GAUTHIER DE VILLERS, "Gauthier de Villers: "Son extraordinaire habileté politique lui a permis de survivre à lui-même pendant 20 ans"", *La Libre Belgique*, 17-18-19 mai 1997, p. 11.

161. "Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, July 29, 1970", *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, (Volume E-5, Part 1, Documents on Sub-Saharan Africa, 1969-1972, Document 234).

162. ALOÏS VAN DE VOORDE, *Mark Eyskens...*, p. 300.

163. GAUTHIER DE VILLERS, *Histoire du politique...*, p. 138.

With the loss of Belgian interest in Congo/Zaire, and the deliquescence of the Mobutu regime, did the memory of Mobutu soon fade away, as Manu Ruys believed¹⁶⁴? The years following the fall of Mobutu rightly received a great deal of scholarly attention, undoubtedly because social, economic, and geopolitical events evolved rapidly, but at least one palpable remnant of the regime is still present: some veterans from the Mobutu era have been rehabilitated by the new regime, such as cur-

rent spokesman of the Presidential majority André Alain Atundu, once general administrator of the Zairean National Service of Intelligence and Protection (SNIP). More generally, Mobutu's heritage is "much more cultural than political", Tshitenge Lubabu declared¹⁶⁵. Twenty years after the fall of the regime, the *Président-fondateur* still fascinates some audiences, as shown by the new biography of Langellier, or the special dossier about Mobutu in *Jeune Afrique*¹⁶⁶.

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164. MANU RUY, *Manu Ruys...*, p. 128.

165. TSHITENGE LUBABU M.K., "L'empreinte du léopard", *Jeune Afrique*, nr. 2941, 21 mai 2017, p. 33.

166. JEAN-PIERRE LANGELLIER, *Mobutu*; and "Mobutu : 20 ans après", *Jeune Afrique*, nr. 2941, 21 mai 2017, p. 24-35.