City and Nation in an African Context: National Identity in Kinshasa

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Abstract
Despite the manifest failings of the Congolese state since independence, its inability to deliver services or to promote the status or prestige of its population, the educated minority of citizens of the capital city, Kinshasa, continue to cling to a notion of the unified state as an ideal that is closely tied to their own sense of self in the world. At its peak, it was a city especially of display and consumption that nourished this sense. The city was the site of the creation of this class par excellence. The particular hold of the state as an ideal comes not out of some inherently African trait but in consequence of the conjuncture of class plus the particular way in which Kinshasa has evolved by contrast with other African capital cities and the DRC by contrast with other African countries.

Keywords
nationalism, nation-state, cities, Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo

For most writers taking on the city as a general premise, Africa hardly features. If anything, African cities are sweepingly dismissed as dystopian. Not that they are lacking in severe problems. However, a rapidly growing urban component of the population and the emergence of a few near-megacities makes this characterization inadequate. African cities generate cultural and political ideas, including forms that national sentiments assume in different historical contexts. This article attempts to add individuality and character to this picture and considers how general ideas about nationalism (Gellner, Anderson, etc.) apply in African situations or, more precisely, in the particular situation of Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The city of Léopoldville was only established as the capital of the huge colony of the Belgian Congo at the end of the 1920s at the point where the Congo, flowing out of the Stanley (Malabo) Pool, turns into a long series of unnavigable rapids before reaching the point where deep sea shipping can enter beyond its mouth. It was not only the key administrative and military point in Belgian control of Africa’s second largest territory but also, after the Second World War, an increasingly important industrial, as well as commercial, center. After independence in 1960, it grew very fast and initially harbored a large European population that dominated the center-city. Although, after a time of trouble in which the city absorbed many refugees, industrial activity

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increased for a period, Kinshasa, as the capital was renamed, became particularly significant as a center of desirable and prestigious services and consumption, rather than one where economic effulgence flowed out of productive activities. *Kin la belle* was the symbol of the good life, notably as the haunts of beautiful and available women and as the fount of musical creation that had a growing continental market, for the rising class of educated Congolese men. The *quartier* of Matonge symbolized this attraction.

From the early 1970s, the economy of Zaïre as the country was renamed began to decay and with it the capital whose infrastructure became dilapidated and whose aesthetic charms gradually faded. On a national scale, the most economically dynamic elements in society, apart from a thin layer close to the head of state, were men and women who found means of accumulation out of the decay of the state and the difficulties this caused. Researchers have suggested in some Congolese cities of little importance in Belgian times, the diamond center of Mbuji-Mayi, which is now perhaps the second biggest urban center in the country, and more recently, Butembo in the east, that a new kind of urban elite based on business rather than paper qualifications and the effective use of French, has emerged whose growth has intensified the fractures in the nation or at least, who reject the national state as a source of identity.1

In the course of conducting a set of interviews concerning the relationship of the middle class in Kinshasa, capital city of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to the city, I was surprised to find that interviewees with a few exceptions held little pride in being Kinois despite a large literature which suggests that culturally Kinshasa has enjoyed the development of a distinctive urban range of attitudes, pleasures, and ways of doing business.2 In most cases, they associated the term *Kinois* with a mentality of looking for easy money, for superficial consumer pleasures, and an indifference to any but individual fate. Several went out of their way to emphasize instead that the good, hard-working Congolese were rural and provincial people; these were the backbone of the country. There was little sense of living in Kinshasa for joy and I even encountered two or three respondents who had plans eventually to move elsewhere out of preference in time.

By contrast, while most were very affected by the plight of the DRC as an impoverished and war-torn country, there was a general loyalty to the idea of being Congolese. Two out of twenty-four people interviewed volunteered information without my asking on how many parts of the country that they had visited and lived in. Without having much positive to say about the actually existing Congolese state, most longed for an effective, strong state that paid salaries regularly and respected educated and professional people while offering the middle class good economic opportunities. Of three relatively recent books by Congolese writers that touch on the relationship of city to state, while there are ambiguous views of Kinshasa and *Kinois* culture, in general the ideal of a strong Congolese state “de la loi et de justice”3 is roughly in line with my understanding of the views of those interviewed.4

My surprise was twofold. First of all, the DRC is in fact a huge, ethnically quite diverse country no longer effectively held together by any system of transport other than air travel. There are two distinct lingua francas for east and west: Kiswahili and Lingala, respectively. Violent episodes devastated the country in the first years of independence after 1960. This included the attempt of the rich southern province of Katanga under the Tshombe regime to secede. Following the collapse of the Mobutu dictatorship in 1997, systematic disorder has again reigned, although in recent years, it has been very largely confined to the northeastern and east-central part of the country. Certainly many casual foreign observers have expected the country to fall apart.

At the same time, the newer literature on nationalism puts a great deal of emphasis on the decline of the nation-state and suggests a growing adherence to region and to cities as sources of accumulation and social and political adhesion.5
From above, the state’s power is eroded by global economic change and continental integration. From below, it is challenged by a reassertion of sub-state identities and the emergence of policy issues with which it is ill-equipped to deal. Laterally, it is being eroded by its declining ability to mobilize collective action and consciousness; by the rise of new forms of collective identity; and by the advance of the market and industrialized social relations.6

While scholarly writing on nationalism has thus far not paid very much distinct attention to the city as a center of national patriotism or opposition to it, as opposed to the classic literature which emphasized urbanization as important to the emergence of nationalist politics not least in Africa,7 there is a contemporary literature that considers critically the possibilities of historically different kinds of relationships between cities and states historically and, by extension, today.8 There is in fact a diverse literature on the Congo that does seem to suggest that energetic forces have moved toward fastening their energies on accumulation of wealth independent of the state, on the rise of new elites with relatively little in the way of European-modeled professional criteria and on the emergence of centers with little or no control from the central state.9 Moreover, the present president, Joseph Kabila, and his father, Laurent, assassinated in 2001, do not have roots in the western part of the country, which seems to have supported rival “warlord” Jean-Pierre Bemba in the last election so there is unlikely to be a partisan regional or urban bias in favor of the present power alliances.

Thus, continued adhesion to a national imaginary seems to defy expectations of state evisceration. Yet a long-established commentator on the Congo, Crawford Young, has pointed out:

In the last Mobutu years, a rejection of the regime, and a pervasive image of the regime as a prostate predator, was virtually universal. Yet none drew the inference that a political solution to impasse and decay lay in a reconfiguration of political space, whether on ethno-regional or other criteria. Understanding the reasons for the improbable survival of this moribund state lies in grasping the degree in which naturalized forms of nationalism have become incorporated into popular culture . . . an unmistakable sense of historically constituted difference from Africans of neighbouring states . . . all contribute to this sentiment. In the intensely frustrating circumstances of intractable civil strife, the one unifying sentiment is the profound resentment of “Ugandans” and especially “Rwandans”, held to have invaded the country.10

To comprehend this aspect of Congolese mentalité, I would like to extract some ideas from the more or less theoretical literature on nationalism. More or less seems fair comment because it has never proven possible for extensive definitions of nationalism to be put to work in a broad range of situations. Ernst Gellner was probably close to a definition in considering nationalism as a means of attaining “political legitimacy.”11 But how far does this take us? Instead, nationalism seems like a transparency through which many colors are revealed from below on closer inspection. The older literature tended to emphasize the class forces behind the discourse and emphasize the possibility of manipulation. Thus, Hans Kohn followed the transformation of Pan-Slavism into a tool of the late Czarist state.12 A more recent view stresses the extent to which nationalism can be a socially progressive force as well. For instance, Linda Colley explores the democratic side of populist nationalism in Britain, in a sense taking the Thompsonian tradition into debates about nationalism.13
Gellner went, however, further than this in his discussion of low, folk cultures that can be very localized and deeply rooted in historically bounded rural communities where knowledge is often oral, contrasted with high cultures that depend on the use of administrative tools controlled by governments and on writing, which systematized language and defined community through creating and bounding an audience. Gellner’s research as an anthropologist focussed on Saharan Africa and he considered that his comments were relevant to African situations. In Africa, he pointed out the emergence of a class of intellectuals debarred from power during the colonial period. They were “intellectuals capable of fluent communication but debarred from positions of real power by a shared distinctive trait: colour. They are united by a shared exclusion, not a shared culture.” They were capable of tapping popular grievances and feeding on particular crisis points in the late colonial period that would lead Africa to independence. Testimonies by Congolese intellectuals used in this research on Kinshasa include paeans of praise to the struggles, and notably the early struggles, of those elites.

The other salient point that Gellner brought to bear on the subject of nationalism coming from his training in anthropology was his emphasis on the cultural. He believed, rightly I think again, that nationalism, however politically weighty as an impulse, sits in the cultural sphere. This is why it has been so difficult to make any convincing and consistent materialist analysis and why so many scholars in the wake of the so-called cultural turn have more recently found it so interesting to return to thinking about nationalism. Nationalism can be and usually is propelled by an ambitious would-be bourgeois stratum searching for status and money but it has to be more than this to take shape. It is rarely the capitalist class itself that generates nationalist thought, certainly in the absence of a serious industrialization process where economic power in production is at stake.

Taking these ideas further, Benedict Anderson has also been a very fruitful source of ideas. Like Gellner, he is interested in the culture of nationalism and he has the unusual benefit of understanding both the “classic” nationalism of central and eastern Europe and the nationalist culture that formed in one major part of the non-European world, Southeast Asia. Anderson takes forward several ideas already visible in Gellner. One is the central importance of what is now more fashionably called “print-capitalism.” Anderson makes the very salient point for Africa that command of this written language (and indeed of oratory, through politically dynamic speechmaking, typical of commanding figures such as Mobutu sese Seko or Jomo Kenyatta) does not mean that the language must be distinct and unique to the nation; it may in fact be the common colonial language appropriated by the nationalists. Second, Anderson emphasizes the importance of the administrative system, and notably the educational system, which defines the purport and objectifies the legitimacy of the postcolonial states once taken over by nationalists; this is power and the key to wealth. In the case of the huge island state of Indonesia, as unlikely a totality beyond its Dutch origins as the Congo is beyond its Belgian past, he has written:

“Indonesia” survived. In part, it survived because Batavia remained the ducational apex until the end, but also because colonial administrative policy did not rusticate Sundanese to the “Sundalands” or the Batak to their place of origin in the highlands of North Sumatra. Virtually all the major ethnolinguistic groups were, by the end of the colonial period, accustomed to the idea that there was an archipelagic stage on which they had parts to play. Thus, only one of the rebellions of 1950-64 had separatist ambitions; all the rest were competitive within a single Indonesian political system.

In this quote, Anderson is also promoting a rather newer idea, namely that nationalism can exist despite what a reading of the very diverse cultural discourse seems to yield. Finally, Anderson,
who is really concerned with the rise of nationalist feeling, stresses the *processual and historically contingent* just as writers such as Gellner, Kohn, and Hobsbawm (as an historian, of course) do.

Anderson also stresses the nonrelationship of nationalism and racism. He sees racism as having entirely different roots and defines nationalism as largely inclusive by nature although admitting that its tendency to wish to swallow up minority groups in the nation may in fact incur rival counternationalisms in some situations. This, it seems to me, is less convincing. The “whiteness” in, say, American nationalism, which canceled out the democratic content so similar to Colley’s perspective on Britishness, is far from unique as a nationalist feature. I prefer the older view that draws a dichotomy between the expansive, territorially based and prospectively assimilative nationalism of Britain, the United States, or France and the nationalism that stresses origins, tradition, and *Blut und Bodem*, with its historical roots in Fichte, Herder, and Hegel. It is a Eurocentric definition but can easily be applied outside Europe. This is frequently a defining feature of particular nationalisms and it is manifest in Africa but in a contingent and irregularly important way.\(^{18}\)

Turning toward the Africanist literature, we find that Crawford Young perhaps typically thinks in terms not so much of lateral division between different interpretations of the nation as of what might be dubbed a “rise, decline and fall” model of nationalism.\(^{19}\) The scholarly literature at the time when African independence movements started to come to power and thereafter tended toward what we call today “modernization” approaches in which the modernizing role of the nation-state loomed large. Thus, in the book that established Crawford Young’s reputation, he viewed the army as the one effective institution that could hold a country with deeply divergent and (preexisting) provincial loyalties together.\(^{20}\) Indeed, whether or not the nation-state was democratic or inclusive was often quite a secondary consideration. However even in the heyday of modernist analysis, important differences were noted in the character of indigenous nationalism in different countries.\(^{21}\) It is possible for instance to enlarge the scale and bring into the picture as against more “realistic” territorial nationalism, continental nationalism (Pan-Africanism), and racial nationalism that reaches out to the “diaspora” across the Atlantic (Black Atlantic). These approaches have had a strong historic appeal to some intellectuals, less to politicians and very much less to any section of the masses. The idea of an “Afro-American” family of some kind, for instance, is quite foreign in northern, central, or southern Africa, for instance, although slightly less so in West Africa.

Keeping the national idea congruent with the colonial frontiers has certainly been a challenge for African politicians. At another level, in many instances, the territorial nationalists were confronted with those who dreamt (and in certain cases, still dream) of separatist nation-states based on some kind of ethnic formulation or another. In Eritrea and Somalia, for instance, separatist movements based on the old colonial territories with no ethnic self-definition whatsoever emerged after independence in the sense of incorporation into Ethiopia and the amalgamation of Somalia, in the first case de jure and in the second de facto successfully. Further south, Kenya is a country notoriously dominated by rival ethnic coalitions that have recently behaved in quite murderous ways, driven by cynical influence-peddling politicians. Playing tribe against tribe, however, is part of a political pattern going back to Kenyatta and before, into British times, and it is not intended to break up the territorial jurisdiction of the Kenyan state. By contrast, Tanzania, Kenya’s southern neighbor, is still under the leadership of the party that brought mainland Tanganyika to independence. This party, originally named the Tanganyikan (later Tanzanian) African National Union, has been very successful in creating a sense of territorial nationhood. However, it should be noted that this does not generally extend to an inclusive embracing of people of European and Asian origins, albeit there have been individual exceptions. Indeed black racial unity has been a source of strength in creating Tanzanian nationalism. Many African countries, however, while very shot through with loyalties that one could call tribal or ethnic,
nonetheless combine these with some sort of national identity linked up to national territory, national symbols, and a national discourse at one and the same time.

In South Africa, the African National Congress (ANC) hovers uncomfortably between an inclusive, territorial nationalism and a consciousness of advancing the interest of “our people” or “our community,” both racially defined, and has done so since becoming alive to the question in the 1950s.\(^\text{22}\) As it is occasionally aware, the ANC is dominated by urban interests. Its weltanschauung emanates entirely from the cities.\(^\text{23}\) By contrast, the party that won out in the nationalist race in Zimbabwe, ZANU-PF, made itself a force to be reckoned with through rural insurrection and with a focus on the land question; its urban support base was thinner, and it is not entirely surprising that in the 1990s the cities of Zimbabwe turned against the ruling authorities. The racial and racist nationalism of the ruling party, stronger in more recent times when that party has become beleaguered and in danger of losing power, is skillfully traced in a recent study of school curricula.\(^\text{24}\)

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This brings one back to the point that the more general literature brings to the fore, the nature of nationalism as a historical process that develops unpredictably in different countries and different cities, sometimes including cities in the same country. Kinshasa in recent times has been seen as a city “for all,” a neutral space in which no one group with a blood or kin relationship can claim control over the city. This is in marked contrast to the city of Brazzaville, Kinshasa’s smaller twin across the Congo River, only fifteen minutes’ distance by hovercraft. Late colonial Brazzaville was marked by rivalry between KiKongo\(^\text{25}\) speakers from downriver and a medley of upriver ethnic groups who today are usually bunched together and called Niboleks. Colonial Brazzaville had two townships for “natives” dominated by KiKongo and Niboleks, respectively. This division was instrumental after independence in fueling civil war that reduced the attractive center of the town to ruins, albeit the conflict was about power in Brazzaville rather than splitting up the Republic of the Congo.\(^\text{26}\)

Ethnic tension has not only been a factor in Brazzaville; for instance, it recently contributed to violence in poor neighborhoods in Nairobi. In Nigeria, where as in Kenya politics has been highly ethnicized and state “citizenship” has often been more powerful than any sense of national identity, several apparently non-ethnic cities such as Jos, Kaduna, and Lagos (but not the new capital of Abuja) have also experienced large-scale, murderous outbreaks of violence. Even parts of the DRC have experienced this kind of ethnicized struggle for the city, for example, in conflict that led most Luba people, proverbially the most “successful” ethnic group in colonial times, to leave Katanga and establish a Luba city in Mbuji Mayi.

Leopoldville, and its postindependence incarnation as Kinshasa, perhaps might have been expected to have experienced similar problems.\(^\text{27}\) The biggest element in Leopoldville was KiKongo-speaking and state “citizenship” has often been more powerful than any sense of national identity, several apparently non-ethnic cities such as Jos, Kaduna, and Lagos (but not the new capital of Abuja) have also experienced large-scale, murderous outbreaks of violence. Even parts of the DRC have experienced this kind of ethnicized struggle for the city, for example, in conflict that led most Luba people, proverbially the most “successful” ethnic group in colonial times, to leave Katanga and establish a Luba city in Mbuji Mayi.

Leopoldville, and its postindependence incarnation as Kinshasa, perhaps might have been expected to have experienced similar problems.\(^\text{27}\) The biggest element in Leopoldville was KiKongo-speaking and the earliest political associations (which began with a music association established in 1940) were identifiably Kongo (in ethnic terms).\(^\text{28}\) With the outbreak of armed struggle in the far north of Portuguese Angola, considerable numbers of KiKongo-speaking refugees from there sheltered in Léopoldville. Over time, different quartiers of the city did have some ethnic association.

In the early years of independence, secession was in the air and the dominant Binza group, named for a rich section of the Belgian part of the city, favored a strongly federal Congo where provinces were broken up into a large number of so-called provincettes. The first elections in the Congo yielded an array of parties that were based entirely on ethnic or regional strength, including in the capital. In popular and sometimes academic mythology, one national politician who supposedly rose above such particularism was Patrice Lumumba, the first prime minister and
sainted martyr to the national cause. But Lumumba did not in fact get many votes outside the east of the country (from where he came), or very far from his stronghold of Stanleyville (later Kisangani). Nor was he a great admirer of Kinois culture, which he saw as self-indulgent, seeking pleasure from alcohol and dance.

Yet after the Mobutu coup of 1965, a strongly centralized system renewed in the Congo. Mobutu was fabulously corrupt, sometimes extremely brutal, and by contrast with Lumumba, an unquestioned friend of various Western interests over time. But Mobutu also absorbed much of Lumumba’s nationalist fervor. This included an equivalent concern for the decadence and depraved character of the capital city that he saw as exploiting the resources of the rest of the country. Consequently, Mobutu’s system of taxation and general extraction from the Congolese population could focus conveniently on the province of Kinshasa as a rich source of pickings for favored clients and underlings.

Mobutu was a dictator who did everything to undermine anybody who had charisma and power derived from precolonial times. Thus, he tried to make sure that high officials were always appointed to posts far from their own place of origin. He also organized *ratissages*, which expelled so-called excess population from Kinshasa, in similar fashion to the actions of many postcolonial African states from radical Tanzania and Mozambique to conservative apartheid South Africa, and as the Belgians had once done in colonial Léopoldville.

However, Kinshasa (as Léopoldville was renamed) experienced little ethnic tension and the distinct Kongo identity politics of the early years tended to fade away. Instead, in the view of many Kinois, Kinshasa became a city of multiple identities where individuals, who may originally have relied on familial and homeboy associations to enter urban life, exploited a multitude of links to obtain jobs, homes, and access to other desiderata. Here is a perhaps typical popular view of ethnicity in town:

> Believe you me, here [in Kinshasa] tribal origins lose their significance. Look at me for example with my name that is not identifiable, I change constantly my place of origins according to what is most convenient. I am a native of Tshikapa, Isiro or Kahemba from the moment that it is a question of talking about precious stones and that business. I am from Equateur [Province] if I want to impress the ladies. I am from Bas-Zaïre [if I wish] to be viewed and received with more warmth by the religious sects. But what I am is a native of Kinshasa, that is to say independent of sex or tendency as soon as one speaks politically, because this gives me the false alibi of neutrality. [My translation]

The cultural lure of the city (and its population, about 400,000 at the time of independence, almost trebled in the 1960s alone) included both football and action films, fertile sources of the male imaginary linked closely to urban life and well able to replace warrior traditions that were too dysfunctional to be tolerated.

Congolese elsewhere in the country also still choose to describe Kinshasa as a neutral city. This is true despite the continuing reality that for purposes of a legitimate marriage and other rites of passage, ethnic identity remained of significant importance even if it had been deprived of any dominant political meaning. Reinforcing this sense of Kinshasa was its role as a peaceful place of refuge from the major rebellions of the early 1960s associated with radical struggles for a “second independence,” of which one major focus lay directly toward the east of the city in what is today Bandundu Province. In another zone of rebellion in Orientale Province, associated with the killing of foreigners and the brief reign eventually of mercenaries, large numbers of educated Congolese men were also victims, associated as they were with the state system against which struggle was directed. Until 1990, during all but the last Mobutu years, Kinshasa itself remained largely at peace. This was eventually violated in a series of serious incidents that began in the early 1990s:
mutinies that led to large-scale destruction of commercial and private property in 1991 and 1993, then fighting between Mobutu’s men and the oncoming army of Laurent Kabila in 1997, and finally armed struggle between Kabila and his rival Jean-Pierre Bemba. But thereafter, the presence of United Nations troops gradually brought back a sense of reliable security.38

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Some writers have chosen to understand identity in the Congo without reference either to class or what Gellner called high culture. De Boeck, who seems to see the middle class as very marginal, has tried to explain the power of Mobutusque rhetoric behind the state as following from precordial discourses of legitimacy, magic and power.39 One might alternatively see this rhetoric as a way that the holders of a new but superficial high culture (one that is intrusive to Africa) are able to speak to practitioners of a more or less generalized low mass culture. To what extent this can simply be seen as manipulation is a moot point.

De Boeck has also imaginatively made claims for what he called the reenchantment of urban life. Urban inhabitants by this token have taken apart the rationality that Max Weber claimed city life delivered in the desperate situation of Kinshasa, a run-down city where the infrastructure functions very poorly and state capacity has become very limited, where few hold on to regular waged employment and reinvented ways of survival and belief based on remolded traditions, including witchcraft and magic, with incorporated elements of discourse coming through modern forms of communications.40 By contrast, the subjects of my interviews in Kinshasa were if anything “reenchanted” in terms of the kind of high culture identified by Gellner. To explain this, beyond the question of ethnicity and subnational identity, it seems to me easiest to turn to modern history. For one authoritative source, one can go back to Jean La Fontaine’s prescient work. She identified a class of people who had high status in Léopoldville/Kinshasa in the early years of independence. Prestige for them came from a set of practices: educational certification, the systematic reading of the press (especially for information about Congolese politics), expenditure on high-quality clothing, use of refined French, and (with generosity to real and potential clients at its heart) the giving of loans to the less fortunate who were sure to give their sustenance to such a social system.41

In the Mobutu period, while the dictator was clearly very unhappy with independent spirits and uncomfortable with intellectuals and they rarely admired him and indeed sometimes sacrificed their lives fighting the Mobutu system, the foundations of a new Congolese elite were laid. In the early years when resources remained available, a massive extension of secondary and higher education took place, especially dramatic because, until the very last years of Belgian rule, elite formation was feared by the state and the articulation of a class system beyond the creation of a working class was stymied wherever possible. When Mobutu called into being a sizeable indigenous state apparatus, those who were able to man such an apparatus and derive legitimacy from it became in a sense his children set against the mass of the population, even perhaps against their conscious will. It was individuals from among their ranks who ultimately agitated against Mobutu and called into being the assemblies that in the beginning of the 1990s attempted to create a new constitutional order in the country. These bodies were weak, divided, and dominated by a myriad of petty feuds and personalities, and Mobutu was able to sweep them aside to enjoy a last fling of power before the Rwandan forces helped Laurent Kabila to seize Kinshasa and drive him off finally.

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So it was Mobutu’s rule that saw the emergence of a class of people who both depended on the state and validated their status through their mastery of the French language and their holding
of paper qualifications, an attitude captured in the word cuistrerie by one astute Congolese observer. Kueno Tshingi points out that anyone with a diploma could consider himself to be an “intellectuel,” the defining moment being the successful completion of secondary education. “The diploma constituted the key to happiness, access to power and to the wealth of the country” [My translation].

And Kinshasa was key to entering this kingdom. It is true that radicals, following the quote from Mobutu himself recorded above, sometimes deplored Kinshasa as a corrupt parasitical blight on what Mobutu called Zaïre. Following the World Bank language of the time, others saw the Congo as suffering severely from “urban bias.” However, a more cheerful view was captured by Biaya. At a time when a positive view of Kinshasa was for many fading into memory, he wrote that “in colonial society, urban culture is essentially perceived as civilisation, bomondele or kizungu, as opposed to basenzi or busejji, barbarism, the state of the primitive.”

Not only was Kinshasa, Kin la belle, the location of the many creature comforts and beautiful sites created by the Belgian “uncles” in the past; even more so it was a world of pleasure symbolized by the dancing bars of Matonge, the creative center for the production of national music that attracted listeners from a whole continent. It was also the hang-out of the ndumbe, the so-called free woman, once despised, once refugees from an uncomfortable village existence, but increasingly a role model for increasingly educated and connected urban women more generally. Biaya writes that this is the very essence of what to the Congolese is modernity: “music, dance and love, the foundational triad of urban culture.” It represents freedom from the constraints of the older village life and the cake of custom there.

Put differently, while Kinshasa up to the early 1970s witnessed the development of considerable secondary industrialization and employment opportunities, it was above all a center of consumption and display. More prosaic than the bars of Matonge but equally important were the array of health and educational facilities as well as the myriad of state departments from which emanated what trickle-down incomes were to be found in Zaïre. Elite neighborhoods, new ones as well as colonial relics, displayed the possibility of supporting a network of family and perhaps clients comfortably in the city. Today, long after the signs of pleasure have largely faded and the bright lights in people’s heads have shifted to Brussels, Paris, Johannesburg, and New York, there continue to be important advantages to modern life in the capital city. This ambiance of pleasure and wealth of amenities has become progressively more threadbare since that time and things have hardly picked up since the fall of Mobutu in 1997 even if the worst disorders and threats have come to an end. Kinshasa is now Kinshasa la poubelle all too demonstratively. It is hard, as Piermay notes, to concentrate on the idea of a parasitical city of luxury living off the country when one sees the level of poverty and the dilapidated condition of contemporary Kinshasa. One source suggests that no more than 5 percent of adults had access to wage employment by the end of the 1980s compared to 20 percent in 1975.

However, the structures that were idealized in the past have set the tone for an elite whose educational strivings represent a heroic passage and who dream of a world where certification and wisdom defined through paper qualifications can determine a good life. Nor have action films or football and the rituals of stadium performance disappeared. This is much more striking than ideological adaptation to the circumstances of state decline even as people struggle in practice to make ends meet.

Finally, it should be pointed out that state decline is not the same as the end of the state or even the nation-state. My informants virtually all took as a matter of course the need for constant journeys to Gombe, the old city-center, where government offices are located. Even the most entrepreneurial are unlikely to divorce themselves from these contacts and indeed are apt to be found among the ranks of politicians and office-holders. The big business deals always require a state stamp of approval, and the organization of partnerships between foreigners and
locals are brokered by the state. Members of the middle class depend on the state, however frustrating it is and however angry it makes them. The government at various levels extracts revenues and yields necessary bits of paper as always. It is a key interlocutor, for instance, in the struggle for legitimate ownership of property. It is no longer the sole actor but it remains an essential part of the forces one must accommodate.55

It is also perhaps apposite to bear in mind the persisting memory of violence directed at the elite, both the extreme violence of the post-1960 years as well as the mass looting and rioting of 1991 and 1993 in Kinshasa itself. The elite may in its ideals deplore the corruption and patriarchal nature of the state but in the end they are also the children of Mobutu and often depend on the state in a pinch against mass upheaval. They are too weak as an incipient class to use the city, or any vehicle other than the state, to their own ends at this stage. Indeed, one might posit them as the key guardians of the Congolese national identity.

The perspectives captured in oral and written testimony point by and large to an attitude toward the city and the state that entered firmly into Congolese elite culture between the late 1950s and the early 1970s. People did not abandon the ideal of an effective nation-state for some other political form such as giving primary loyalty to cities as centers of accumulation. As elsewhere in the world, if the nation-state ideal may in some ways be in decline, in individual nations most states are not, and the significance of a network of states that form the basis for international jurisdiction and initiative only increases. Even in Butembo, an African city of an ideal type arising from the weakness of state authority in northeastern Congo with impressive elements of civic self-government promoted by a rich commercial class, there remains the ideal of reconciliation with an effective Congolese state that could promote, rather than stifle, local interests.56 Defying this pattern entirely would become the burden of Sisyphus. Life in the capital city belongs with print-capitalism and the panoply of administrative burdens and structures as a way of understanding and reinforcing the state’s enduring nature and the power of the classes that depend on it, even with a relationship of hate as well as love. Africa today displays both those forces bearing against the creation of nation-states, inevitably far younger and more fragile than in most parts of the world, but also others sustaining and locking people in to national cultures.57

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Notes


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22. Thus David Everatt in a recent study cites African National Congress President, Chief Albert Luthuli’s response when accepting the 1955 Freedom Charter, which claimed the land belonged to all the people, whites included: “What in fact South Africa is hearing from the African National Congress is the voice of African nationalism, rather than Communism. African Nationalism will become a much more powerful and appealing force than Communism. In fact, our task as leaders is to make this nationalism a broad nationalism, rather than the narrow nationalism of the [Afrikaner] Nationalist Party. . . . Extreme Nationalism is a much greater danger than Communism, and a real one”: David Everatt, *The Origins of Non-racialism: White Opposition to Apartheid in the 1950s* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2009), 177.
This is not to suggest that Luthuli’s views were necessarily popular with black ANC members at the
time or later. Afrikaner nationalism in turn was racial in its assumptions and never questioned the
rights of all white South Africans to citizenship, preferring instead a stealthy assimilation model for
the minority of white non-Afrikaners.

23. Everatt, *The Origins of Non-racialism*, 172, for an acknowledgement of this by former president
Thabo Mbeki, for example.

24. Theresa Barnes, “‘History Has to Play Its Role’; Constructions of Race and Reconciliation in Secondary
633-52. This racist understanding of the world extended to Indian Zimbabweans and people of mixed-
race origins as well as whites. The doyen of Zimbabwean studies, Terence Ranger, who in earlier work
created a rich and positive image of black nationalism, has now come around to writing that “the legacy
of the nationalists is one of violence and intimidation”; Terence Ranger, reviewing Timothy Scarmecchia,
*The Urban Roots of Democracy and Political Violence in Zimbabwe in Journal of Southern African
Studies* 35, no. 4 (2009): 995. The potency of the sort of nationalism that fought against the emergence
of a white Rhodesian nation, however, befuddles the West which has failed to grasp the continuing, if
declining, support for a Robert Mugabe.

25. The Portuguese encountered a large Kongo kingdom in the late fifteenth century and interacted, as did
the Roman Catholic Church, with it until its terminal decline by the early eighteenth century. Since
then, there has been no question of a unified Kongo state. Not entirely identically, there is a language
defined as KiKongo by linguists with local variants associated with far smaller territorial and political
units than the old kingdom.


27. For assessments of early Congolese political evolution, see Young, 1965; Lafontaine, 1970.


29. Young, *Politics in the Congo*.


31. For the Mobutu system at different stages, see Young and Turner, 1985; Willame, 1992.

32. In Schatzberg, 1979, my translation.


34. So too did any sense of the Kimbangu religious sect, strong among KiKongo speakers and long con-
sidered subversive by the Belgians, as a potent alternative rallying discourse to the national one.

35. From Jean-Claude Willame, *L’automne d’un despotisme; pouvoir, argent et obéissance dans le Zaïre


38. Gauther deVillers and Jean Omasombo Tshonda, “When Kinois Take to the Streets,” in *Reinventing

39. Filip de Boeck, “Postcolonialism, Power and Identity: Local and Global Perspectives from Zaire,”

40. de Boeck and Plissart, *Tales of the Invisible City*.

41. J. S. Lafontaine, *City Politics; A Study of Léopoldville, 1962-63* (Cambridge: Cambridge University
42. Biaya, “La cuistrerie de Mbujimayi.”
44. Ibid., 130.
52. Muketa, *Kinshasa d’un Quartier à l’Autre*.
53. As his heritage, Laurent Kabila gave to the Kinois a new stadium not associated with Mobutu as well as a well-placed new large city market.
54. This has been very effectively observed by David Newbury, “From ‘Frontier’ to ‘Boundary’: Some Historical Roots of Peasant Strategies of Survival in Zaire,” in Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Crisis in Zaïre*, 87-97, as well as by Janet MacGaffey, *Entrepreneurs and Parasites*, and Piermay, “Kinshasa.” It is also something that has become far more apparent in the newer international literature whereas older studies of nationalism are more wedded to its very close attachment to the nation-state concept.
56. Kabamba, “Trading on War.”
57. I have recently made a very similar point vis-à-vis Zulu identity in South Africa. See Bill Freund, “Zulu Identity in the International Context,” in *Zulu Identities; Being Zulu Past and Present*, ed. Benedict Carton, John Laband, and Jabulani Sithole (Pietermaritzburg: University of Kwa-Zulu Natal Press, 2008), 606-12.

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