The Political Undead: Is It Possible to Mourn for Mobutu's Zaire?
Author(s): Bob W. White
Source: *African Studies Review*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (Sep., 2005), pp. 65-85
Published by: Cambridge University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/20065096
Accessed: 20-11-2017 10:19 UTC

ASR FOCUS

Mourning and the Imagination of Political Time in Contemporary Central Africa

The Political Undead: Is It Possible to Mourn for Mobutu's Zaire?

Bob W. White

Abstract: Following the successful coup d'état of Laurent Kabila's forces in May 1997, the Zairian dictator Mobutu Sese Seko was forced into exile in Morocco, where he died. This article looks at a lively transnational debate about what should be done with the former president's remains, and through this debate reflects on attempts by people in the Congo to determine what version of history should be told and how to understand the impact of Mobutu's political legacy.

Résumé: A la suite du coup d'état réussi des forces de Laurent Kabila en Mai 1997, le dictateur zaïrois Sese Seko Mobutu fut exilé au Maroc, où il est mort. Dans cet essai, je m'intéresse à un débat actif transnational sur la décision à prendre concernant les restes de l'ancien président, et au travers de ce débat, je propose une réflexion sur les tentatives du peuple congolais de déterminer quelle version historique doit être choisie pour comprendre l'impact de l'héritage politique laissé par Mobutu.

WHEN MOBUTU LEFT ZAIRE in the spring of 1997—not as "president for life" but as "recently ousted dictator"—there was a strange, heady feeling in the air. Because he had survived one of the longest dictatorships in

African Studies Review, Volume 48, Number 2 (September 2005), pp. 65–85

Bob W. White is an assistant professor in the Department of Anthropology at the Université de Montréal, in Canada. He has conducted extensive fieldwork in Kinshasa, DRC, and he is currently completing a monograph that examines the relationship between popular music and political culture in Mobutu's Zaire (forthcoming from Duke University Press). He has published articles on the performance and the history of Congolese popular dance music, the political culture of the Mobutu regime, the political economy of world music, and the various uses of culture and performance in the public sphere. His most current research uses ethnographic methods to look at the relationship between mass media and audiences in the contemporary urban setting of the Congo.

the history of African politics, most people in Kinshasa were excited about the idea of a change in leadership, but many were incredulous. Like Mobutu, people living in the capital were caught off guard by the ability of Laurent Kabila's rebel movement to cover such large distances in so little time, and by the ease with which his troops sent Zairian soldiers running. Congolese and foreigners in the Congo were asking similar questions: If it was so easy to get rid of Mobutu, then what exactly had been keeping him in power? Would he ever return? *Was he really gone?* The question of Mobutu's whereabouts struck a particularly sensitive chord with people in the Congo since Mobutu died abroad and his body has still not been repatriated, making it impossible to feel the sense of closure that mourning is intended to achieve. In this article I will look at a lively transnational debate about whether or not the former president's remains should be repatriated to the Congo, and what this repatriation would mean in terms of the country's current political crisis. Through this debate I will reflect on attempts by people in the Congo to determine what version of history should be told, and how to understand the impact of Mobutu's political legacy.

In the fall of 2002, the Congo lost a local cosmopolitan luminary who was advancing our thinking on the relationship between popular culture and politics in Mobutu's Zaire. T. K. Biaya would certainly have had a great deal to say on the topic of mourning; he published a number of articles that spoke to the subject of the elaborate end-of-mourning ceremonies in the Congo known as *matanga*, and he would have been the first to remind us that funeral ceremonies are just as much about the living as the dead (Biaya 1997, 1998). My interest in the relationship between popular culture and politics is due in part to the influence that Biaya's thinking has had on my own research, and thus I see this article as an attempt to inventory Biaya's intellectual legacy. But this article is also written in response to Bogumil Jewsiewicki's thought-provoking proposition that the passage of time and shifts in political imagination make it possible for us to talk about lifting the mourning on Belgian colonialism, at least in the Congo. In order to assess the timeliness of such a proposition, it may be helpful to look carefully at what people in the Congo are thinking and saying about more recent historical developments, since in the minds of many Congolese the two are inextricably linked. If, as Johannes Fabian has suggested, the events of the colonial past are good material with which to think the present (1996), to what extent do current or recent events enable us to shed light on the experiences of the deep colonial past?

States of Sickness

Long before Mobutu passed away, the Zairian state had already been diagnosed as chronically ill. Much of the scholarship on African politics written in the 1980s and 1990s was fixated on the dysfunctional nature of African

states, which were described as bloated and broken, and Zaire quickly became the poster child for this literature. Zaire's combination of charismatic authoritarian rule and overgrown informal sector put it at the center of an academic literature that was desperately trying to find descriptive categories that would explain why African states did not "work":

> The Mobutu regime has a vague and eclectic legitimating "mentality"—an eclectic and often haphazard blend of ambiguous, fluctuating, and often derivative legitimating formulas or doctrines (as opposed to a coherent ideology)—which includes notions from liberal democracy, revolutionary populism, even socialism. Above all, however, it is organic-statist in orientation, drawing on traditional African notions of community, equity, authority, and power, particularly pre-colonial concepts of kingship, chiefship, and the "big man." (Callaghy 1984:6)

Much of what was written about Zaire during this period, especially in the international mainstream press, focused on the problem of corruption. In fact there is probably no regime in Africa that has been more publicized, admittedly not without reason, for its lavish misuse of public funds.[1] But as Mobutu became progressively alienated from his base of political support in the West (Belgium, France, U.S.), the novelty of his government's excesses began to wear off, and both the academic literature and the international press began to lose interest in Mobutu's Zaire. Not surprisingly, Mobutu's death in September 1997 was followed by a renewed interest in the story of the person who will always be remembered as the doyen of African dictators, the man whom the documentary filmmaker Thierry Michel has referred to as the "king of Zaire."[2] What *is* surprising is the extent to which accounts of the Mobutu era still rely on well-rehearsed scripts about corruption and "kleptocracy." In one of the most in-depth accounts to date, the journalist Michela Wrong demonstrates how Zaire's decline "was generated not by one man, but by thousands of compliant collaborators, at home and abroad" (2000:11). While she correctly identifies the failure to accept responsibility as the common thread running through insider accounts of this era, her version, like many of those she criticizes, is still a story about the intrigues of power and influence, with detailed explanations of lavishness and ostentation and relatively little attention to how this political culture was experienced or reproduced outside the official sphere of politics.[3]

As Jean-François Bayart has written, "the excess of power continues to have a deep rooted otherness in the eyes of western philosophers" (1993), or, one might say, corruption is always someone else's problem. Structural adjustment programs and growing concern with "good governance" in the 1990s led to a renewed interest in the topic of corruption, especially from various actor-centered perspectives (see for example Blundo & Sardan 2001). It is important to remember that "corruption" refers to a wide vari-

ety of official and nonofficial practices, but also that everyday people in developing economies are deeply concerned about corruption, and that they spend a significant amount of time either criticizing it or participating in it, or both. Akhil Gupta's analysis of corruption in contemporary India breaks from mainstream writing on this topic by showing how local idioms of corruption, instead of being markers of underdevelopment, actually enable us to understand how people imagine their relationship to the state and the workings of politics (Gupta 1995). Similarly, Mahmood Mamdani (1996) challenges us to see corruption as a phenomenon with its own historicity, one that is intimately linked with the history of colonial rule. As the introduction to this special issue makes clear, the problem of corruption in Central Africa goes much further than questions about "good governance." Because political elites have squandered the rewards of independence, there is nothing of value to be passed on to today's youth. Through the increasingly visible presence of death and funerals, younger generations contest their elders' claim to legitimacy. It is in this sense that mourning can be seen as a way of rethinking time (Jewsiewicki & White, this issue).

During my doctoral fieldwork in Kinshasa in 1995 and 1996, I conducted ethnographic research on the vibrant popular music scene that helped put Zaire on the map, at least within Africa. As I began revising this material for publication, I realized that it was impossible to tell the story of Zairian popular dance music without talking seriously about the political legacy of Mobutu. If it took me so long to realize this about my work, it was due in part to the fact that during my research and during most of the time I was writing, Mobutu was still alive, and for me this meant the same thing that it did for many Zairians. It meant that I never used a camera in public for fear that it would be confiscated by soldiers or police and used as a means of extorting cash (an uncomfortable experience that happened to me on more than one occasion). It meant that I stopped talking about politics (and especially about Mobutu) with people I did not know. It meant that even with people whom I did know I was never quite sure if my activities were being reported to Mobutu's elaborate network of agents and informants. It meant that when I left the country, the friends who accompanied me to the airport were followed home afterward and interrogated about what I was doing in Zaire and how they benefited from their relationship with me. In Mobutu's Zaire, even in the final years of the regime, it was considered risky to openly criticize the government, so people in Kinshasa developed specific ways of speaking about the politics: Politicians were referred to as "the responsible ones," corruption became known as "cooperation," the economic crisis became "the conjuncture."

Following the government's announced plans for democratic reform in 1991 and the resulting urban unrest that took the form of widespread pillaging in 1991 and 1993, Mobutu became increasingly distant from the political scene in Kinshasa and began spending more time in Gbadolite, his hometown in the northern province of Equateur. His

absence, however, did not mean that the state ceased to function. It was still common throughout the 1990s for people within a certain vicinity of police stations and other public buildings to completely stop whatever they were doing and stand motionless as the Zairian flag was raised or taken down. This was one of the many policies put into place under Mobutu in order to reinforce loyalty to the one-party state through public displays of submission. "If you move as much as an eyelash," a cassette vendor in the central market told me, "you will be shot or put in jail."[4] In a city as fast-paced and frenetic as Kinshasa, the total standstill of traffic, street noise, and human bodies could only be achieved by politics. This stillness was a physical reminder of the power that Mobutu held over the people and also a reminder that whether or not he was physically present in Kinshasa, some part of him always remained. Thus in the mid-1990s when the presidential motorcade zoomed through residential neighborhoods across the city, people would stop to watch it go by, and when the bulletproof Mercedes limousine passed, they would speculate about whether or not the president was inside. This was markedly different from Mobutu's early years in power, when he used to float above the crowd, standing up in the presidential convertible and waving magnanimously to an adoring mass of fellow *citoyens*. It was perhaps this image of charisma and strength that he had hoped to project in his last open-roof ride through the capital in late 1996, but those who saw this final curtain call commented primarily on how much the ailing leader had aged and on how frail he seemed.

Even at this late stage in his career, Mobutu's image was everywhere. Pictures of him were posted in all public buildings and institutions (though very often they were faded and water stained). His image continued to descend from the clouds before and after every television newscast, and though less frequent, all of his public appearances were covered, broadcast, and rebroadcast just as they had been for years. There was said to have been a mystical double that he sent out for important appearances. Rumors of this type—often involving serpents, *mamywata*, and *féticheurs*—circulated about Mobutu's connections with various occult specialists (an Indian guru, a West African marabout, and his own personal *mamywata* spirit), as did stories about the mystical methods he and his closest collaborators employed to keep themselves in power. In one of the most memorable political moments of the 1990s, the former minister of information and Mobutu spin doctor, Dominique Sakombi, made public statements about his own role in the formation of cultural policy and propaganda measures under Mobutu. His statement took the form of a religious testimonial (*témoignage*), which circulated widely and became not only a genre of religious conversion, but also a genre of rumor. The fantastic story of how he was restrained and seduced by a huge magic boa constrictor, and especially the fact that he had lived to tell the tale, reinforced an eerie, supernatural mood in the final years of the regime.

No Funeral for the Corpse of a Chicken

During the beginning period of my research, I asked a group of youths in the neighborhood where I was staying to draw a map of the city for me. I thought it would help me learn my way around and also that it might give me an idea of how Congolese perceive the social topography of their city. One young man took the lead by placing dots to represent the different zones or neighborhoods. When he had the initial of each zone in place, organized roughly in relation to one another, he proceeded to fill in their names. Then he said something to his friends that I was unable to understand. There was some discussion and then he carefully placed a cross near the bottom of the map. He filled it in and said, "Do you know what this is?" He was not testing me as much as trying to make sure his map was clear. I said, "It's either a church or a cemetery." "That's right," he said, and then he drew a second and a third cross to represent the other major cemeteries, carefully filling them in so I would be sure to understand the symbol. Then he lifted up the piece of paper and held it in front of him to verify his work. His friends nodded as if to suggest that the map was accurate and complete. No stadiums, no schools, no intersections, no government buildings, streets, or nightclubs, just zones and cemeteries. The basic structure of his map was in place and now he was ready to add elements that might be useful for my research. "Okay," he said, "what else do you want to see?" (fieldnotes, July 24, 1995). What I understood from this exchange is that cemeteries are a central part of the way that people in Kinshasa imagine the landscape of their urban environment.

Given the country's large degree of ethnic diversity, it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the complexity of Congolese mortuary practices, but there are some patterns that cut across ethnic lines, at least in the context of Kinshasa. Mourning in this context is generally divided into three phases, each of which must be successfully completed in order to ensure that the deceased will truly be able to rest in peace. The Lingala term *matanga* traditionally applies to the last phase of mourning, but with time this term has come to be used to refer to the process as a whole. The first phase of mourning (*veillée mortuaire*, or "mortuary late-night," sometimes also referred to as *ebembe* or "corpse") involves several days of emotionally charged social exchange at the residence of the deceased, and concludes with the display of the corpse for friends and family members to see the deceased one last time before the body is buried. This first phase is characterized by a mixture of melodrama (primarily from female family members, who are expected to be publicly demonstrative with their emotions), music (preferably live music performed by musicians from the same ethnic group of the deceased), conversation (some of which is intended to remember the deceased and some to forget), and introspection (either to catch up on sleep or to reflect on what this means in relation to their life and death). The *veillée* continues without pause over a period of several

days and nights, but the family of the deceased can decide to extend this phase by several days to wait for the arrival of family members who are far away from Kinshasa (especially those living in Europe). Palm leaves are placed at strategic intersections near the family compound in order to help visitors coming from other parts of the city who might not otherwise know the exact location. There is a constant flow of guests, family members, and neighbors (most of whom do their best to tolerate the additional traffic and noise), and it is common for young people in the neighborhood to be involved in the preparation and organization of the event, which often spills over into the street and into other families' courtyards.

The second phase of mourning (*enterrement*, or "burial") is fraught with tension, not only because it requires the completion of financial arrangements for the funeral (coffin, hearse, grave, tombstone), but also because the corpse must be moved. After the corpse has been displayed, the family announces its plans to transport the coffin to the cemetery, and it is at this moment that the largest number of people gather in and around the family courtyard. When all of the vehicles are ready, the coffin is lifted by a group of young people with some connection to the deceased and is carried around the neighborhood for a "last goodbye" (*tour d'adieu*). In the case of a funeral of a person with special occupational status, the last goodbye may take place elsewhere (for example an accomplished soccer player will be carried around a soccer stadium or a teacher will be carried around the school where he taught). If the cemetery is not too far away or if the deceased was particularly well known, the coffin may be carried by foot from the family compound all the way to the burial site. In most cases, however, the funeral procession involves a hearse, a series of passenger vehicles, and a number of larger transport vehicles (minivans, pickup trucks, and commercial vehicles) in order to accommodate a large number of neighborhood youth, many of whom see the motorcade (*cortège*) as a form of cathartic release. Upon arriving at the cemetery, the coffin is placed in the grave, some words of inspiration are offered by an important member of the family and then by a pastor or priest, and after a few moments of reflection around the grave, people disperse and return to their daily lives.

Forty days later the family of the deceased organizes the third and final phase of mourning (*matanga* or *levee du deuil*, meaning "end of mourning"), in which close friends and family members are invited to a party that marks the end of the period of mourning and enables the family members (especially the spouse of the deceased) to resume life as normal. End-of-mourning parties generally begin at around 6:00 p.m., and following a small speech (*mot de circonstance*) from an important member of the family, food is served and there is music (usually religious music) until the gathering ends at around midnight. Since the 1990s, end-of-mourning parties are less and less common in Kinshasa, presumably because of the costs associated with preparing food, drink, and entertainment for a large group of people. As Biaya (1998) explains, some families hold the end-of-mourning

ceremony immediately following the burial in order to reduce costs and to take advantage of the fact that those close to the deceased are already nearby. Where financial resources are lacking, a group prayer followed by a beverage (coffee, tea, or soda) is offered and those attending the ceremony leave after reiterating personal expressions of condolence and support for the family of the deceased.

It is important to call attention to the role played by youth in the process of mourning in an urban context. The first two stages of mourning are very often a matter of negotiation between the family of the deceased and young people who live in the immediate vicinity. This is true even in cases in which the deceased and the youths in question were not peers. When relations between the family and the youths are good, there is a considerable amount of cooperation. If the deceased was popular, the youths will offer to assist with logistics such as borrowing chairs, renting lighting and sound equipment, or decorating the family courtyard and its immediate surroundings. Especially if the family has limited financial resources, they organize neighborhood-based collection efforts that enable them to make a contribution to the family and help pay for the costs related to the funeral (beverages, cigarettes, transportation to the cemetery, etc.). There are, however, many examples of conflict between the family and neighborhood youths. Discussions about protocol and specific decisions regarding the handling of the corpse (especially in preparation for its transfer to the cemetery) can lead to heated arguments. It is relatively common for young people to harass people passing through the neighborhood in order to collect additional money. This includes shaking vehicles, threatening to cover pedestrians with mud, and singing or shouting obscenities at those who refuse to contribute. There are also stories of coffin bearers believing that the spirit of the deceased has caused them to point the coffin in the direction of the person who is responsible for having mystically killed the deceased. An accusation of this type can be extremely disruptive and very often it places neighborhood youths at odds with the family of the deceased.

Thus the process of mourning is not always harmonious. Having a large number of people present at the different stages of mourning attests to the deceased's status as a member of society, but it is also important that those present have goodwill toward the deceased, since their intentions may have an effect on his or her transition to the world of the ancestors. According to Lye M. Yoka, mourning is supposed to be a moment of reconciliation, reparation, and reconstruction, but all too often it turns into a space of exhibitionism, ostentation, and excess, "as if the burlesque mockery about and against death will somehow make it less dangerous" (Yoka, n.d: 4). Members of Kinshasa's growing evangelical movement cling tightly to the idea that death functions as a form of social leveling (since all human beings are equal before the eyes of God), but there is still a strong sense among people in Kinshasa that a proper funeral is something that

only the wealthy can enjoy: A commonly heard proverb is "ebembe ya soso matanga te" ("no funeral for the corpse of a chicken").

One way of understanding what people in Kinshasa view as a "proper funeral" is by examining references to death and dying in expressions of local popular culture. In a fascinating article looking at various forms of urban popular culture, T. K. Biaya explores metaphors and discourses about death and dying during the middle years of the Mobutu regime. Focusing primarily on the *mamiwata* mermaid image in urban popular painting, but also citing references to death in a series of popular song texts, Biaya argues that the metaphor of "dying well" (*bien mourir*) emerged at a particular moment in Zairian political history: the moment when local elites began coming to terms with their mortality as individuals and as a political class. While Biaya is right to call attention to the importance of this theme, his emphasis on "dying well" overlooks other important aspects of song lyrics during this period.[5] The most well-known songs about death (for example "Mabele" by Lutumba Simaro and "Mokolo Nakokufa" by Tabu Ley Rochereau) often play out a tension between "dying well" (leaving behind a moral and material legacy of value) and dying equal (all human beings are equal in the face of death). Other songs are primarily concerned with the question of premature or unwarranted death (as in the case of Miyalu's "Mwana Nsuka," or Reddy Amisi's "Orphelin"). Songs of homage to the deceased (some of which are central to Biaya's analysis) are a third type of song. To Biaya's list we might add several songs that were issued following the death of the Congolese music giant Pépé Kallé, whose funeral was attended by so many people that it was often compared to that of a head of state (see for example "Respect Pépé Kallé" by Djuna Mumbafu and "Hommage à Pépé Kallé" by General Defao).

Rumors, much like song lyrics, have lives of their own (White 2004). One urban legend that circulated widely in the 1990s is the story of Mobutu's funeral. It is commonly believed that Mobutu's immense personal wealth enabled him to have access to the best spiritual advisors (*féticheurs*) that money can buy. It is also believed that Franco, the leader of the legendary musical group O.K. Jazz, relied heavily on féticheurs. The urban legend explains that because of their personal affinities, Mobutu and Franco often consulted the same féticheur and that their fates became twisted through this person's predictions about their future. One of you will live like a true king, the advisor said, with unlimited wealth, a huge territory over which to rule, millions of adoring supporters, and powerful friends all over the world. The other one will live in relative poverty during his life, never sure how he will eat from one day to the next, constantly struggling to provide for the needs of his family and dependents. In death, however, the situations will be reversed. He who lived his life as a king, will die in abject poverty and have a funeral far from his homeland, ridden with shame. He who lived as a pauper will have a funeral worthy of the greatest head of state, with tens of thousands of people in attendance who will cry

from the deepest part of their souls, and news of this unfortunate event will be heard across the globe.

Mobutu Undead

During a residency as a postdoctoral fellow at Emory University's Center for the Study of Public Scholarship in 1999, I organized a performance workshop in which a group of Congolese musicians was to perform examples of Zairian popular music and explain its evolution in relation to the culture of political violence and repression during the Mobutu regime. As part of the event I designed a promotional poster that included two people dancing and the outline of an image of Mobutu floating in the background. Given the emphasis that the workshop placed on music as a means of activating collective memory, and given the fact that we had organized a free evening concert starring the Zairian singer J. P. Buse, I was hopeful that a good number of people from the Congolese community in Atlanta would attend. But this all changed when my research assistant, a Congolese student living and working in Atlanta, came to see me with initial feedback from the poster, which we had been distributing across campus and through Congolese churches and cultural associations in the region. "I don't think any Congolese will be attending the workshop," he said, with a tone of resignation. "Why?" I asked. He hesitated and smiled, slightly embarrassed: "As soon as they saw Mobutu's picture, most people said they wanted nothing to do with the event." And as he predicted, the only Congolese who showed up were people who had not seen the poster. Of the two hundred or so people who attended the event, not including the musicians and my assistant, only three were Congolese. At this point, Mobutu had been dead for nearly two years and still his image, or at least the fear of being associated with his image, was enough to deter people who otherwise would have been interested in attending.[6] Obviously, Mobutu was not totally dead.

Nowhere is Mobutu more "undead" than in Nyunda ya Rubango's fascinating account of political discourse among Congolese living in the diaspora. In his recently published book (2001) on discursive practices in Congo-Zaire, he shows how a certain type of Congolese cosmopolitan ("those that never danced or sang for Mobutu or for the MPR") attempt to make sense of this *fin de régime,* positioning themselves against Mobutu's political legacy in all its forms (*mobutisme, neomobutisme, multimobutisme, mobutitude*) and distancing themselves from those who promoted such ideas (*mouvanciers, animateurs, acquéreurs, mpriens,* etc.). What is striking in Rubango's account is the extent to which the Mobutuist label has become generalized in popular discourse about national politics. These days the term *mobutiste* refers to all forms of political ambition for personal ends, regardless of political party or generation, and it is generally used as a

means of attacking an opponent's integrity or legitimacy. From this point of view, those who benefited from the Mobutu regime can never be fully trusted (even if they give back all illegally acquired assets) and those who are currently in power can only work in its shadow.

Thus any association with the Mobutu government is interpreted as a form of political death. Close personal or family ties take the form of an ongoing curse. In an extensive interview with *Jeune Afrique*, Mobutu's son Nzanga claimed that the transition that led to Mobutu's removal happened too quickly, and that Mobutu himself was considering the transfer of power before the arrival of Kabila. In response to this interview, one Congolese commentator wrote:

> Don't be fooled. The *maréchal* was thirsty for power and would never have ceded it to someone else. Best of luck to his son and may God save him from the principle by which the sins of the father have repercussions on his sons for at least seven generations. May he take full advantage of all the castles, villas and bank accounts that are nothing less than the result of the systematic pillaging of our national heritage. Goods that are ill acquired do not benefit anyone. Ask Kongolo Mobutu alias Saddam Hussein, ask Konga and Niwa [other children of Mobutu who died before or after their father's death] and they will give you all the details from the hell where they are purging their sins with their father the pilferer. (Congovista, September 26, 2000)[7]

In February 2001, shortly after Laurent Kabila's assassination, a list serve devoted to Congolese current events and politics published a fictional letter from Mobutu to Kabila.[8] After a series of insults ("you are a true amateur," "you have no vision") and direct accusations ("you have divided the country," "you have violated the constitution"), the voice of Mobutu accuses Kabila of jealously keeping the honors of an official state funeral for himself. Mobutu seems to turn in his grave as he revels in the idea of Kabila's joining him in the dead dictators' club:

> All I want is to see you perish in hell. You kept my remains from being transferred to Gbadolite and you made it impossible for me to have a ceremony that would be fitting of my undeniable status as the leader of leaders in the last century, while you on the other hand, you have the nerve to give yourself an ostentatious national funeral. You are nothing but a rebel in my eyes, brainless baboon. Welcome to hell. (Congovista, February 7, 2001)

The image of Mobutu, portrayed here as a permanent resident of Hell, is effectively reactivated in the context of current political events and debates. Not only his person, but also his voice serves to remind people in the Congo that even though he is dead, his political legacy is still a matter

of political urgency. It was reported that Mobutu died in Morocco from complications of prostate cancer, a diagnosis that was received with a great deal of satisfaction by his enemies, who saw this particular illness as a delicious form of payback given Mobutu's reputation for having a voracious sexual appetite and his self-proclaimed status as the "father of the nation." But there are people in Kinshasa who are not completely convinced that cancer was the cause of Mobutu's death. Some believe it was due to HIV-AIDS. Some believe it followed an intervention by the CIA. Some people are not even totally convinced that he is dead. In many ways he is like the undead, those creatures somewhere in between zombies and ghosts, humans whose bodies were possessed before being killed and who retain their physical form but remain in a perpetual state of fleshy decomposition.

The fact that people in Kinshasa never had the chance to see Mobutu dying or dead has given him an ambiguous status in the Congolese political imaginary. To cite the words of a Tetela elder who spoke at the opening ceremony for a monument that was recently dedicated to the memory of Patrice Lumumba: "The body of the deceased must be eaten by dirt in order for the soul to be eternally free" (cited in Yoka, n.d.:1). How people position themselves in relation to dead bodies (especially those of famous people) in an attempt to gain social capital or political advantage—what Katherine Verdery refers to as "dead-body politics"—is a central question for understanding the meaningfulness of mourning and the different ways in which social relations are affected by the process of mourning. Arguments over what to do with the body, especially when the body of the deceased is metaphorically linked to the body of the nation (Huntington & Metcalf 1979), are "struggles for authority over inscription of the past" (Odhiambo & Cohen 1992:95), and this past is always linked to various attempts to project political imagination onto the future:

> Dead bodies have posthumous political life in the service of creating a newly meaningful universe. Their political work is to institute ideas about morality by assessing accountability and punishment, to sanctify space anew, to redefine temporalities of daily life, to line people up with alternative ancestors and thereby to reconfigure the communities people participate in, and to attend to ancestors properly so they will fructify the enterprise of their descendants. (Verdery 1999:127)

How to Dispose of a Dictator?

In the spring of 2001, Joseph Kabila Jr. surprised many Congolese by announcing his intention to make arrangements for the repatriation of Mobutu's body, which was buried in a Christian cemetery in Rabat. Initially the idea led to a great deal of debate, not only because certain members of

Mobutu's family wanted this repatriation to be accompanied by a national day of mourning, but also because there was a war going on and most people believed that the country had much more important matters to which to attend. At the same time, people in Kinshasa were not so naive as to miss the political significance of such a gesture. Kabila needed the support of the Mobutu inner circle in order to gain influence in the Equateur region where Jean-Pierre Bemba (the closest thing to Mobutu's spiritual heir) headed the forces of the Mouvement pour la Libération du Congo (MLC) and where an important number of soldiers and officers still loyal to Mobutu were believed to be in various states of hiding. Thus while Bemba and his followers may favor the repatriation of Mobutu's remains to his home region, most political parties in the Congo, few of whom have the same ethnic or regional support that Bemba does in this region, came out in strong opposition to this proposition. In political terms the only people who would stand to benefit from Mobutu's repatriation are those who are vying for control of the region where the former dictator still has pockets of support.

In late November 2002, Nzanga Mobutu, responding to an invitation from Joseph Kabila Jr., traveled to Kinshasa so that the two sons of former Congolese presidents could meet in person to discuss the matter further. Before leaving for Kinshasa, Nzanga expressed some concern about security, not only in transporting the body from Kinshasa to Gbadolite, but also because of the fear that a Mobutu grave within the Congo could be a prime target for politically based vandalism and revenge. "Kabila can talk in the air as much as he likes, but it won't be under him that we repatriate my father's body," said Nzanga. "Certain preconditions have to be met. He was, after all, head of state for more than thirty years" (cited in Wrong 304). Reactions to Kabila's initiative have varied from indifference to outrage, but based on a preliminary reading of debates on the subject (gathered mostly from Congovista), it would seem that most responses fall in one of two categories.

The first response is one of desire for reconciliation, suggesting that bringing back Mobutu's body and laying it to rest once and for all would serve as a means of easing tension in the region and moving toward lasting peace:

> In the end would it be a sacrilege for these remains to be repatriated? I don't think so. Because in our culture, as long as the body is not buried in its homeland, the soul of the deceased continues to roam. As long as the remains of Lumumba remain missing, we can never stop mourning for his memory.... (Congovista, April 7, 2001)

> We respect all our deceased, repatriating the body of Mobutu is a priority.... If his body can be used to bring back peace and reconciliation then fine[,] we can even send all the residents of Kinshasa to make a special place to keep his remains.... [Mobutu] can be buried in heaven or in

> hell, what matters now is that all Congolese can get something to eat and live in peace. (Congovista, April 15, 2001)

> Congolese are in favor of national reconciliation, and against endless hostility that gets us absolutely nowhere. Joseph Kabila is a noble man that is capable of seeing beyond the petty conflicts that keep us down.... Please let us give a chance to this young man, so that he can find a solution to our country's problem. We are tired of this never-ending war, hunger, poverty, and sickness.... We want peace. (Congovista, April 2, 2001)

The more common response among contributors to electronic discussion groups was opposition to the idea of repatriation and caution against the danger of forgetting. From this point of view, repatriating Mobutu's remains would be an irreversible public gesture of forgiveness that would only plunge the country into further conflict and insecurity.

> The Congolese people seem to have a very short memory. Not even five years ago the MPR and the Mobutistes were stealing and embezzling, raping our mothers and our daughters, taking away our houses, compounds and all our belongings. How is it possible that after so little time, certain people want to bring back the sad memory of Mobutuism? (Congovista, July 11, 2002)

> If we have to look at the economic and political track record of [Mobutu], I think he, the one who is the cause of all our problems since 1960, does not deserve this honor.... I think it is time for the Congolese people to oppose the organization of the national mourning for a person that I consider to be the source of evil and curse in our country. Hitler had no right to a national mourning in Germany.... We must oppose such an event. Bringing his body back is one thing, but a national mourning would be shameful.... (Congovista, April 6, 2001)

What is most striking about these accounts is how they reassert a cultural future by relying on discourses from the past about the integrity of national boundaries and the relationship between national boundaries and some larger notion of national identity. In response to the hardline position on the integrity of national borders taken by Manda Mobutu and his party, Rassemblement National Populaire, one contributor to the discussion group wrote, "Dear Sir: You should be more discrete with the money that your father the Opera Marshall [Mobutu] stole from my people.... If you are not careful the noise you are making will wake old demons, among them your father, the devil, Satan..." (Congovista, December 14, 1999). Thus Mobutu's body stands for the nation, a proposition that would certainly have thrilled the former dictator. The only way to disassociate his body from the larger political body is to bury it, to make it a thing of the past:

> M.P.R. and Mobutuism, two names but a single culture that has to be buried even if it means making a pact with the devil (Congovista, June 13, 2001).

> We all know that Mobutuism is a mentality and a culture that we Congolese should bury once and for all. Those people [i.e., Mobutu's followers] kill, pilfer, steal, [and] rape... without morality. But it seems to us that the adherents of this culture are not ready to completely disband their movement. Neither are they ready to forget about power in Kinshasa (Congovista, February 5, 2001).

In order to rid the country of this problem, there are periodic calls to action that seek to publicly identify those people and politicians responsible for perpetuating Mobutu's system:

> What is the sad reality? The godfathers of the Mobutu regime, the gravediggers of the Congolese people, whom I do not necessarily consider "mobutistes," are easily identified! Anyway, it would be possible to make an approximate list! With a margin of error of 85% [sic]. Where are they? Most of them underground, others in exile, poor, mentally deranged or suffering from incurable disease—and others have chosen to seek justice (the nerve!) at home! So who is strong enough to carry the weight and the responsibility? Name them and prove it! Here is the question: What and who are we afraid of? If the specter of the "mobutistes" is such that only uttering the term causes a cold sweat... then my friends... we have a very serious problem." (Congovista, November 27, 2000)

And if they are to be named, it is not only to seek justice but also to ensure that Congolese never forget the abuses of the Mobutu era:

> We invite the entire Congolese press and especially the press in Kinshasa to help us bury the M.P.R. and mobutuism as soon as possible. How to do this, it's very simple:
>
> (1) Followers of Mobutu should not have access to the press
>
> (2) In addition, the media should edify, inform and remind the public how much the M.P.R. pillaged, stole, embezzled and mismanaged the country for more than 30 years. As its contribution to national reconstruction, the press has the obligation to remind the people of the Congo how Kengo wa Dondo paid a university professor $5 per month and how he encouraged people to make sacrifices while he was getting rich. The press has to remind the people of the Congo how much Vunduawe and his friends robbed us of our houses and property. It has to remind people how Vunduawe, Manda Mobutu, Nzanga Mobutu and their friends raped our mothers and our daughters.
>
> Thus we consider that any invitation from Vunduawe to the press is an

> insult to the people. We invite the members of the Congolese press to stop any attempt to bring back to life the M.P.R. and mobutuism in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. (Congovista, June 13, 2001)

Declarations of this type must be read as examples of the ongoing threat that Mobutu's legacy represents, especially given the fact that former members of Mobutu's MPR. (Mouvement Populaire de la Révolution) have continued to mobilize themselves politically. For the last several years, Catherine Nzuzi wa Mbombo's MPR/Fait-privé has organized public ceremonies to commemorate the death of former President Mobutu and to ensure that this political formation remains visible:

> With [Mobutu's] accomplishments now officially recognized, the Marshall [Mobutu] can rest in peace waiting for his body to be repatriated—as announced by President Joseph Kabila himself—for a state funeral according to the wishes of the majority of people in the Congo. But for [the MPR/Fait-privé] this repatriation can only happen in a reunited Congo. Mobutu's funeral must be celebrated by the Congolese nation as a whole (a nation that he devoted his entire life to uniting) and not only by Congolese living in the territories under the control of the government in Kinshasa. (Wina Lokondo, n.d.)

Legacy Time

In the Congo, as elsewhere, mourning takes on multiple meanings. It means being forced to let go of the things we love. It means facing up to our own mortality and coming clean with regard to the consequences of our acts (see de Lame, this issue). In social terms, mourning generally calls our attention to the question of legacy. "Mourning," writes Bogumil Jewsiewicki, "is above all a context where the relationship between dead and living are inventoried, evaluated and debated so that the work of memory can apply yesterday's experience to a broader horizon of expectations for the future" (2002). In this account it is not a question of revising history, but one of digesting history or "setting it straight" by rendering it public. The debates about Mobutu's remains are not only about protocol or funeral arrangements. They are also concerned with the process of evaluating what the legacy of the deceased will be. Should Mobutu's memory be allowed a voice in the new Congo? If not, how can national politics claim to be democratic? If so, then what means are there to ensure that history does not repeat itself? Nothing less than the country's political future is at stake.

Of course, Mobutu constantly made claims about having pacified the country following the turbulent years of the Congo Crisis in the first half of the 1960s. He also took credit, and most Congolese would give him as

much, for bringing Congolese together under the umbrella of a single national identity, something that was accomplished not only by force, but also by the deployment of a complex machinery of political imagination known as *authenticité* (White, in press). As one musician friend in Kinshasa said to me: "Mobutu was a tribalist, but he was sneaky—he made it look like ethnicity didn't matter. But he gave us something valuable without knowing it. He made us proud to be Zairian" (August 25, 2004). What is so interesting is that even in death, Mobutu is able to mobilize politics. Indeed, even his harshest critics acknowledge this as his greatest skill: the ability to create, manage, and take advantage of political conflict. Not his physical presence or even his policy, but his body and the question of what to do with it is enough to fuel debates about the integrity of national borders and the colonial legacy in Africa. Could this be the legacy of Mobutu? Resuscitating another century's idea of ideal futures by reasserting authority over a piece of land?

The question of legacy takes on quite a different meaning in the context of discussions about Patrice Lumumba, the Congo's first prime minister and the political figure who Mobutu sacrificed politically only to hold up later for all to see as an "héro national." Ludo de Witte's (2001) text on the assassination of Lumumba brings to light a number of important facts about the final days of Lumumba's life; the finality with which he was disposed (his body parts were burned in acid) is just as permanent as ideas about his political legacy. In a gripping analysis of how images of Lumumba in Congolese popular painting revolve around the motifs of redemption and sacrifice, Bogumil Jewsiewicki shows how the formal aspects of these painted images give a political meaning to the individual experiences of social actors in the Congo:

> The face of Lumumba, a portrait of an elegant man and a respectable head of household, reclaims the status of personhood from the anonymity imposed upon them by the depersonalization of the social category "blacks." Since the day they were born, Zairians have been enrolled against their will in a single-party state that has devoured their identity. During the colonial period, they were nothing more than ethnic beings upon whom a particular collective identity imposed a communal destiny that was not of their choosing. (1996:138)

Whereas Lumumba's failure to be buried properly reinforces his status as a martyr, Mobutu's failure to be buried properly is seen as a form of justice. Thus the idea of mourning for Mobutu in the current political context would be ludicrous. To mourn for Mobutuism (either the system or the ideology) would seem equally perverse given what we know about the failures and abuses of the Mobutu regime.

The idea of Zaire, however, might be seen as worthy of mourning. What Mobutu offered to people in the Congo, at least in the early years of

his government, was a common project that proposed a way out of the colonial dilemma through a particular way of imagining politics. People remember with a certain bitter nostalgia the practice of *salongo*, the government policy that beginning in the 1970s required all citizens to contribute a part of their Saturday morning to public works and maintenance. "There was a real energy in the air" one musician explained to me. "It was hard work, but it made us proud to be part of something, we were proud to be Zairian" (interview, August 10, 2003). Unfortunately, it was not long before this collective effort turned into forced labor, further extending the association between Mobutu and the Congo's other brutal ruler, Leopold II. Given the time it takes to make sense of such complex histories, is it premature to talk about mourning for Mobutu's Zaire? It may be, but as Filip De Boeck has argued, once colonialism has been defined as a space of death, the question then becomes "how to speak about the postcolonial afterlife, that which lies beyond the grave" (1998:23).

On November 2, 2002, a Brussels-based Congolese nonprofit organization known as ELAN-CONGO organized a ceremony to commemorate the lives of seven Congolese who were brought to Belgium to be displayed as part of the Brussels Universal Exhibition in 1897 and who, after being put on display in imitation African huts, fell ill and died before they could return to the Congo. Their bodies were eventually relocated to the courtyard of the Catholic church of Tervuren, which is where the ceremony took place: "Do you want to join us..." the communiqué asks, "to visit your ancestors?" The communiqué names each of the ancestors, and then it proceeds to explain what will happen at the ceremony and what will be said to the deceased:

> We will bring them palm wine and flowers.
> We will tell them that the Congo became independent on June 30, 1960, and that we are no longer under colonial control.
> We will tell them that their children, in spite of this independence, have not been able to run the country properly.
> We will tell them that the country is in bad shape.
> We will tell them that their country is in a war that has already taken 4,000,000 lives and that their country is occupied by other African countries.
> We will tell them that many of us live in Europe now; that they are no longer alone.
> We will tell them that many more of their children are living elsewhere, because their own country cannot provide them with the means to support themselves.
> And finally we will tell them that we respect them and love them.
> (Association ELAN-CONGO, October 31, 2002)

The bad legacies of this political system certainly outweigh the good: a legacy of corruption ("When you steal, steal intelligently"), a legacy of dou-

blespeak ("Serve and don't be self-serving"), a legacy of authoritarian rule ("Whether you like it or not, you are all members of the MPR"). Elsewhere (White 2004) I have tried to work through Mobutu's legacy with regard to the emergence of a particular type of political culture, what Biaya, in one of the last texts written before his untimely death, refers to as *la kinoiserie*. According to Biaya, Mobutu is remembered primarily for his ability to play off the generational tension between insiders and outsiders through the mobilization of a culture of hedonism. This means that the question of political failure is not cultural, but fundamentally historical. In the end, however, the political legacy that matters the most is the one that will be pronounced if and when Mobutu returns, especially if everyday people are given the opportunity to comment publicly on his politics and his passing. When this occurs, what words will be reserved for the occasion? What truth will be spoken? This depends largely on the tone set by the government in power at the time, and the extent of its attempt to appropriate the reburial as a moment in national, and not just family, history. It is hard to know what people will say, or even who will have the opportunity to speak, but by looking at recent debates over what should happen with Mobutu's body, we have some idea of what people will be thinking.

Acknowledgments

My initial field research was made possible by financial support from the Zeller Family Foundation, the McGill Graduate Faculty, the Center for Society, Technology and Development, and the McGill Associates. I would also like to thank the Center for the Study of Public Scholarship at Emory University in Atlanta for their support of a postdoctoral fellowship organized under the generous encouragement of Corinne Kratz and Ivan Karp. The final version of this paper benefited from the helpful comments of Bogumil Jewsiewicki and *ASR*'s anonymous reviewer. Additional information concerning Mobutu's final days in power and certain details with regard to local funerary practices was provided by Serge Makobo and Doudou Madoda. All translations in this text are my own.

References

Bayart, Jean-François. 1993. *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly*. New York: Longman Publishers.

Biaya, T. K. n.d. "La kinoiserie: aux sources de la culture politique congolaise contemporaine."

_____. 1997. "Ngoma ya Madilu, the Mourning Drums: Luba-Kasayi Sacred Rituals, Dances and Celebrations." In Esther A. Dagan, ed., *The Spirit's Dance in Africa*, 226–30. Westmount, Québec: Galerie Amrad African Arts Publications.

_____. 1998. "La 'Mort' et ses metaphors au Congo-Zaire, 1990–1995 ou Mami Wata, le Congolais et les cycles gnosiques ou 'Bien Mourir': La mort dans les arts populaires et la vie quotidienne au pays du fleuve Congo." *Cahiers Africans*:

89–127.

Blundo, Giorgio, and J.-P. Olivier de Sardan, eds. 2001. "La corruption au quotidien." *Politique africaine* 83 (October).

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

Cohen, David William, and E. S. Atieno Odhiambo. 1992. *Burying SM: The Politics of Knowledge and the Sociology of Power in Africa.* Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.

De Boeck, Filip. 1998. "Beyond the Grave: History, Memory, and Death in Postcolonial Congo/Zaire." In R. Werbner, ed., *Memory in the Postcolony: African Anthropology and the Critique of Power,* 21–57. London: Zed.

De Witte, Ludo. 2001. *The Assassination of Lumumba.* New York: Verso.

Dungia, Emmanuel. 1992. *Mobutu et l'argent du Zaire.* Paris: l'Harmattan

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

Gupta, Akhil. 1995. "Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics, and the Imagined State." *American Ethnologist* 22 (2): 375–402.

Huntington, Richard, and Peter Metcalf, eds. 1979. *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jewsiewicki, Bogumil. 1991. "Painting in Zaire: From the Invention of the West to the Representation of Social Self." *In Africa Explores: Twentieth Century African Art,* edited by S. M. Vogel, 56–77. New York: Center for African Art.

_____. 1996. "Corps Interdits: La représentation christique de Lumumba comme rédempteur du peuple zairois." *Cahiers d'Études africaines* 141–42: 113–42.

Jewsiewicki, Bogumil, and Bob W. White. 2002. "Memory and Mourning for the Traumatic Past." Panel abstract, annual meeting of the African Studies Association, November.

Lokondo, Wina. n.d. "M.P.R. ne disparaîtra pas du paysage politique Congolais." Letter appearing in press kit publication for the MPR/Fait-privé: available on the Web at 129.194.252.80/catfiles/2070.pdf.

Mamdani, Mamood. 1996. *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Ngbanda, Honoré. 1998. *Ainsi sonne le glas! Les derniers jours du maréchal.* Paris: Gideppe.

Nguza Karl-I-Bond. 1982. *Mobutu ou l'incarnation du mal.* London: Rex Collings.

Ndaywel è Nziem, I. 1993. "La société zaïroise dans le miroir de son discours religieux (1990–1993)." *Cahiers Africains* 6: 39–50.

Rubango, Nyunda ya. 2001. *Les Pratiques Discursives du Congo-Belge au Congo-Kinshasa.* Paris: L'Harmattan.

Verdery, Katherine. 1999. *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change.* New York: Columbia University Press.

White, Bob W. 2004. "The Elusive Lupemba: Rumors About Fame and Misfortune in Mobutu's Zaire." In Theodore Trefon, ed., *Reinventing Order in the Congo,* 174–91. New York: Zed Publishers.

_____. In press. *Ndule: The Politics of Popular Dance Music in Mobutu's Zaire.* Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

Wrong, Michela. 2000. *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz: Living on the Brink of Disaster in the Congo.* London: Fourth Estate.

Yambuya, Pierre. 1991. *Zaire l'abattoir, un pilote qui parle.* Bruxelles: EPO.

Yoka, Lye M. n.d. "Paix en R.D. Congo: Le 'travail de deuil' n'a pas eu lieu!"

Notes

1. A recent report on the world's most corrupt leaders published by Transparency International (see www.transparency.org) placed Mobutu in third position, only after Suharto and Marcos.
2. *Mobutu: Roi du Zaire*, 162 minutes, First Run/Icarus Films.
3. Wrong's account makes use of a genre of writing that might be termed "insider political exposé," in which former members of the Mobutu government or military decide to expose the abuses of the regime. Other examples are Nguza Karl-I-Bond, (1982), Yambuya (1991), Dungia (1992), and Ngbanda (1998).
4. For an earlier account of this phenomenon, see Jewsiewicki (1991).
5. For more information on song lyrics and the reception of popular music in Kinshasa, see the preliminary results of a research project in collaboration with Lye M. Yoka: www.atalaku.net/pages/index_research.htm.
6. Research with Congolese living in Canada and the United States suggests that Atlanta was one of the first places in the United States where politicians fleeing from the Mobutu regime settled. According to several Congolese living in Atlanta, this may also have had an impact on the turnout at the workshop.
7. Congovista is an electronic discussion group made up of Congolese living outside of their home country.
8. A conflict on January 16, 2001, in the presidential residence led to gunshots and left Kabila and one of his bodyguards dead. Following the assassination, Kabila's son Joseph assumed power and declared a period of thirty days of mourning. Initially there were conflicting press reports about how Kabila was shot, and it took two years for the inquiry to be complete. In January 2003, a Congolese military court sentenced twenty-six people to death in association with the assassination of Kabila, principal among them Colonel Eddy Kapend, a former aide to Kabila. The haste and secrecy with which these proceedings were held led many Congolese to be skeptical about the court's decision. Kabila's body was buried in Kinshasa, but to this day many Congolese are not convinced that they have the full story behind his death.