Zaire: the hoax of independence

Eyong-Echaw Lawrence analyzes the historical legacy that has left Zaire, with its abundant resources, one of the poorest countries in the world.

Since 1990, when the usefulness to the West of Zairean potentate President Mobuto Sese Seko had plummeted with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the West has carried out a policy to pull the plug on Zaire, a nation of 39 million people in central Africa. Disturbances in the country in 1991-92 prompted most of the Europeans and other westerners to flee the country. Since the western mining companies have systematically refused to train Zaireans to run the mines and associated infrastructure, the withdrawal of Europeans has brought about the complete collapse of the country.

Because Mobutu has refused to accede to Project Democracy demands for a conversion to pluralist democracy, the United States, France, and Belgium have cut off most aid to Zaire, despite the enormous poverty of its population. In January 1993, the World Bank ceased all operations in the country, cutting the pipeline of cash for the nationalized Gecamines company operating in Katanga province, the heart of Zaire's vast copper resources. Zaire's export earnings from copper and cobalt fell by nearly 75% in 1993, as Gecamines shut down operations. "Without Gecamines, they're back in the Stone Age," commented a Belgian businessman.

Bringing Zaire to its knees is but the latest episode in the systematic looting of the country that began with King Leopold of Belgium's pronouncement that the Congo was his private property. Zaire is by all rights one of the richest nations in Africa: It has about 60% of the world's reserves of cobalt, along with vast reserves of copper, cadmium, gold, silver, tin, germanium, zinc, iron, manganese, uranium, and radium. Instead, as the boxed figures show, it is one of the poorest. This is not simply because of a "corrupt government," as western media assert, but is due to a corruption enforced by the post-colonial system that was imposed from outside. Zaire today is a case study of the hoax of independence.

Joseph Desire Mobutu came to power in Zaire in November 1965 in a military coup, which was greeted with relief by western nations that had seen their multinational interests threatened by the chaos that followed the accession of Congo-Leopoldville to independence in June 1960. In the last 29 years, Mobutu has accrued a fortune estimated at $10 billion, while the pauperization of the Zaireans has rendered the country virtually ungovernable. To forestall handing over government to opposition forces, Mobutu has been playing one political party against another (there are 300 parties), one tribe against another (there are 254 ethnic groups speaking 400 dialects), one region against another, and one prime minister against the other.

In March, the National Assembly, a grouping under Mobutu's control that was forced to merge with the High Council of the Republic that emerged from the opposition-supported National Conference, will appoint a new prime minister charged with overseeing the transition to democratic rule. Mobutu's strongest opponent is Etienne Tshisekedi wa Mulumba, who has held various portfolios in Mobutu's cabinets. It would appear that he has the broadest support among the Zairean people. He controls the capital city of Kinshasa, having virtually chased Mobutu to his home town Gbadolite—another sign of the increasing fragmentation of the Zairean state.

Congo: private royal property

In 1855, when Belgium was just 28 years old as a nation, the young King Leopold was already obsessed with an unquenchable imperialist urge. Africa was still a *terra incognita,* with the Royal Society of Britain financing exploratory expeditions between 1857 and 1875. King Leopold convened an International Geographic Conference in 1876 in Laeken, to which the most reputed explorers were invited. On Oct. 30, 1879, Leopold entered into an agreement with an American journalist and explorer, Henry Morton Stanley, who was later to become notorious among the Congolese for his trigger-happy attitude to shooting down like game, any "natives" who crossed his path.

The invaders used the same method of conflict mediation and protection that the United Nations and other western powers are using today against Africa. As Father A. Roeykens wrote in *White Paper on Leopold II and the Colonization of the Congo,* Leopold contrived to have the commanders of his stations to cause the indigenous chiefs to choose them as arbiters in their conflicts with other tribes, and to place themselves under the protection of the African

Association to defend them against attacks from other tribes. In exchange, they had to cede part of their territory to Leopold directly.

Taking advantage of the rivalry among Britain, France, and Portugal in Africa, Leopold II imposed himself as an arbiter and made his association the guarantor of free navigation in the Congo basin. The Berlin Conference of 1884-85 among the powers thus created an Independent State of Congo which was King Leopold II's personal property. As Zairean historian Elikia Mbokolo wrote, "The juridical monstrosity which made a European king the owner of a huge piece of African territory on which he had never set foot, gave Leopold the leeway to build a veritable system of slavery based on expropriation and generalized violence." This odious system was later to be denounced by Leopold's own subjects.

One of the most dedicated crusaders against the inhuman treatment dealt the "natives" was Daniel Van Groenweghe, who in his work *Du Sang sur les Lianes* (*Blood on Lianes*), quoted the district head of the Equator region as saying, "For me as well as for all other people, Central Africa was just a land of terror. My mind had been made up to accept the words of our ancestor that his African education started in the sound of gunfire as well as the burning of villages 'to bring the villages to reason.' In a nutshell, it was a life of force, with all its excesses."

Leopold's tyranny over Congo was unmatched anywhere in Africa for its brutality. A letter written by Leopold II to all his agents in Congo on June 16, 1897, and quoted by Hubert Galle and Yannis Thanassekos in *Congo—From Discovery to Independence,* says, "I am aware that in barbarous countries, there is need for a strong authority to oblige the indigenous to adopt the manners of civilized society which they have not been so far used to."

Consequently, villagers who did not extract enough rubber had their arms amputated. The most recalcitrant villages were burned to the ground. The agents of Leopold's administration received huge bonuses for their extortions. The African-American George Washington, who came to the Congo in search of his roots in 1890, published a horrifying report on the "policy of amputated arms." British missionaries reported cases of natives recruited from British colonies and taken to work as slaves in Leopold's Congo. Daniel Van Groenweghe also quoted the secretary general of the Congo writing to Leopold II: "I think your Majesty should not be reticent in taking decisions which are unavoidable. The system of hostage-taking is considered as an odious practice by those who do not think. The villagers themselves now accept the fact that corporal punishment is necessary to make debtors pay promptly. Women are the most frequent victims. They are incarcerated, until such a time that their families or villages are able to furnish the required quantity of rubber."

In 1906, under pressure from the United States and Britain, the Belgian parliament took over the running of Congo as a full-fledged colony. But the excesses of the Leopold administration were only to intensify. The Belgian colonial administrators pushed their brutality to such extremes that they publicly flogged the corpses of people who had not yet paid all their taxes when they died.

FIGURE 1
Zaire: approaching zero

Total population (1990)	38.6 million
Life expectancy	53.0 years
Infant mortality (per 1,000 live births)	96
Population with access to safe water	34%
Population with access to sanitation	14%
Children reported dying before age 5 in 1991	211,000
Under-five mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)	130
Maternity mortality rate (per 1,000)	70
Population per doctor	13,540
HIV infection in low-risk urban population	5%
Percentage of urban population	40%
Food import dependency ratio	37%
Per capita energy consumption (kg of oil equivalent)	71 kg*
College graduates as % of college-age population	0.2%
Total debt as % of GNP	141%
Debt service ratio	15.4%

* For comparison, U.S. per capita energy consumption (kg of oil equivalent) is 7,822 kg.
Sources: UNDP and U.S. Bureau of the Census

The scars of racial discrimination that the Belgians imposed during the colonial period have remained indelible. In most of the principal cities, the living quarters of Europeans and Congolese are strictly separated. The European quarters are referred to as the "Ville," and the shanty towns are for the Congolese who return to their "Soweto" from their menial jobs in the "Ville."

Pseudo-independence

In 1955, Professor Van Bilsen proposed the gradual emancipation of Congo with the final objective of creating a federation with Belgium in 30 years. But by the next year, there was a blossoming of ethnic and culturally based associations, which served as the basis for the political awakening of Congo. Among these was the Association of the Bakongo (Abako), created in 1950 by Joseph Kasavubu; the African Conscience of Joseph Ileo and Joseph Albert Malula; the National Congolese Movement of Patrice Lumumba; the Party of African Solidarity of Antoine Gizenga; and the National Katangan Congress of Moise Tshombe.

In 1960, Belgium organized Round Table discussions in Brussels, to determine Congo's political future. During these talks, it was agreed in principle that all economic assets which belonged to the Belgian Congo should simply be transferred to the independent state of Congo. But Congo was curiously asked to pay all the debts incurred by the Belgian state for projects in Congo—including a huge debt of $5 billion to be paid to the World Bank. However, out of $120 million borrowed from the U.S. government for road infrastructure in Congo, $80 million had already been spent without any construction work having begun.

Between May 11-25, 1960, elections were held in Congo. The results showed a convincing win for Patrice Lumumba, whose National Congolese Movement was the only national party and which had emerged as the strongest party both in central and provincial elections. Lumumba himself had been present at the 1958 All-African Peoples Congress in newly independent Ghana, under the leadership of Kwame Nkrumah.

The independence of Congo was abrupt. By 1960, the training of the Congo population was so poor, that the country had only 20 university graduates.

There was more to come. Only 12 days before the proclamation of independence, the Belgian parliament voted up a bill transforming all Belgian companies operating in Congo, into Belgian companies to be headquartered in Brussels by law, to prevent them from being absorbed by the nationalist government of Patrice Lumumba. It soon became evident that Belgium had never really intended to release its stranglehold on the country's rich agricultural and mineral wealth.

Independence was finally proclaimed on June 29, 1960, and a "Belgian-Congolese Friendship Treaty" was signed stipulating that the Belgian troops stationed in Congo could only be used with the express consent of the Congolese government. But within two weeks, mutinies and riots had erupted in various parts of Congo, due initially to provocative statements from the Belgian commander of the Congolese troops. Panic-stricken Europeans began leaving the country, as Belgian troops intervened, seizing the Matadi and Leopoldville (Kinshasa) airports. Moise Tshombe, a protégé of the Belgian mining companies, declared the secession of the mineral-rich Katanga (Shaba) province. By July 12, the Congolese government appealed for United Nations military assistance against Belgian aggression.

The story of the U.N. intervention into Congo is a sorry tale of imperialist manipulation which culminated in the murder of Patrice Lumumba by Belgian puppets such as Moise Tshombe, the president of the self-proclaimed Republic of Katanga, thereby siphoning off the prime revenue earner of the newly independent country. U.N. forces refused to intervene against Katangan secession. Sometime between November 1960 and January 1961, Lumumba was murdered in Katanga. Assured of the firm backing of the United States and other NATO allies, Belgium adamantly refused to withdraw its troops from Congo.

In the same period, the CIA, which was deeply involved in Congo, discovered Mobutu, commander of the Army. The United States used its influence to get money from the U.N. for Mobutu to pay his troops and the mercenaries recruited for him. They also ensured that Mobutu's superior, General Lundula, suspected of being loyal to Lumumba, was barred from returning to the capital at the critical moment.

Not until the end of 1962 did U.N. troops, still in Congo, intervene to shut down the Katangan secessionist operation, in a deal which made the Belgian favorite Tshombe himself prime minister of the reunified Congo.

The 1964 Stanleyville revolt brought Tshombe down. The revolt may perhaps be the most dramatic instance of CIA intervention in Congo. Cuban Bay of Pigs veterans were contracted to fly vintage B-27 bombers, and mercenaries were recruited by the Agency in South Africa and Rhodesia. The revolt was crushed, though not before 50 European hostages were killed by the rebels in the wake of U.S. bombing and the Belgian-U.S. airdrop on Stanleyville. Ten thousand Congolese were killed by the Belgian-U.S. troops.

In late 1965, General Mobutu succeeded in a bloodless coup in taking power, where he has operated under the tutelage of his western sponsors until the 1990s. In 1967, President Lyndon Johnson was quick to send in arms to help restore order during an anti-Mobutu mercenary-led coup. Mobutu also functioned as a key western asset in the wars in Angola. And in 1977-78, Mobutu himself had to depend on his western allies to repell the invasion of exiled Zaireans from Angola.

An example of Mobutu's compliance with western powers is his deal with the German firm Orbital Transport und Rohenthen Aktien Gesellschaft (Otrag). In the 1970s, Mobutu signed a contract leasing out a piece of Zairean territory three times the size of Belgium to Otrag. The lease was undertaken without seeking ratification from the Zairean parliament. Otrag is involved in the launching of rockets and installation of launching pads for nuclear satellites. Zaire, however, cannot claim that it is using Otrag for the benefit of its own technological progress, because Otrag is strictly segregated from Zaire's own economy.

Despite his abject compliance with western powers, Mobutu was not without personal pride. On July 13, 1966, he froze the accounts of the Belgian airline Sabena and requested the right to own shares in the business. In 1967, he declared Zairean subsoil and all its wealth the property of the state, and nationalized the mining companies, dissolving the Union Minière de Haute Katanga and the all-powerful Société Générale. In 1971, he launched his policy of a "return to authenticity," changing the country's name to Zaire. In 1973, he made the decision to nationalize most companies belonging to foreigners. However, as the profile of the economy demonstrates, the nationalizations did not result in increased wealth for the population, but a financial rearrangement, as the money gained from the nationalized mineral exports continued to flow out of the country, either in the form of debt service or organized capital flight.

Economic dependence

Zaire is a glaring example of the western multinational companies' application of the politics of "bribe-block-break." This has permitted them to penetrate the state apparatus, to secure cheap minerals and other resource concessions, fraudulent contracts and commissions, over-generous fiscal incentives, soft tax laws and easy profit repatriation, ultra-cheap labor, and other material advantages. In return, the Zairean elite has taken advantage to secure political office and prerequisites such as lucrative jobs, foreign bank accounts, shareholdings, and executive positions in the subsidiaries of the multis operating there.

On average, western multinationals in Zaire pay their Zairean workers only 20% of what they pay workers in their parent companies and only 36% of the hourly rate of their subsidiaries in other countries. Most skilled jobs are held by foreigners, and there is absolutely no technology transfer to the Zairean work force.

More than 80% of the export earnings of the Zairean economy come from the mining industry. Of this amount, 90% is used to pay for manufactured products destined for the cities. Plantation agriculture, which has been encouraged by the western multinationals, expropriates most of the arable land for export crops. Thus in Zaire there is a scarcity of land for planting of food. This has aggravated rural unemployment and encouraged the exodus from the countryside to the cities. Despite its total lack of industrialization, Zaire's population is only 60% in the countryside. Already, the city of Kinshasa, with 6 million people, receives thousands more each day who are trying to escape the poverty and misery of the rural areas.

Furthermore, with a 37% dependency on food imports, Zaire spends $200 million a year for the purchase of food, which could easily be produced in the country. Zaire's beef comes from the Republic of South Africa, and its rice from China, Pakistan, and Vietnam.

The degradation of production in Zaire has also caused massive inflation. Between 1969 and 1990 there was an increase in the price of all products from 100 to 2,507 zaires, an increase in the price of food from 100 to 3,053 zaires. A worker in a factory had to work for 100 days in 1990 to buy a loincloth (imported from Holland), whereas he had to work for only three days in 1960 to buy the same item. In 1990, a worker had to put in 10 days to earn enough to buy a kilogram of fish, whereas he had to work only 2 days in 1960 to buy the same kilogram. In 1980, a laborer had to furnish 18 days' labor to earn enough to buy a bag of manioc of 50 kg instead of 3 days in 1960. In most Zairean families, the revenue is not enough to buy food for a full week.

This extreme poverty has fed a tremendous rise in teenage prostitution. Girls age 16-20, who have been virtually abandoned by their parents who cannot afford to feed their families, have taken to soliciting foreign visitors in front of the main hotels in the capital, especially Europeans who pay in hard currency.

Profits from the exploitation of Zaire's copper are repatriated by multinational companies and the share of the state is used to import raw materials and intermediary products necessary for running the outward-oriented factories. All the mineral wealth of Zaire is shared between the western shareholders of the multis and the political elite who gravitated around Mobutu. Zaire is the only country in the region whose currency has been devalued 12 times since independence in 1960. Yet, today the inflation rate is almost 4,000%, while the annual per capita income has fallen to less than $100.

Nevertheless, some people in Zaire live in magnificent wealth. For instance, my host there, publisher of a weekly newspaper, had a fleet of eight cars and was renting offices at the Continental Hotel in Kinshasa, where a room costs $200 a night.

In September 1991, riots broke out in Zaire, which included looting and ransacking of commercial and industrial sites. Thousands of jobs were lost, as investors started pulling out of the country. French troops were brought in from their bases in Chad, Gabon, and the Central African Republic to restore order. Zairean soldiers, who had not been paid for months, looted and set fire to the headquarters of the People's Revolutionary Movement, Mobutu's ruling party. The United States, France, and Belgium suspended economic aid. The International Monetary Fund (known as the Instant Misery Fund in Zaire) declared that Zaire could no longer borrow funds because of its arrears, and the World Bank followed suit.

Mobutu has consistently tried to teleguide and manipulate the democratization process that he reluctantly announced in April 1991. Since then, he has switched prime ministers six times. His special Presidential Squad, dominated by Ngbandi tribesmen, has been fortified and equipped with ultra-modern weapons, to terrorize the opposition. More than 400 people disappeared in Zaire last year in politically related abductions.

After a National Forum held last year and presided over by a Catholic prelate, Archbishop Musengo, it was widely rumored that the end of Mobutu's reign had come, but he bounced back, destabilizing the tribally fragmented opposition. Mobutu has predicted apocalypse for Zaire if he is overthrown, threatening that when he leaves, the country will disintegrate into warfare among the tribal nations that were brought together under colonialism. The truth is: Unless Zairean and other African leaders are able to dismantle the system of post-colonial dependence and exploitation, Mobutu could be proved right.