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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Navigating Lingala: Linguistic Change, Political Power, and Everyday Authoritarianism in Congo-Zaire, 1965–97

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Abstract

I argue that navigating Lingala represented a central part of many Zairians' experiences of Mobutu's regime (1965–97), causing linguistic change, shaping their relationships to state power, and influencing their experiences of the regime's everyday authoritarianism. Mobutu's regime imposed Lingala through informal language practices including political rallies, songs, and slogans, interactions with state agents, and Mobutu's own practice of addressing audiences nation-wide in Lingala. Zairians navigated the regime's imposition of Lingala in different, and often divergent ways along a spectrum from rejection and opposition to acquisition and embrace. Where some Zairians, especially Kiswahili speakers in the East, rejected Lingala and criticized the language — critiquing Mobutu's authoritarian rule in the process — other Zairians, particularly people in the Kikongo and Ciluba national language zones adapted to Mobutu's new linguistic dispensation by learning to speak and understand Lingala, improving their relationship with the state and facilitating life under Mobutu's rule.

Keywords: Central Africa; Democratic Republic of Congo; linguistics; nation states; political culture; African modernities

Early one morning during the wet season in the late 1970s, Mama Henriette Mafuika joined thousands of other men, women, and children from the Zairian city of Boma in the local stadium. The crowd had gathered, many against their wishes, to welcome the provincial governor to the city. The crowded atmosphere felt at turns festive, restless, and oppressive. Loud, infectious propaganda music played in Lingala over amplifiers powered by inconsistent electricity. Local Mouvement Populaire de la Révolution (MPR) officials went around to party informants asking in Lingala, "*nani adefiler te?*" (Who hasn't shown up for the rally?) As Mafuika explained, "If you did not show up, they would arrest you and throw you in jail."[1] These forced assemblies were partially predictable. Everyone knew that they would gather, chant slogans, dance to festive political music, watch performances by party dance troupes, and greet their single-party leaders.[2] However, they did not know how long they would need to wait for their governor to show up and what their leaders would require of them once they did.[3]

[1]Interview with Mama Henriette Mafuika, Boma, 27 Oct. 2021. Official correspondence in the MPR collection of the Congolese national archives in Kinshasa and in the extensive MPR collection at Stanford's Hoover Institution emphasized rally attendance as a crucial way to prove *fidélité au guide* or loyalty to Mobutu.

[2]Bob White, "L'Incroyable machine de l'authenticite - l'animation politique et l'usage public de la culture dans le Zaïre de Mobutu," *Revue Anthropologie et Sociétés* 30, no. 2, (2007): 43–63; interview with Jean Claude Ngoy, Northampton, MA, 27 Oct. 2020.

[3]Mafuika interview; interview with Daniel Kyungu, Lubumbashi, 17 Aug. 2019.

On this occasion, the governor showed no signs of coming. The hazy morning in the riverside city turned to a humid afternoon, and still the crowd waited. One song followed another: "Oh, Mobutu, our father of love, we cry out for you. Live long, live long!"[4] As Mafuika explained, "Regardless of the wait, you couldn't go back to your home. If you tried, they would say that you were against Mobutu, and they would arrest you."[5] The crowd marched, they danced, they sang in Lingala until they were tired, and still the governor did not show up. When he finally arrived around 4pm, Mafuika recalled: "We were all exhausted. All the young children in the crowd were hungry."[6] With the governor's arrival, the crowd's coerced praise took on new enthusiasm. The local young people launched into their musical and dance performance, and finally, the governor took the stage in the overheated stadium.

Although Boma was a Kikongo-speaking city, the governor addressed the crowd in Lingala, as all the other governors did when they rotated through town every few years.[7] If asked why these rallies were in Lingala, each official would give the same answer, "The speeches were in Lingala so that everyone could understand. Whether you had studied [in school] or you had not, you could understand."[8] Where MPR officials saw Lingala as a unifying force to facilitate communication, Mafuika's recollection illustrates how the Mobutu regime's authoritarian imposition of Lingala fostered resentment and critique among some Zairians.

I argue in this article that Zairians' experiences navigating Lingala during Mobutu's regime had three important effects: contributing to linguistic change, shaping people's relationships to state power, and influencing their experiences of the regime's everyday authoritarianism.[9] First, Lingala's informal yet central role in Mobutu's regime caused linguistic change, contributing to Lingala's nationwide expansion, especially in cities and towns. This occurred at first with the regime's informal imposition of the language, and later, due to the crisis of Zaire's formal economy that the regime's disastrous economic policies precipitated.[10] Second, navigating Lingala strongly influenced Zairians' relationships to political power, and their ability to negotiate, evade, or contest the regime's authority. Third, navigating Lingala became a central part of Zairians' experiences of the everyday authoritarianism of Mobutu's regime, from MPR rallies and regime slogans to Mobutu's speeches.[11]

This article draws from some of the roughly 350 oral history interviews that I conducted across eight Congolese provinces — in Congo's four national languages of Lingala, Kikongo, Ciluba, and Kiswahili, and also in French — primarily between 2019 and 2021.[12] I used a relational approach to

[4]Mafuika interview. The propaganda songs were often adapted from Christian songs taught by missionaries, with Mobutu replacing Jesus Christ or God. See Kapalanga Gazungil Sang'Amin, *Les Spectacles d'Animation Politique en République du Zaïre* (Louvain: Cahiers théâtre Louvain, 1989), 153–60.

[5]Mafuika interview. Other interviewees shared similar memories: interview with Jean-Baptiste Mbizikwa Dimaloka, village near Tshela, Kongo Central, 27 Oct. 2021; interview with Mama Emilie Basekata, Kikwit, 4 Sep. 2021.

[6]Mafuika interview.

[7]Interview with Cyrille Sikunu Ngimbi, Boma, 28 Oct. 2021.

[8]Mafuika interview; interview with Paul Mangata, former MPR Zone Commissioner, Kikwit, 7 Sep. 2021; interview with Lazar Tshipinda, former MPR Zone Commissioner, Mbuji-Mayi, 26 Nov. 2021.

[9]Political scientist Tom Pepinsky developed the concept of "everyday authoritarianism" positing that "everyday life in the modern authoritarian regime is, in this sense, boring and tolerable. It is not outrageous." Thomas B. Pepinsky, "Everyday Authoritarianism is Boring and Tolerable," *Tom Pepinsky Blog*, https://tompepinsky.com/2017/01/06/everyday-authoritarianism-is-boring-and-tolerable/; Marie-Eve Desrosiers, *Trajectories of Authoritarianism in Rwanda: Elusive Control Before the Genocide*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 1–2.

[10]Thomas Turner and Crawford Young, *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian State* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 326–63; Emizet Kisangani, "Confronting Leaders at the Apex of the State: The Growth of the Unofficial Economy in Congo," *African Studies Review* 41, no. 1(1998): 99–137.

[11]In addition to Mobutu using Lingala, MPR's unofficial slogan was in Lingala: "*Olinga, olinga te, ozali kaka na MPR* ("Whether you like it or not, you belong to the MPR"). Interview with Prof. Mbala Nkanga, Kinshasa, 22 July 2021; interview with Prof. Isidore Ndaywel, Kinshasa, 29 Aug. 2019.

[12]I learned Congo's four national languages prior to and during fieldwork, facilitating multi-sited research. These "national languages" only received legal recognition in 2005. For discussion of their earlier colonial status see Michael Meeuwis,

interviewing pioneered by the late Lee Ann Fujii in which the interviewer gains insights through conversational co-creation with their interviewees rather than through one-way questioning.[13] I centered oral histories within my research to capture people's primarily oral practice of Lingala in Congo, and in response to Congolese historian Donatien Dibwe Dia Mwembu, who has made convincing arguments for their centrality to understanding Congolese history across decades.[14] I corroborated my oral histories by combining a close reading of Congolese sociolinguistic publications, with extensive interviews with Congolese sociolinguists from across the four national language zones (see Fig. 1, below), and archival research in Congo, Belgium, and the US.[15] Across my interviews, I noticed a striking generational impact where people in regions like Kwilu and Katanga who experienced brutal violence by the Lingala-speaking Congolese army during the Congo Crisis (1960–65) retained more negative perspectives toward the language over time, even as younger people without these experiences expressed more openness to the language and its possibilities.[16]

The collective experience of how Mobutu's regime used Lingala brought Congolese together and strengthened Congolese national identity, both through linguistic community, and through the suffering that Congolese shared under Mobutu's increasingly violent authoritarian rule.[17] Lingala thus became a central part of Zairian experiences of everyday authoritarianism, of what Marie-Eve Desrosiers has described as the "the regular engaging, vying, and navigating that forms the day-to-day life of authoritarianism."[18] Desrosiers encouraged scholars to reconsider the mundane limitations of authoritarian regimes, moving beyond the spectacular and horrible staging of authoritarian excess to recognize and analyze everyday governance. Lingala's informal and oral status made it difficult to capture through archives or government documents.[19] In their extensive study of Mobutu's regime, Turner and Young noted: "the central role accorded to Lingala by the regime entrenched regionalized perceptions of power," and yet they only dedicated one paragraph to discussing Lingala under Mobutu.[20] In the Congolese case, the lack of focus on the relationship between Lingala and political power also stemmed from the language's overwhelmingly oral practice, which Mobutu's regime furthered by shutting down important Lingala and other African-language journals.[21] Lingala's informality and orality under Mobutu made oral history interviews central to understanding how Zairians navigated Lingala's pervasive presence in Mobutu's regime.[22]

"Constructing Sociolinguistic Consensus: A Linguistic Ethnography of the Zairian Community in Antwerp, Belgium" (PhD dissertation, University of Antwerp, 1997), 102. See article 1, section 8 of Congo's 2005 constitution. https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Democratic_Republic_of_the_Congo_2011.

[13]Lee Ann Fujii, *Interviewing in Social Science Research: A Relational Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 4–5.

[14]Donatien Dibwe Dia Mwembu, "Les sources orales à la conquête du passé colonial," *The Journal of African History* 64, no. 3 (2023); Donatien Dibwe dia Mwembu, *Faire de l'histoire orale dans une ville africaine: La méthode de Jan Vansina appliquée à Lubumbashi* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2009); interview with Prof. Donatien Dibwe Dia Mwembu, Lubumbashi, 22 Aug. 2019.

[15]Eyamba Bokamba, "DR Congo: Language and 'Authentic Nationalism,'" in *Language and National Identity in Africa*, ed. Andrew Simpson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 214–34; Tshimpaka Yanga, "A Sociolinguistic Identification of Lingala (Republic of Zaire)" (PhD dissertation, University of Texas, Austin, 1980); Sesep Nsial, "L'Expansion du Lingala," *Linguistique et Sciences Humaines* 27, no. 1 (1986): 19–41.

[16]Interview with Prof. Leon Mundeke, Kinshasa, 21 Oct. 2021.

[17]Interview with Prof. Mbala Nkanga, Kinshasa, 22 July 2021.

[18]Desrosiers, *Trajectories of Authoritarianism,* 6.

[19]Linguists have long acknowledged Lingala's prominent place in Mobutu's regime but more through one-off observations than sustained, interview-based analysis. Nsial, "L'Expansion du Lingala," 19–41; Eyamba Bokamba, "DR Congo," 214–34.

[20]Turner and Young, *The Rise*, 154; Ericka Albaugh, *State-Building and Multilingual Education in Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Ayo Bamgbose, *Language and Exclusion: The Consequences of Language Policies in Africa*, (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2000), 7–30.

[21]Makim Mputubwele, "The Zairian Language Policy and its Effect on the Literatures in National Languages," *Journal of Black Studies* 34, no. 2 (2003): 272–92. For an exception see See Daniel Reboussin, "The Papa Mfumu'eto Papers: An Urban Vernacular Artist in Congo's Megacity," *Inks: The Journal of the Comics Studies Society* 3, no. 3 (2019): 315–29.

[22]M. M. Ngalasso, "L'état des langues et les langues de l'état," *Politique Africaine* 23, no. 1 (1986): 7–20.

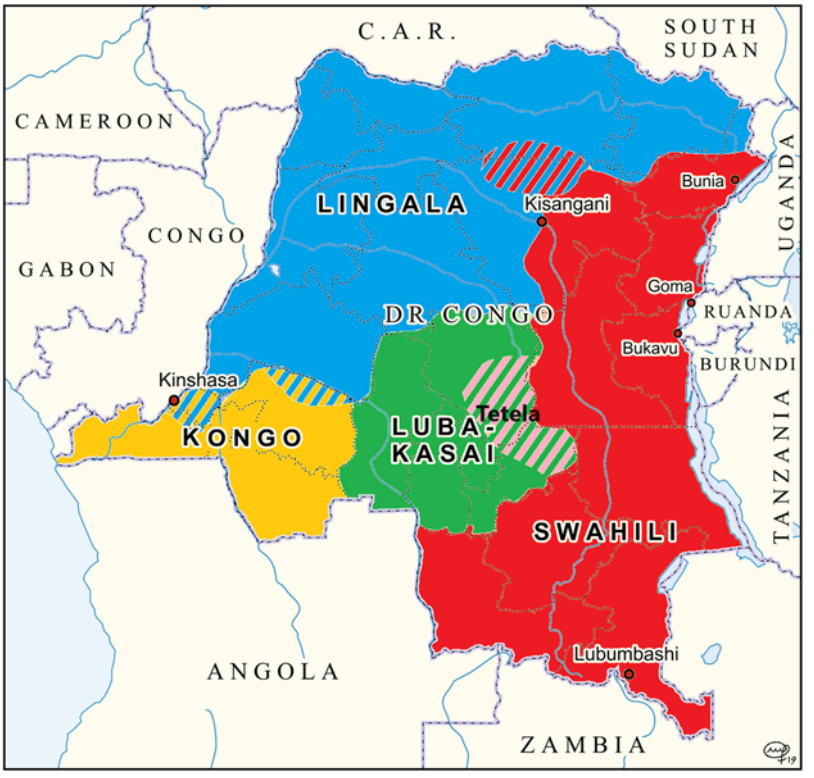

Figure. 1. Map of Congo's four national languages: situating Lingala under Mobutu in the Democratic Republic of the Congo's linguistic ecology
Source: Courtesy of Nico Nassenstein.
Note: The author slightly adjusted the map to enhance color contrasts. Except for Lingala, the other languages listed (Kikongo, Ciluba, Kiswahili) do not include their Bantu-language prefix.

This article contributes to African history by rethinking the relationship between language and postcolonial power, underscoring the rupture that independence represented in terms of how African publics could engage with and influence their political leaders. In recent years, postcolonial historians have nuanced prior chronologies and persuasively portrayed decolonization as a contested, gradual, and contingent process.[23] Accounts of Mobutu's regime have often emphasized continuities in his style of governance from Belgian colonial rule. Turner and Young portrayed Mobutu's Zairian state as a successor to Belgian colonial *bula matari* in its reliance on authoritarian violence.[24] Historians like Sarah Van Beurden and Bogumil Jewsiewicki have noted continuities with Mobutu's regime in his practicing of cultural guardianship, and in his political logic of rule.[25] More recently, Pedro Monaville and Emery Kalema have shown, respectively, the uncertain political shifts of Mobutu's early years and how Mobutu's violent politics of forgetting reshaped Congolese society.[26] My research does not

[23]Benoît Henriet, "Decolonizing African History: *Authenticité*, Cosmopolitanism and Knowledge production in Zaire, 1971–1975," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 16, no. 2 (2022): 335–54; Sarah Van Beurden, *Authentically African: Arts and the Transnational Politics of Congolese Culture* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015), 100–27.

[24]Turner and Young, *The Rise*, 3–8.

[25]Van Beurden, *Authentically African*, 126; Bogumil Jewsiewicki, "De la nation indigène à l'authenticité: La notion d'ordre public au Congo 1908–1990," *Civilizations* 40, no. 2 (1992): 102–27.

[26]Pedro Monaville, *Students of the World: Global 1968 and Decolonization in the Congo*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022); Van Beurden, *Authentically African*; Emery M. Kalema, "Scars, Marked Bodies, and Suffering: The Mulele

dispute the authoritarian character of Mobutu's regime but reveals how the use of Lingala under Mobutu created a new interface through which Congolese citizens interacted with state agents and navigated authoritarian governance differently than under Belgian colonial rule.

Navigating Lingala

I enlist the concept of "social navigation" to describe how Zairians deployed their linguistic, cultural, political, and social capital to navigate Mobutu's predatory regime. Within African Studies, Henrik Vigh first formulated the concept of social navigation to capture how young people in urban Guinea-Bissau managed conflict and soldiering during the nation's civil war.[27] Judith Verweijen built on Vigh's analysis in discussing civilian resistance against military force in contemporary eastern DRC.[28] Verweijen's emphasis on movement, dynamism, and shifting social formations is particularly relevant for Mobutu's Zaire, as the leader changed state structures to maintain power and kept state officials constantly shifting posts to maintain discipline and control. Where social navigation literature has provided us with new insights into social experiences of (civil) war, I add linguistic dimensions to this discussion, which has especially high stakes in DRC, as one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world.[29]

By analyzing the role that language played mediating between Zairian state actors and citizens, we find striking instances of civilian (particularly feminine) agency, power, and resilience in the face of state violence and oppression. Historians across geographies have historicized ideas of agency to highlight and appreciate the ways in which women and other marginalized folks have negotiated their relationships with state and capitalist power.[30] In a recent issue of this journal, Elijah Doro and Sandra Swart acknowledged creative peasant agency in Southern Africa, but urged historians to move beyond agency to "engage power asymmetries and disparities" that have in their context, contributed to the "pervasive and enduring constraints of White settler power."[31] In Africanist scholarship, resilience has recently been invoked to explain the persistence and popular legitimacy of customary authorities, and of African adaptations when facing insufficient state support.[32] My research engages with discourses of both resilience and agency as it considers how Zairians used their knowledge of Lingala to subvert predatory interactions, opening space for negotiation, either to blunt persistent state power or bend it in their favor.[33]

'Rebellion' in Postcolonial Congo," *The Journal of African History* 59, no. 2 (2018): 263–82; Emery Kalema, "The Mulele 'Rebellion,' Congolese Regimes, and the Politics of Forgetting," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 59, no. 3 (2019): 747–81.

[27]Henrik Vigh, *Navigating Terrains of War Youth and Soldiering in Guinea-Bissau* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006); Henrik Vigh, "Motion Squared: A Second Look at the Concept of Social Navigation," *Anthropological Theory* 9, no. 4 (2009): 419–38; Mats Utas, "West-African Warscapes: Victimcy, Girlfriending, Soldiering: Tactic Agency in a Young Woman's Social Navigation of the Liberian War Zone," *Anthropological Quarterly* 78, no. 2 (2005): 403–30.

[28]Judith Verweijen, "Civilian Resistance Against the Military in Eastern DR Congo: A Combined Social Navigation and Structuration Approach," *Qualitative Sociology* 41, no. 2 (2018): 282.

[29]Stephen C. Lubkemann, *Culture in Chaos. An Anthropology of the Social condition in War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Ekkehard Wolff, *Language and Development in Africa: Perceptions, Ideologies and Challenges* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 294–95.

[30]Rupa Ghosh, "Historicising the Agency of India's reproductive subjects," *Social Identities* 27, no. 1 (2021): 114–28; Lynn M. Thomas, "Historicizing Agency," *Gender and History* 28, no. 2 (2016): 324–39.

[31]Elijah Doro and Sandra Swart, "Beyond Agency: The African Peasantry, the State, and Tobacco in Southern Rhodesia (Colonial Zimbabwe), 1900–80," *The Journal of African History* 63, no. 1(2022): 73–74.

[32]Carolyn Logan, "The Roots of Resilience: Exploring Popular Support for African Traditional Authorities," *African Affairs* 112, no. 448 (2013): 353–76; Jacinta Chiamaka Nwaka, "Treasure in a Slum: Resilience and Infrastructural Catastrophe in Ariaria International Market, Aba, Nigeria 1999-2021," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 30, no. 1 (2021): 104–29.

[33]I also benefited from Michelle Moyd's analysis of *Askari* in German East Africa as both enacting colonial power and using their powerful intermediary position to carve out personal influence and authority. Michelle Moyd, "Bomani: African Soldiers as Colonial Intermediaries in German East Africa, 1890–1914," in *German Colonialism Revisited: African, Asian, and Oceanic Experiences*, eds. Nina Berman, Klaus Mühlhahn, and Patrice Nganang (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 101–13.

The Lingala language originated in the early 1880s when newly arrived European officials and African (non-Congolese) soldiers formed a new pidgin, based on Bobangi, the main *lingua franca* on the upper Congo River.[34] Lingala's major expansion into what became the Lingala zone occurred following the Batetela mutiny of colonial auxiliaries against the Congo Free State in 1893–94. Authorities subsequently restructured the Force Publique, ending their reliance on foreign missionaries, and adopting Lingala as the military's new language of command to nationalize the force and reduce the potential for mutiny.[35] Thus military recruits, soldiers, veterans, and their families used Lingala — as the language became known after the 1890s — to construct new colonial identities.[36]

Beyond Lingala, Congo's complex linguistic ecology in the late nineteenth century — with an estimated 350 ethnic groups and around 250 languages — influenced the policy choices of Congo Free State (CFS) and Belgian colonial authorities.[37] Where CFS authorities made a failed attempt to spread French among state auxiliaries, Belgian colonial authorities after 1908 moved away from expanding French due to a combination of pragmatism and racism.[38] They instead leaned on the four regional lingua francas which became Congo's de facto national languages: Lingala, Kiswahili, Kikongo (ya Leta), and Ciluba.[39] These languages expanded through their use by colonial agents and auxiliaries, and their adoption by Congolese seeking social mobility in Congo's oppressive colonial economy.[40] Lingala came to be spoken across what became the Lingala zone through its adoption by colonial agents, some mission schools, and Congolese town-dwellers, the other three national languages followed similar patterns — with a partial exception in Ciluba.[41]

Belgian colonial authorities maintained French as official language, but only trained small numbers of Congolese (men) in French until a slight expansion of secondary education in the 1940s.[42] These Congolese, the *évolués,* constituted a small percentage of the population — and a significant focus of the historiography — and were almost exclusively men, who gained outsized power at independence, as educational attainment and mastery of French became essential criteria for entering government.[43] Linguist Marcel Kalunga Mwela Ubi's explanation to me is worth quoting at length:

> Immediately after independence, education truly was the key to enabling someone in Congo to live a prosperous life. All that people had to do was look at the *évolués*, who had converted their years in school, their mastery of French, and their technical knowledge into a dominant

[34]Michael Meeuwis provides a detailed analysis of this history, referencing numerous primary sources in his revised Lingala grammar. Michael Meeuwis, *A Grammatical Overview of Lingala: Revised and Extended Edition* (Munich: Lincom GmbH, 2020), 19–30; see also André Mangulu Motingea, *Aspects des parlers minoritaires des lacs Tumba et Inongo: Contribution à l'histoire de contact des langues dans le bassin central congolais* (Tokyo: Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 2010).

[35]Pamphile Mabiala-Mangoma, *Les Soldats de Bula Matari (1885–1960): Histoire Sociale de la Force Publique du Congo Belge* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2019), 93.

[36]*Ibid.,* 196; interview with Col. Rex Honoré Izwa, Kinshasa, 17 Sep. 2021.

[37]Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem, *Histoire générale du Congo: de l'héritage ancien à la République Démocratique* (Paris: Afrique Editions, 1998), 234; Mutombo Huta Mukana, et al *Atlas Linguistique de la République Démocratique du Congo*, (Yaoundé: Éditions du CERDOTLA, 2011); William J. Samarin, "Language in the Colonization of Central Africa, 1880–1900," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 23, no. 2 (1989): 232–49.

[38]Meeuwis, "Constructing Sociolinguist," 58.

[39]*Ibid.*, 102.

[40]Samarin, "Language," Dibwe dia Mwembu, *Faire*, 185.

[41]William J. Samarin, "Versions of Kituba's Origin: Historiography and Theory," *Journal of African Languages and Linguistics* 34, no. 1 (2013): 111–81. For more on Ciluba's development, see: Bogumil Jewsiewicki, "The Formation of the Political Culture of Ethnicity in the Belgian Congo, 1920–1959," in *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*, ed. Leroy Vail (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Martin Kalulambi Pongo, *Être Luba au 20ième Siècle: Identité Chrétienne au Congo-Kinshasa* (Paris: Karthala, 1997).

[42]Meeuwis, "Constructing," 58–59.

[43]Interview with Prof. Nyembwe Ntita, Kinshasa, 29 July 2021.

> position in post-independence Congo … education, and with this, the mastery of French, was the key to attaining prosperity and influence in life.[44]

Benefitting from UN and other external support, Congolese authorities during the First Republic (1960–65) expanded Congo's small secondary education system but faced massive challenges in implementation due to the concurrent Congo Crisis.[45] Mobutu's regime continued this educational expansion in his first decade (1965–75), but shifted criteria for political advancement away from educational attainment and toward loyalty or *militantisme,* as Mobutu publicly embraced Lingala, and cemented his power.[46]

Mobutu's use of Lingala differed substantially from Belgian colonial language policies and from the French-favored policy of the First Republic in that his de facto Lingala policy enabled a much closer, yet still authoritarian relationship between Mobutu and the Congolese population.[47] Where the MPR party-state bureaucracy had French as its language of work, Mobutu's personalized state engaged with Zaire's broader population primarily through Lingala, giving the language a central position in Congolese politics. Mobutu's regime thus provided Zairians with greater proximity to power through language, shifting from the distant superiority of French under Belgian colonial rule and the First Republic.[48] French retained its position as Zaire's official language, but Mobutu's patrimonial politics and the devastating economic decline that his regime presided over undermined the ability of mastering French to provide socioeconomic advancement.[49]

Mama Anasthesie Kasese's recollections reveal how Zairians navigated the Zairian state linguistically. Kasese, a Katangese farmer and mother, improved her relationships with soldiers and other state agents by speaking Lingala. As she explained: "it helped me a lot knowing Lingala. When I came across a military roadblock, I would just say in Lingala *mbote, sango nini* (hi, how are you)? And they would let me pass every time without any issue."[50] This reaction presented a striking contrast with soldiers' normal, predatory treatment of women at roadblocks, especially in Kiswahili-speaking Katanga province, which came under military rule following the Shaba Wars of 1977–78.[51] Kasese's testimony, along with those of my other interviewees, illustrates how Zairians deployed their linguistic and cultural resources under Mobutu, to navigate state power, survive its predation, and manage their daily lives.

Lingala and the state: from regional expansion toward national practice

We can understand the central role that Mobutu's regime played in Lingala's cross-country expansion by exploring Lingala's position at the start of his rule, and how it changed throughout. Before Mobutu seized power in November 1965, Lingala was growing rapidly within its linguistic region, and in parts of western Congo, but not elsewhere. In western Congo, Lingala was, as Margot Luyckfasseel has argued, a "killer language," winning out in competition over different local languages, especially

[44]Interview with Prof. Marcel Kalunga Mwela Ubi, Lubumbashi, 15 Aug. 2019.

[45]James C. Ching, "Public Education Trends in the Democratic Republic of the Congo," *Comparative Education Review* 12, no. 3 (1968): 323–37.

[46]Eyamba Bokamba, "Education and Development in Zaire," in *The Crisis in Zaire: Myths and Realities*, ed. Nzongola-Ntalaja (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1986), 191–218; Interview with Prof. Andre Yoka Lye, Kinshasa, 20 July 2021; Congolese National Archives (INACO), MPR Collection, Administrative correspondence 1967–1980, Kithima Bin Ramazani, "Mobutisme et le rôle du cadre dans la conjoncture actuelle," Secrétariat Exécutif du MPR (1979), 1.

[47]Regime propaganda termed this relationship the "Mobutu-people dialogue," although the communication often went only one way. *Glossaire Idéologique du M.P.R.,* (Kinshasa, Publications FORCAD, 1986), 7.

[48]Lye interview; Nkanga interview.

[49]Interview with Jeff Koni, Kikwit, 2 Sep. 2021; Interview with Nafisa Tambwe, Northampton, MA, 8 Oct. 2020.

[50]Interview with Mama Anasthesie Kasese, Lubumbashi, 8 Sep. 2019.

[51]Daniel Henk, "Kazi ya Shaba: Choice, Continuity, and Social change in an Industrial Community of Southern Zaire" (PhD dissertation, University of Florida, 1988), 57–58.

among young people.[52] Lingala's expansion in this phase came largely at the expense of local languages as people migrated to cities to escape insecurity and find new economic opportunities.[53]

East of Kinshasa in the Kikongo zone, Lingala was already established along the Congo River in 1965. Some people had learned Lingala as the language made inroads westward, especially in the city of Bandundu.[54] Lingala also gained speakers in western Bas-Kongo from the 1950s onward, as people expanded commercial contacts with Kinshasa, and some preferred not to speak Kikongo ya Leta due to its connections with the Belgian colonial state.[55] While Lingala served as the language of the army, this did not always lead to its diffusion amongst the civilian populace. Moreover, multiple regional rebellions during the era of the Congo Crisis (1960–65) meant that these soldiers were not deployed nationwide.[56] The decentralized federalist government of President Joseph Kasa-Vubu during the First Republic further limited linguistic expansion: Kinshasa, the Lingala-speaking Congolese capital, was not the center of political and cultural power that it would become during Mobutu's reign.[57] Lingala-language rumba music — another major factor in its eventual expansion — was then limited by the limitations on broadcasting and distribution into Congo's vast hinterland.[58]

In Ciluba-speaking Kasai, Lingala's presence in 1965 was limited to soldiers, their families and a small number of traders travelling to Kinshasa.[59] In the western regional center of Kananga (known as Luluabourg until 1966), Lingala was present with the city's military, and especially with the military's officer school (*Ecole de formation d'officiers*) where Congolese military and national police officers trained, and yet Lingala's use did not extend beyond the areas around military barracks.[60] As linguist Adrien Munyoka explained, regarding the southeastern Kasaien town of Mwene-Ditu: "People perceived Lingala as the language of hard power, the language of law enforcement."[61] Still this presence was limited, as local police forces mainly used Ciluba and Kinshasa's cultural and political influence remained weak. Lingala was absent from fast-growing Mbuji-Mayi, which had emerged from the small town of Bakwanga following ethnic cleansing practiced by Balulua against ethnic Baluba in western Kasai in 1959–1960. Felicien Mbala, recalled that in Mbuji-Mayi in 1965, "we did not hear Lingala spoken here. A few very rare traders who travelled to Kinshasa spoke it but for the vast majority, Lingala did not mean anything to us. City residents did not speak Lingala at all."[62] According to Munyoka, Lingala music from Kinshasa became noticeable in Kasai's cities in "1964 or 1965 with the arrival of portable radios" from Kinshasa.[63] In Kasai's rural areas, home to close to 80 percent of the region's population at the time, Lingala remained nearly non-existent, as customary authorities and local law enforcement continued to use Ciluba and other local languages.[64]

In Congo's Kiswahili zone, Lingala's presence remained even more limited than in Kasai. Little trade connected the East with Kinshasa, and multiple rebellions against the central government in the 1960s reduced Lingala's practice further. Before Mobutu, Kiswahili had an unopposed status as the

[52]Margot Luyckfasseel, "Kongo with a K Acoustic Repertoires and Hegemony in Kinshasa" (PhD dissertation, University of Ghent, 2021), 19–23.

[53]Interview with Prof. Andre Makokila, Kinshasa, 25 Aug. 2021.

[54]Izwa interview.

[55]Interview with Placide Munanga, Boma, 28 Oct. 2021.

[56]Interview with Prof. Kiangu Sindani, Kinshasa, 16 Aug. 2021; Interview with Isidore Kabongo, Kinshasa, 29 Sep. 2021.

[57]Interview with Prof. Jean-Marie Mutamba Makombo, Kinshasa, 5 Aug. 2021; Lye interview.

[58]Interview with Prof. Adrien Munyoka, Mbuji-Mayi, 27 Nov. 2021; interview with I. Kabongo, former head of Congolese national radio. See Jeremy Rich, *Protestant Missionaries and Humanitarianism in the DRC* (London: James Currey, 2020), 59–82; Charlotte Grabli, "La ville des auditeurs: radio, rumba congolaise et droit à la ville dans la cité indigène de Léopoldville (1949-1960)," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 59, no. 1 (2019): 9–45.

[59]Interview with Prof. Maurice Muyaya Wetu, Lubumbashi, 16 Aug. 2019.

[60]*Ibid.*

[61]Munyoka interview.

[62]Interview with Felicien Mbala Kafiondo, Mbuji-Mayi, 24 Nov. 2021.

[63]Munyoka interview.

[64]Interview with Prof. Guy Kabongo, Mbuji-Mayi, 26 Nov. 2021.

main lingua franca in urban, periurban, and multiethnic parts of eastern Congo. Kiswahili was taught in primary schools, spoken by local authorities, and used as the language of work in Katanga's critical mining industry, and by some religious denominations across eastern Congo.[65] During Belgian colonial rule, Kiswahili also became the language of urban life in Elizabethville (Lubumbashi) and other major towns. Learning Kiswahili for Katangese became synonymous with socioeconomic success and aspirations of modernity.[66] Lingala's absence from Katanga was reinforced during the Katanga secession (1960–63), when Katangese authorities banned music in Lingala, and on at least a few occasions, mobs targeted Lingala speakers due to the language's association with the national army and central government.[67] Elsewhere in the Kiswahili zone in rural Kivu, Lingala was practically nonexistent.[68] As with Kwilu, central government soldiers sent to quell Congo's numerous rebellions only deepened popular antipathy toward Lingala as these soldiers and their European mercenary allies practiced brutal scorched earth tactics against civilians as well as soldiers. If civilians' increased interactions with soldiers necessitated at least limited knowledge of Lingala, the soldiers' numerous war crimes caused many Kiswahili-speakers to reject Lingala and refuse to speak the language when possible.[69]

Imposing Lingala: language and Mobutu's regime

In my interviews, Congolese used the French verb *imposer* (in French as well as Congolese languages) to characterize how Mobutu and his regime used Lingala to rule Congo-Zaire throughout his rule.[70] Unlike other cases in Africa such as Tanzania or Malawi, the Mobutu regime did not impose Lingala through formal language policies or the education system.[71] Under Mobutu, Lingala did not displace the official language — in this case French — but rather existed alongside it, as a prestigious and powerful language associated with the state, in a language regime partially inherited from the colonial period, but augmented under Mobutu's rule.[72]

Many Zairians associated the leader himself with the informal imposition of the tongue due to Mobutu's exclusive use of Lingala during his popular rallies across the country, forcing people from all social classes to attend these rallies where they would be subject to the language.[73] Politicians, the MPR and its youth league (the Jeunesse de la Mouvement Populaire de la Révolution, or JMPR), as well as, soldiers, and *gendarmes* joined these regime efforts but imposed Lingala through language practices and ideologies rather than formal language policy.[74] Where many interviewees described Mobutu's regime as imposing Lingala through their rule, informants from within the regime often saw their use of Lingala as a pragmatic tool facilitating communication with the public.

[65]Interview with Prof. Marcel Kalunga Mwela Ubi, Lubumbashi, 12 Aug. 2019.

[66]Dibwe dia Mwembu, *Faire*, 117–18; personal correspondence with Prof. Bogumil Jewsiewicki, Apr. 2019; Johannes Fabian, *Language and Colonial Power: The Appropriation of Swahili in the Former Belgian Congo, 1880–1938*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

[67]I. Kabongo interview; interview with Prof. Cesar Nkuku, Lubumbashi, 5 Sep. 2019.

[68]Interview with Prof. Dismas Nkiko, Lubumbashi, 13 Aug. 2019.

[69]Interview with Prof. Marcel Kalunga Mwela Ubi, Lubumbashi, 12 Aug. 2019; interview with Prof. Aliko Songolo, Philadelphia, PA, 17 Nov. 2022.

[70]Interview with Prof. Marcel Kalunga Mwela Ubi, Lubumbashi, 12 Aug. 2019; interview with Pierre-Aimé Mobembo, chief of historical section, Congolese National Archives, Kinshasa, 28 Aug. 2019.

[71]Jan Blommaert, *State Ideology and Language in Tanzania* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014); Alfred Jana Matiki, "Language Planning and Social Change: A Study of Linguistic Exclusion and the Legislation Process in Malawi" (PhD diss., University of New Mexico, 2001).

[72]Ngalasso, "L'état des langues et les langues de l'état," 14–20.

[73]Interview with Charlotte Kutemba, Lubumbashi, 8 Sep. 2019; Basekata interview.

[74]This was not for lack of trying, see "Revealing Debate: The 1974 First Seminar of Zairian Linguists and Congo's Politics of Language in Historical Perspective," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 55, no. 3 (2022): 303–24.

The Mobutu regime's imposition of Lingala represented a language policy by effect, rather than by law or decree. Lingala expanded due to Mobutu's personalized dictatorship, regime officials' need to demonstrate loyalty and proximity to Mobutu, and the regime's policy of stationing officials outside their home region and rotating them periodically. The regime's informal imposition of Lingala produced ambiguous, sometimes contradictory effects. Imposing Lingala created resentment among some Zairians, particularly in Shaba province, who viewed the regime's use of Lingala as a form of oppression, providing one more grievance for people who experienced Mobutu's regime as predatory, exploitative, and corrupt. The regime's use of Lingala also enabled political leaders to communicate with much of Zaire's population, and on rare occasions, it enabled ordinary Zairians to critique their leaders directly.[75] Learning Lingala allowed Zairians to negotiate with a predatory regime, and navigate the uncertainties of daily life in Zaire, especially after 1970s once the formal economy imploded, and people needed to fend for themselves *(se débrouiller)* to survive and feed their families.[76]

Idi Amin's imposition of Kiswahili in Uganda represents a particularly apt comparative case study for Lingala under Mobutu as a formerly colonial language, used by the military and enlisted by an authoritarian postcolonial government to strengthen its rule. Amin decreed Kiswahili to be Uganda's sole "national language" following his 1971 military coup. As with Lingala in Congo-Zaire, Kiswahili in Uganda had a longer history connected most to its use in the British King's African Rifles (KAR), who imposed a simplified version of Kiswahili (Ki-KAR) across Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda under Britain's colonial control.[77] Idi Amin, like Mobutu, had a limited formal education and rose through the ranks of the colonial army before taking power in a military coup.[78] Before Amin's dictatorship, Kiswahili had served as a lingua franca in northern and western Uganda but had been largely rejected by Baganda elites and commoners dating back to the late nineteenth century.[79] Amin's imposition of Kiswahili through Radio Uganda and Uganda Television — and its continued use by security forces — caused Kiswahili to become associated with his regime's extensive political violence, particularly in Buganda.[80] Unlike Mobutu with Lingala, which had become established as the language of Leopoldville (Kinshasa) and rumba music prior to independence, Kampala urbanites preferred Luganda and largely rejected Kiswahili in Amin's Uganda, meaning that the language did not gain the positive cultural associations of urban modernity from which Lingala in Zaire benefited under Mobutu's rule.[81]

Navigating Lingala in the Kiswahili zone

After Mobutu seized power in 1965, Kiswahili maintained its position from a language policy perspective, however Mobutu's nationalization of the territorial administration and his restructuring of

[75]Musifiky Mwanasali, "Accumulation, Regulation and Development: The Grass-Roots Economy in the Upper Zaire Region" (PhD dissertation, Northwestern University, 1994), 258–59; Collette Braeckman, "Zaïre: la consultation populaire débouche sur la contestation du régime," *Le Soir,* 3 Apr. 1990; Engunduka Gbabendu and, Efolo Ngobaasu, *Volonte de changement au Zaire*, vol. 1 (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1991), 44–50.

[76]Joshua Walker, "The Ends of Extraction: Diamonds, Value, and Reproduction in Democratic Republic of Congo" (PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 2014), 88–89.

[77]Ali A. Mazrui, and Al'Amin M. Mazrui, *The Political Culture of Language – Swahili, Society, and the State*, (Binghamton: Global English Academic Publishing, 1999), 121–24.

[78]Mazrui and Mazrui, *The Political Culture,* 124; Ogenga Otunnu, *Crisis of Legitimacy and Political Violence in Uganda, 1890 to 1979* (Camden: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 234–59; Thomas Turner and, Crawford Young, *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian State* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 173–75.

[79]Medadi Ssentanda and Judith Nakayiza, "'Without English There Is No Future': The Case of Language Attitudes and Ideologies in Uganda," in *Sociolinguistics in African Contexts: Perspectives and Challenges*, eds. Augustin Emmanuel Ebongue and Ellen Hurst (New York: Springer, 2017), 115–17.

[80]Mazrui and Mazrui, *The Political Culture*, 121–28.

[81]Benjamin Twagira, "Bajeemi Urbanites: The Roots of Social Resilience in Militarized Kampala, 1966–1986," (PhD dissertation, Boston University, 2017), 40–41; Margot Luyckfasseel and Michael Meeuwis, "Ethnicity and Language in the Run-up to Congolese Independence in the 1950s: Ba(Ki)Kongo and Ba(Li)Ngala," *Language Matters* 49, no. 3 (2018): 86–104.

Congolese political culture brought Lingala increasingly into Kiswahili's area of influence from the early 1970s onward.[82] After Zaire's commodity-dependent economy began to worsen in the late 1970s, Kiswahili speakers and other Zairians needed to make increasing use of Lingala to navigate predatory state agents in Zaire's grassroots economy, and to build longer distance social, economic, and commercial networks.

We can differentiate a spectrum of reception across Zaire's Kiswahili zone ranging from more significant rejection in Katanga, to more ambivalent reactions in Kivu and elsewhere. While some Kiswahili speakers learned Lingala to adapt to their new reality, other Kiswahili-speaking Zairians, especially in Katanga, viewed the regime's informal imposition of Lingala as arrogant and oppressive. This was particularly true for older generations of Katangese. As Daniel Kyungu recalled "I was proud (*nilikuwa na kiburi*) of speaking Kiswahili and so I refused to speak Lingala at all."[83] Kyungu was far from alone. Some Kiswahili-phone interviewees used ideological critiques of Lingala to blunt its power, arguing that Lingala was the language of theft (*luga ya bwiji* in Katanga Kiswahili) or that it was impolite and lacking respect (*aina eshima*).[84] Many Katangese came to despise Lingala and to refuse to speak it (*kubouder Lingala*) as the regime went on. Contemporaneous sources corroborated my interviewees' perspectives regarding the prevalence of negative language attitudes toward Lingala during Mobutu's rule in Katanga (Shaba).[85]

Where negative attitudes toward Lingala appeared most drastic in Katanga, people elsewhere in eastern Zaire shared largely negative views, even if Lingala gained comparatively more adoption in these areas. Regarding South Kivu, Joseph Lunjwire explained that: "For us in Bukavu, Lingala was the language of musicians, soldiers, and Mobutists. But if someone from Bukavu spoke Lingala, they were either considered to be a thug, or a boastful person."[86] Lunjwire's perspective is complicated by the analyses of sociolinguist Didier Goyvaerts, who observed the significant adoption of Lingala in the city of Bukavu during the late 1980s and early 1990s.[87] Bringing together the recollections of Lunjwire and others who lived in Bukavu with Goyvaerts's analysis, we can see that Lingala in Kivu was both widely disliked due to associations with regime violence and a necessary evil that people needed to adapt to and, in some cases, to learn.[88] As the broader Kivu region spiraled into increasing insecurity and violence during and after the early 1990s, learning Lingala became even more important to both navigate encounters with security forces and secure scarce employment.[89] Amos Bagambe, for example, learned Lingala as a youngster in rural North Kivu during the early 1990s by speaking with soldiers in his area, and later writing down the words that he learned in school notebooks. Bagambe's learning Lingala as a youngster facilitated his later finding employment as a response driver for a private security company.[90]

Where some Zairians rejected Lingala as being a language of oppression or violence, others embraced Lingala as a language of economic opportunity, political influence, and national unity. "Moustique" recalled to me that growing up in Shaba during the 1970s, he and his age-mates found

[82]Interview with Prof. Denis Malasi, Kinshasa, 16 Aug. 2021.

[83]Kyungu interview.

[84]In this instance, I rely on spelling conventions for Katanga Swahili laid out by Congolese linguist Marcel Kalunga Mwela Ubi in his excellent primer, *Njia fupi kwa kujua Kiswahili* (Lubumbashi: Presses Universitaires de Lubumbashi, 2016).

[85]Kapanga emphasized the "resistance of Shabians" to Lingala. Mwamba Tshishiku Kapanga, "Language variation and change: A case study of Shaba Swahili" (PhD dissertation, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, 1991), 46; Mutombo Huta Mukana, "Pour ou contre l'unicité linguistique au Zaire?," *Analyses Sociales* 1, no. 4 (1984): 27–36.

[86]Interview with Joseph Lunjwire, Lubumbashi, 17 Aug. 2019.

[87]Didier Goyvaerts, "The Emergence of Lingala in Bukavu Zaire," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 33, no. 2 (1995), 295–314.

[88]Malasi interview; interview with Yvonne Lupema, Lubumbashi, 21 Aug. 2019.

[89]Denis M. Tull, "A Reconfiguration of Political Order? The State of the State in North Kivu (DR Congo)," *African Affairs* 102, no. 408 (2003): 429–46.

[90]Interview with Amos Bagambe, Goma, 24 Aug. 2017.

Lingala to be a gateway to possibilities and employment through the JMPR.[91] Other Zairians across the country learned or improved on their Lingala under the Mobutu regime for its benefits in terms of business and trade. Giles Acevedo, who lived in South Kivu for most of Mobutu's rule, used Lingala to build relationships with government officials and thus expand his agricultural business. Acevedo explained that many Zairians where he lived learned Lingala either to deal with soldiers, follow Mobutu's speeches, or enjoy Zaire's continent-topping rumba music.[92] In South Kivu where Acevedo lived, Kiswahili had been established as the regional language since the early twentieth century and Lingala only arrived after Mobutu's seizure of power.[93] Lingala never threatened the position of Kiswahili in the east or Ciluba in Kasai, but rather grafted onto existing language ecologies, taking on some characteristics which had previously been associated with French in facilitating networking, business, and relationships with political leaders.

Where some Zairian traders and businesspeople embraced Lingala, many Zairian parents — especially in the Kiswahili zone — grew concerned when their children began to speak Lingala at home. For these Zairian parents, attacking Lingala became a way to criticize the immoral behavior that they saw Mobutu's regime as sanctioning if not producing. Parents in Katanga who heard their teenagers speaking Lingala at home would ask: *je unafunda bwizi* (are you learning how to steal)?[94] With the implication that speaking Lingala was only a short jump from becoming a criminal. This type of discourse from parents became so prevalent that young people learning Lingala needed to avoid carefully speaking the language at home, as Laurent Itela and others recalled.[95]

"Moustique"'s experience and those of other interviewees also point to the significance of generation in understanding and explaining responses to Lingala. The Zairian parents who rejected Lingala and sought to prevent their children from learning the language had lived before Mobutu's lengthy rule. Zairians who came of age after the mid-1970s, particularly those in cities and towns, grew up with Lingala and with the extensive propaganda of Mobutu's MPR party-state, but also the increasing insecurity and economic crisis that Mobutu's regime contributed to. Both factors, the politicization of employment and the increasing insecurity that Zairians faced contributed toward Lingala's expansion. Where many of my interviewees discussed Lingala as having been easy to learn, it was particularly those of and after this "independence generation" (born from 1956–65) who gained early exposure to Lingala during the critical period of linguistic development and could thus internalize their knowledge of the language more effectively.[96] Still, we must recognize that popular responses to Lingala in the Kiswahili zone tended toward the most negative, particularly in Katanga, which experienced a military state of emergency and its accompanying violence through much of Mobutu's regime.[97]

Navigating Lingala in the Kikongo zone

Where Lingala expanded across the Kikongo zone under Mobutu's rule, people had contrasting reactions to Lingala in Kongo Central as opposed to Kikongo-speaking parts of Bandundu. For Kongo

[91] Interview with "Moustique," Lubumbashi, 8 Sep. 2019.

[92] Interview with Giles Acevedo, Lubumbashi, 17 Aug. 2019; Bob White, *Rumba Rules: The Politics of Dance Music in Mobutu's Zaire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); John Nimis, "Literary Listening: Readings in Congolese Popular Music" (PhD dissertation, New York University, 2010).

[93] Acevedo interview; interview with Nico Nassenstein, Ostend, Belgium, 4 June 2023.

[94] Kyungu interview.

[95] Interview with Laurent Kalau Itela, Lubumbashi, 12 Aug. 2019; interview with Vivien Nakamasa, Kikwit, 2 Sep. 2021.

[96] Most of my interviewees described learning basic Lingala as easy, facilitated by the language's simpler structure than many Bantu languages, they described mastering Lingala as harder. Interview with Andre Kibale, Lubumbashi, 9 Sep. 2019; Itela interview.

[97] Tshipinda interview; Mangata interview; Waruzi Bianga, "Peasant, State, and Rural Development in Post-independence Zaire: A Case Study of 'Reforme Rurale' 1970–1980 and its Implications" (PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1982).

Central, Lingala had already begun to make inroads before independence through the region's close economic integration with Léopoldville, and due to extensive migration toward the capital. Kwilu and Kwango in Bandundu by contrast, had more peripheral economic relationships with Léopoldville at independence, as transportation proved a major challenge. The primary force behind Lingala's penetration of Bandundu was the region's military occupation by central government troops in response to the Mulele rebellion. The army's extremely violent campaign to suppress this rebellion and collectively punish civilians in the region for their alleged support of the rebels, poisoned a whole generation against Lingala through popular perceptions of it as a language of violence and oppression.[98] The Kikongo zone contrasted with the other national languages in terms of its proximity to Kinshasa. The region thus encountered Lingala as much through cultural and economic integration as through politicization, along a regional spectrum based on proximity and relative experiences of Congo Crisis violence.[99] In all regions, rumba music in Lingala provided a more positive motivator to learn the language than Lingala's accompanying political position.[100]

For Bandundu, a crucial shift toward people's gradual acceptance of Lingala came with a major bridge and road construction project along national highway number one — connecting Kinshasa and Bandundu's capital, Kikwit — in 1971. While Kikwit was only 500 kilometers from Kinshasa, Western Congo's geography complicated this journey via the dirt roads due to the nine rivers that needed to be forded. Once highway number one had been modernized, Bandundu became far more integrated into Kinshasa's economic and cultural orbit, bringing Lingala deeper into the region. Popular responses to Lingala in Kwilu began to improve in the 1970s, especially among young people with limited experiences of military occupation during the Mulele rebellion, however Kikongo (ya Leta) retained its status as both regional lingua franca, and an important symbol of regional identity.[101]

Among Kikongo speakers in Bandundu, an earlier generation who survived the horrific collective punishment that Lingala-speaking soldiers inflicted across Kwilu in the 1960s retained their intense opposition to Lingala throughout their lives.[102] Younger folks growing up in the 1970s and 1980s began to see Lingala in a new and more positive light, particularly in relation to popular music but also due to Zaire's declining and changing formal economy after 1975.[103] As Bandundu became more connected to Kinshasa by economic and social connections, the pressure for young people to learn and speak Lingala increased, contributing to a gradual expansion in the use of Lingala, particularly in the region's cities and towns. Adding to these social and cultural pressures, Zaire's economic collapse in the 1980s and 1990s pushed increasing numbers of young people into Zaire's vibrant grass-roots economy through activities like artisanal mining, street vending, or smuggling.[104]

Popular responses to the city of Kikwit's 1995 Ebola outbreak revealed continued perceptions of Lingala as a symbol of regime oppression. By the mid-1990s, the state's impact on Zairian society had become deeply negative, providing almost no social services but exporting political violence and starvation-level poverty across the country. During the panic and fear that came with the world's first Ebola outbreak in a major city, Kikwit residents responded by scapegoating Lingala. In some

[98]Mabaya interview; Mundeke interview.

[99]Sindani interview; Ernest Kiangu Sindani, "Les Identités régionales et ethniques dans l'Ouest de la R-D Cong: Bas-Congo et Kwango-Kwilu," in *Les Identités Régionales en Afrique Centrale: constructions et derives*, eds. Bogumil Jewsiewicki and Léonard N'Sanda Buleli (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008), 81–137; N'kiene Musinga, "Situation Sociolinguisitique de la Ville de Kikwit," *Pistes et Recherches* 5, nos. 2–3 (1990): 363–95.

[100]Thomas Salter, "Rumba from Congo to Cape Town" (PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2007), 146–47.

[101]Interview with Taty Kabamba, Kikwit, 1 Sep. 2021.

[102]Interview with Salikoko Mufwene, videocall, 14 Aug. 2020; Kalema, "Scars."

[103]Janet MacGaffey, *The Real Economy of Zaire: The Contribution of Smuggling and Other Unofficial Activities to National Wealth* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 60–65.

[104]Mabaya interview; Kabamba interview.

instances, people attacked anyone heard speaking Lingala, and chased known regime members or supporters from the town. People saw Ebola as the regime's latest measure to punish and damage the city and region, which had given rise to military opposition in the 1960s and added political opposition through the Parti Lumumbiste Unifié (PALU) in the 1990s.[105]

Navigating Lingala in the Ciluba zone

Popular responses to Lingala's expansion under Mobutu in Ciluba-speaking Kasai skewed less negative than in the Kiswahili-phone east despite similar associations with theft, violence, and impoliteness.[106] Mobutu began his regime by following the advice of Kasaien political leaders and maintaining the provincial division between eastern and western Kasai, which the First Republic central government had enacted in 1964 to reduce tensions between Kasai's two largest ethnic groups, the Luba and Lulua.[107] One major factor that influenced Kasaien experiences of Mobutu's regime was the provincial quota system that Mobutu enacted for higher education. Kasaiens (especially members of the Luba ethnic group) had predominated in secondary education and urban areas across Congo during the colonial period as clerks, teachers, and other white-collar professions.[108] Mobutu's quota system, combined with the later collapse of the formal economy, reoriented many Kasaiens more towards trade, business, and artisanal mining. Diamond mining, which expanded significantly during the secession of Eastern Kasai in 1961–62, remained a critical part of Kasai's economy throughout the Mobutu years, providing jobs, wealth, and opportunities for social advancement through both artisanal and industrial mining.[109]

As historian T. K. Biaya has discussed, both mining and commerce pushed many Kasaiens away from education, and with that, mastering French, giving rise to the popular Ciluba expression *Cifalansa ki falanga tò* (French is not money), meaning that learning French would not necessarily make one wealthy. Biaya noted that among Mbuji-Mayi's wealthiest and most powerful traders in the 1980s, many had either a primary education or no formal education at all; they rather gained their wealth through diamond trading or importing goods from Kinshasa. In both cases, these *nouveau riche* needed to speak Lingala to facilitate relationships with the regime but did not need to speak French to succeed.[110] Kasai's relative sociolinguistic homogeneity supported Ciluba's important role, as unlike Congo's other three national language zones, Ciluba served as a first language for a majority of Kasaiens, including those from both the Lulua and Luba ethnic groups.[111] Many members of Kasai's ethnolinguistic minority groups learned Ciluba in primary schools, and spoke the language as needed. Negative language attitudes toward Ciluba among some members of these groups — like with Kanyok people in southeastern Kasai, furthered Lingala's establishment in the region.[112]

Two groups in Kasai which became most associated with Lingala under Mobutu, aside from the military, were politicians and traders. These categories often overlapped, as Zairians connected to the regime leveraged their political capital to diversify income streams.[113] Kasaien politicians — as

[105]Interview with Ruphin Kibari, Kikwit, 7 Sep. 2021; Mabaya interview.

[106]Wetu interview.

[107]Benoît Verhaegen and Jules Girard-Libois, *Congo 1968* (Brussels: Centre de recherche et d'information socio-politiques, 1969), 83–84.

[108]Munyoka interview.

[109]Interview with Andre Malengela, Mbuji-Mayi, 25 Nov. 2021; interview with Mama Tchaba, Mbuji-Mayi, 22 Nov. 2021.

[110]T. K. Biaya, "La 'cuistrerie' de Mbujimayi (Zaire). Organisation, fonctionnement, et idéologie d'une bourgeoisie africaine," *Genève-Afrique* 23, no. 1 (1985): 85–86.

[111]Maurice Muyaya Wetu and Mukendi Nkashama, *Sorcellerie, Langues et Développement à Kananga*, (Lubumbashi: Presses Universitaires de Lubumbashi, 2002).

[112]Munyoka interview; interview with Josue Misombo, Kinshasa, 30 Aug. 2019.

[113]G. Kabongo interview.

elsewhere in Zaire — needed to speak Lingala, from local up to provincial levels, to demonstrate their adherence to the regime and loyalty to Mobutu. This became especially true after the 1980s, when Kasai became the home base of Mobutu's main political opposition, the Union pour la Démocratie et le Progrès Social (UDPS), and its leader Mobutu's former collaborator, Ettienne Tshisekedi.[114] Aspiring politicians would learn Lingala in order to build their connections with the regime, and also to understand Mobutu himself, who spoke only Lingala when he led his frequent political rallies in either Kananga, Mbuji-Mayi, or smaller towns in the region. Many Kasaiens involved in business, even simple traders, also learned Lingala during Mobutu's rule to improve their contacts in Kinshasa, facilitate their travel to western Zaire, and manage the demands of predatory regime officials.

One important vector of Lingala's expansion into Kasai beyond state actors and businesspeople occurred through Kasai's extensive artisanal diamond mining. Artisanal diamond mining in Kasai first became a major industry during the South Kasai secession following independence in 1960. Under Mobutu's rule, artisanal diamond mining was completely illegal until 1979, and later partially legalized following outrage at a military massacre of artisanal miners which also precipitated the formation of UDPS.[115] This work's quasi-legal status meant that miners needed to navigate and evade state agents to maintain their livelihoods and survive encounters with soldiers or police.

For artisanal miners in Mbuji-Mayi's diamond fields along the Kasai River during the 1970s and 1980s, knowing Lingala made the difference between life and death. Beyond the outskirts of Mbuji-Mayi's Societé minière de Bakwanga (MIBA) parastatal compounds, artisanal miners worked in small groups sifting through silty dirt to find diamonds. Upon finding diamonds, they needed to reenter town, being sure to evade unpaid soldiers, who extorted the diggers for their living. Ditunga recalled multiple stories of miners, caught with diamonds, and summarily executed by soldiers. After each incident, stories spread among the miners that they were killed because they could not negotiate with their captors in Lingala. On two occasions, soldiers caught Ditunga, and although they beat him, he had spent time learning to speak rudimentary Lingala, and successfully placated the soldiers. While he needed to give them a small portion of his findings, they let him go each time.[116] Thus state violence pushed Lingala's expansion among artisanal miners and other workers in the informal economy in Kasai and beyond.

Further up Kasai's diamond mining supply chain, diamond traders known as *diamentaires* also needed to speak Lingala to navigate regime authorities and sell their diamonds to international brokers in Kinshasa. For Andre Malengela, who entered the industry in Mbuji-Mayi in the 1980s and became an important diamond trader later in the 1990s, learning to speak Lingala was a critical skill for aspiring diamond traders hoping to succeed. As Malengela explained, Lingala helped diamond traders to deal with state agents in Kasai but was absolutely necessary for negotiating with state authorities and customs officials in Kinshasa.[117] Kasai's cities — Mbuji-Mayi and, especially, Tshikapa — played important roles in the cross-border diamond exchange between UNITA rebels and Zairian authorities, for which Lingala also served as the main lingua franca for the trade on both sides of the Angolan border into the 1990s.[118]

Deploying knowledge of Lingala especially improved Zairian civilians' interactions with state agents in places like Katanga or Kasai, where knowledge of Lingala remained limited. Conversely, Lingala's ability to improve outcomes of negotiations with state agents decreased in spaces like Kinshasa, where virtually everyone spoke Lingala prior to Mobutu. If Lingala represented a source

[114]Interview with Tharcisse Mulumba, Kinshasa, 4 Aug. 2021; interview with Prof. Mutombo Huta Mukana, Kinshasa, 28 July 2021.

[115]G. Kabongo interview; interview with *Creuseur* Ditunga, Mbuji-Mayi, 26 Nov. 2021.

[116]*Ibid.*

[117]Malengela interview.

[118]Ditunga interview.

of alienation and opposition to the Mobutu regime in areas like Katanga or Kivu, the regime's extensive use of Lingala provided some measure of connectivity and popular support across the Lingala zone. We must recognize. However, that differing linguistic relationships did not change the regime's authoritarian and exploitative nature.[119]

Zairians in Kinshasa and across the Lingala zone dealt with the same roadblocks, extortion, and violence of the regime as did folks elsewhere. In places where knowledge of Lingala proved relatively rare, people could speak Lingala to improve their proximity and relationship to both security forces and the regime, as Jonathan Kitenge explained regarding Katanga: "Lingala was the president's language (*luga ya president* in Kiswahili), and as such it carried powerful authority (*authority moya ya nguvu*)."[120] Lingala's scarcity in these places made speaking it more valuable as a way to differentiate oneself from others in relations with the state.[121] Yet in places like Mbandaka, where virtually everyone spoke Lingala prior to Mobutu's rule, speaking the language provided less benefit.[122] Still, in reflecting on the decades since Mobutu lost power, people's memories of Mobutu's regime within the Lingala zone proved much more positive during my interviews than those of folks elsewhere, pointing to the role of linguistic affinity in influencing collective memory.[123]

Conclusion

This article represents an early foray into the sociolinguistic history of postcolonial Africa. For Africanist historians, there is significant work to be done in Congo, across Central Africa, and around the continent in studying divergent histories of language and power.[124] Angola is another case where research is needed into both linguistic affiliations and linguistic changes during civil war.[125] Further analysis of historical relationships between language, political power, and authoritarian violence is also particularly needed in the cases of Zimbabwe and Uganda. In both countries, postcolonial governments under Robert Mugabe and Idi Amin respectively imposed languages associated with colonial militaries (Chishona in Zimbabwe and Kiswahili in Uganda) through militarized collective violence directed at regions and people that these governments constructed as oppositional.[126]

This article has argued that Zairian experiences navigating Lingala under the Mobutu regime in Congo-Zaire had three significant effects: contributing to linguistic change in Lingala's expansion, shaping Zairians' ability to negotiate with state power, and becoming central to Congolese memories of the everyday authoritarianism of Mobutu's regime. Beyond Congo, this article shows that for historians, studying sociolinguistic processes provides us with new insights into a crucial but underemphasized difference from colonial to postcolonial regimes in Africa. We gain insight into the way in which African languages provided Africans with differentiated access to their postcolonial rulers. We also see how new postcolonial subjects needed to adapt and deploy their linguistic resources as they navigated new postcolonial states. By recentering the linguistic navigation of non-elite Congolese in our understanding of Mobutu's regime, we gain deeper appreciation for the (constrained)

[119]Michael Schatzberg, *The Dialectics of Oppression in Zaire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 24.

[120]Interview with Jonathan Kitenge, Lubumbashi, 7 Sep. 2019.

[121]Interview with Marcel Kalunga Mwela Ubi, 15 Aug. 2019; Kutemba interview.

[122]Interview with Phillippe Bosembe, Mbandaka, 16 Nov. 2021; interview with Col. "Nzete," Mbandaka, 16 Nov. 2021.

[123]Interview with Mama Marie, Kinshasa, 9 Nov. 2021; interview with Mama Pascaline Boele, Mbandaka, 11 Nov. 2021; interview with Jean Pierre Bofula, Kinshasa, 22 Sep. 2021.

[124]For the underappreciated Equatorial Guinea case, see Justo Bolekia Boleká, *Lenguas y Poder en África* (Madrid: Mundo Negro, D. L., 2001); Patrice Yengo, La guerre civile du Congo-Brazzaville, 1993–2002: "Chacun aura sa part" (Paris: Karthala, 2006); Rene Lemarchand, *Burundi: Ethnic Conflict and Genocide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 108–10.

[125]Justin Pearce, "Control Politics and Identity in the Angolan Civil War," *African Affairs* 111, no. 444 (2012): 442–65; Linda M. Heywood, "Unita and Ethnic Nationalism in Angola," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 27, no. 1 (1989): 47–66.

[126]Twagira, "Bajeemi Urbanites"; personal correspondence with Admire Mseba, 1 Dec. 2023.

agency and creativity that people exert in even the most predatory and challenging political contexts.

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