The Journal of African History (2024), 65(1), 66–84
doi:10.1017/S0021853724000173

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Between Economic Nationalism and Liberalization: Ideas of Development and the Neoliberal Moment in Mobutu's Congo, 1965–74

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(Received 23 June 2022; revised 20 April 2024; accepted 20 April 2024)

Abstract

In January 1967, under the infamous military head Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, the Democratic Republic of Congo nationalized its mining industry based on anticolonial rhetoric of "economic sovereignty." Only two years later, the same Mobutu government welcomed foreign companies and investors with open arms to the inaugural Foire Internationale de Kinshasa. Even at this crucial postcolonial moment when ideas of economic independence and self-sufficiency had become so highly valued, an attachment to — even affinity towards — foreign capital persisted throughout Congolese politics. This article explores the political and intellectual tensions that arose from the postcolonial utilization of foreign capital for state consolidation and synthesizes these contradictions into a broader understanding of early development approaches in Mobutu's Congo. In contrast to those who have framed the Congolese leader's ideology as a rearticulation of colonial logics or the authoritarian whims of an individual, I argue that these early notions of Mobutist development should be understood as a kind of "worldmaking," emerging from an anticolonial ideology that asserted Congo's economic sovereignty while simultaneously inserting itself into the global streams of finance. By tracing the Mobutu government's fluctuating relationship to foreign finance, this research offers a longer history of the "neoliberal moment" in Congo — one in which the intellectual underpinnings for liberalization had percolated in Congolese nationalist politics for several decades.

Keywords: Central Africa; Democratic Republic of Congo; postcolonial; nationalism; economic; politics

On 22 January 1983, two years after the World Bank's "Berg report" criticizing African economic policies and recommending liberalization, Léon Kengo wa Dondo, the eighth prime minister under the infamous Zairian military and political leader Mobutu Sese Seko (born Joseph-Désiré Mobutu), gathered together a group of representatives from Zairian state enterprises. After briefly ingratiating himself with them, congratulating them for maintaining the president's trust and confidence, Kengo wa Dondo vehemently scolded them for their persistent mismanagement and failures to turn a profit. While the prime minister acknowledged the practical importance of state companies — they held valuable foreign currency and created a class of entrepreneurs who could eventually lead businesses in the private or public sectors — Kengo referred to the companies in their current state as "lame ducks." Moreover, he warned that without a "rigorous execution of their budgets" the path forward might require the privatization of management or even full liquidation of the companies.[1] Imploring these executives to focus their immediate efforts on efficiency and financial

[1]Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren (RMCA), Doos 191/235, "Statement 22 January 1983 to Présidents-Délégués of Public Companies and the Representatives of the State in Public-Private Companies," *AZaP*, 22 Jan. 1983.

performance, he suggested that the parastatals operate more like "real" companies, noting his concern over the incentives for state companies: "Their dependence on subsidies, easy access to credit, tax and custom exemptions, generally cause them to turn away from effort and settle with the easiest path."[2]

In this obsession with efficiency and market logics, what might be referred to as "neoliberalism" — a term referencing privatization and market reform that has garnered extensive debate — appeared to have triumphed with domestic actors carrying the banner. But was the "neoliberal moment" of the 1980s as radical of a transition as the terminology and current scholarship suggests?[3] In reality, the groundwork for the transition towards policies of trade liberalization, privatization, and the sell-off of state assets during the 1980s, '90s, and 2000s had been laid decades earlier during the period of "economic nationalism."[4] Privatized capital, ruralization efforts, cuts to services, and internationalized markets were already central features of corporate governance under nationalized companies.[5] Tracing the intersection of finance, domestic economic policies, and political rhetoric in Mobutu's Congo ('Zaire' after 1971), I challenge the binary between economic nationalism and neoliberalism that has structured both polemical writing and scholarly frameworks on postcolonial African political economies since independence.[6] Instead, I argue that a fundamentally different vision emerged in the early postcolonial period — one in which economic nationalism and liberalization became intimately linked and set the stage for the contemporary alliance between private finance and nationalist elites in Congo and throughout the continent.

From the early colonial period of the late nineteenth century, politics in Congo — and particularly in the mineral-rich Katanga region — was refracted through a global lens that prioritized questions of capital investment, global trade, and industrialization. For over sixty years, foreign investors and colonial companies had directed local, national, and transnational infrastructure construction; they had managed certain migration activities at the border; they had controlled electricity and water distribution; and they had directed medical services. Given the Belgian colonial state's weak authority and general "abstention" from active involvement in mining activities, these investors and companies had embedded themselves in daily life while also enforcing discipline, often through corporal violence, to extract the maximum amount of labor from each worker throughout the region.[7]

With independence in 1960, however, new questions over how the postcolonial international financial order would be constituted and where Congo would fit into it became central. Thomas Kanza — Congolese intellectual and diplomat — noted the compromised position of postindependence Congo: "Since independence, one can rightly say that the Congo is economically 'an international colony.'"[8] Initially, it seemed — with Cold War politics weighing upon all international

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] Graham Harrison, *Neoliberal Africa: The Impact of Global Social Engineering* (London: Zed Books, 2010); Nana Poku and Jim Whitman, eds., *Africa Under Neoliberalism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018); James Ferguson, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

[4] Jean-François Bayart talks of the "nationalist wave" sweeping across the continent in the early 1970s, see Jean-François Bayart, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly* (New York: Longman, 1993), 85.

[5] In fact, many of the Congolese state companies continue to exist today, but their operations have been slowly reduced over the last forty years — becoming tax collectors and regulators in industries dominated by private, foreign companies.

[6] This binary is perhaps most stark in the emphasis placed on the IMF and World Bank structural adjustment programs (SAPs) discussed in the following section; Bayart, *The State in Africa*, 85–86.

[7] Jean-Luc Vellut, "Hégémonies en construction: Articulations entre Etat et Entreprises dans le bloc colonial Belge (1908–1960)," *Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines* 16, no. 2 (1982): 314–18; John Higginson, *A Working Class in the Making: Belgian Colonial Labor Policy, Private Enterprise, and the African Mineworker, 1907–1951* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

[8] Thomas Kanza, "The Problems of the Congo," *African Affairs* 67, no. 266 (1968): 58. Part of a talk given at the Royal Society of Arts in late 1967, Kanza's rhetoric here echoes that of many anglophone postcolonial intellectuals, see: Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 23.

relations — that the Congolese government would have to make a choice in its relationship to capital. It could embrace economic liberalization as in Kenya where the political elite often "collaborated with foreign capital and established capitalist enterprises," or it could push out foreign stakeholders and centralize industries in the name of calving off the persistent remnants of the colonial era, as was done with varying degrees of success in places like Ghana and Tanzania.[9] The upheaval of the first five years of Congolese independence, the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, and its broader resonance, in large part, represented this contestation over these different possible directions as political parties, rebel groups, and foreign mercenaries all fought for greater influence in the new nation-state.[10]

Eventually, the rise of Joseph-Désiré Mobutu via coup in November 1965 quelled some of this unrest and conflict, but Mobutu's government constantly faced this fundamental postcolonial dilemma over whether it could — or if it was even in its interest to — disentangle itself from the web of foreign capital. Mobutu and those around him consistently expressed their desires to achieve "economic sovereignty" and "economic independence," but what would such independence actually look like? Were these genuine commitments? Was their objective to eliminate foreign imports and become entirely self-sufficient? Or did they simply want colonial companies gone? In which case, was their goal to sever ties just with Belgium or with all foreign financiers? Taking these together, the underlying historical question of this article is: how would the postcolonial Mobutu government navigate Congo's reliance on foreign finance with the wider pressures towards economic nationalism?

From his takeover, Mobutu — influenced by both internal coalitions and external capitalist allies — avoided taking a definitive ideological path, offering, instead, an economic vision that skillfully intertwined economic nationalism with forms of liberalization.[11] In contrast to those who have framed the Congolese leader's political-economic ideology as simply a rearticulation of colonial logics or the authoritarian whims of an individual, I suggest that this early development activity under Mobutu should be understood as a kind of "worldmaking," emerging from an anticolonial politics that asserted Congo's economic sovereignty while simultaneously inserting itself into the global streams of finance.[12] In the midst of this crucial postcolonial period in which popular demands for economic independence and industry nationalization were rising, it was, paradoxically,

[9]It is worth noting that unlike Ghana where marketing board profits from cocoa farming drove state development projects or Kenya and Ivory Coast where export-oriented agriculture facilitated economic expansion, agriculture was important in Congo, but it was not the symbolic center of the economy. Years of activity by mining and concessionary companies had created a Katanga region of full-on industrial capitalism — more akin to the likes of South Africa — where dam projects, transportation infrastructure, and urban growth had been facilitated by constant capital investment and expansion; David Kenneth Fieldhouse, *Black Africa 1945–1980: Economic Decolonization & Arrested Development* (New York: Routledge, 1986), 163; Jeffrey Ahlman, *Living with Nkrumahism: Nation, State, and Pan-Africanism in Ghana* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2017); Priya Lal, *African Socialism in Postcolonial Tanzania: Between the Village and the World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[10]Crawford Young and Thomas Turner, *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian State* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 102–4; Pedro Monaville, *Students of the World: Global 1968 and Decolonization in the Congo* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022).

[11]It wasn't until 1974, amidst broader trends in the personalization of politics, that this ambivalent ideological position became integrated under the umbrella of "Mobutism" as the highly personalized term became enshrined constitutionally and began circulating in public discourse and Congolese journals such as *Mwana Shaba*; Young and Turner, *The Rise*, 43.

[12]Bogumil Jewsiewicki, "De la nation indigène à l'authenticité: la notion d'ordre public au congo 1908–1990," *Civilizations* 40, no. 2 (1992): 120–23; Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A People's History* (London: Zed Books, 2002), 141–50; Jean-Claude Hombart, *Naufragée de la dictature: De Mobutu à Kabila Récit* (Paris: Les impliqués, 2015); Reuben Loffman, "Belgian Rule and its Afterlives: Colonialism, Developmentalism, and Mobutism in the Tanganyika District, Southeastern DR-Congo, 1885–1985," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 92 (2017): 47–68. For more on "worldmaking" see: Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*; Christopher Lee, *Making a World after Empire: The Bandung Moment and Its Political Afterlives* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010); and Issue 6.1 (2015) of *Humanity* on the New International Economic Order.

foreign capital that provided Congolese officials with an avenue for solidifying economic centralization and advancing national sovereignty claims.[13] And yet, in the process of trying to prove these nationalist bona fides to the Congolese public, the government had — quite intentionally — accelerated international interest in its resources such that when the advocates of decentralization and privatization came knocking in the 1980s and '90s, companies and investors from all over the world were politically well-positioned and more than ready to capitalize.

From neocolonialism to neoliberalism: political economy in Central Africa

What do we mean when we refer to "neoliberalism"? Conventional interpretations have focused on the rise of an unregulated capitalist system based around free choice, economic efficiency, and a reduction of the state.[14] Brenda Chalfin, following David Harvey, in her work on customs and frontiers in Ghana defines neoliberalism as "marked by a systematic commitment to freeing financial flows and nearly every mode of social welfare from state control."[15] Recently, however, Quinn Slobodian has sought to upend these understandings, arguing that neoliberalism was not necessarily about liberating a "self-regulating" market from the state, but rather designing state policy and a set of institutions to protect and defend the market, trade, and capital.[16] The present project contributes to this important reframing of neoliberalism around state policy and institutions, drawing out the connections between massive state intervention and the rise of private capital.

In the African context, the story of neoliberalism, privatization, and decentralization is often refracted through the lens of international institutions and Western powers.[17] The 1973 and 1979 global oil shocks exist as a kind of tipping point where energy costs skyrocketed, commodity prices collapsed, and, as a result, state debt accelerated. World Bank and IMF-imposed structural adjustment policies and market liberalizations during the 1980s were then the harsh economic shocks to a continent that had been burdened by this accumulated debt as well as rising interest rates from Western lenders.[18] This prevailing story captures important global constraints and key intellectual trends emblematic of late 1970s and early 1980s economic thought. Yet, its orientation around external institutions and global economic conditions leaves open the question of why African governments would so readily accept or capitulate to this new world. Finance is surely a powerful drug, but it also had a much longer African history.

With the goal of accounting for the "agency of actors in Africa" in mind, Africanist scholars have advanced limited arguments about the domestication of "American-style modernization" concepts as well as the African origins of market-based ideologies and neoliberalism.[19] Frank Gerits describes Ghanaian "anticolonial capitalism" in the late 1970s and early '80s as a response to the disillusionment with state-led modernization and the failures of dependency theorists' New International

[13]Miles Larmer, "Permanent precarity: capital and labour in the Central African copperbelt," *Labor History* 58, no. 2 (2017): 170–84; Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo*, 29; Loffman, "Belgian Rule," 61; David Gibbs, "International Commercial Rivalries and the Zairian Copper Nationalisation of 1967," *Review of African Political Economy* 24, no. 72 (1997): 172.

[14]Boaventura Monjane, "Agrarian Neoliberalism, Authoritarianism, and the Political Reactions from below in Southern Africa," in *Global Authoritarianism: Perspectives and Contestations from the South,* ed. International Research Group on Authoritarianism and Counter-Strategies (Bielefeld, Germany: transcript Verlag, 2022), 222; Ernest Wamba dia Wamba, *Politique africaine contemporaine: Le cas de la République démocratique du Congo* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2012), 4.

[15]Brenda Chalfin, *Neoliberal Frontiers: An Ethnography of Sovereignty in West Africa* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 2.

[16]Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 2–6.

[17]Harrison, *Neoliberal Africa*, 38–41; Quinn Slobodian and Dieter Plehwe, eds., *Market Civilizations: Neoliberals East and South* (New York: Zone Books, 2022).

[18]Bill Freund, *The Making of Contemporary Africa: The Development of African Society Since 1800* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 220–22.

[19]Abou Bamba, *African Miracle, African Mirage: Transnational Politics and the Paradox of Modernization in Ivory Coast* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2016).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853724000173 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Economic Order (NIEO).[20] In Congo, however, the rise of economic liberalization and market-centric ideas was not so much a reactionary or oppositional movement as it was a natural outgrowth of the Congolese government's makeshift embrace of both economic nationalism and private investment.

At the same time, many scholars of Congo have utilized the predominance of foreign finance to downplay whether economic nationalism was ever important to the Mobutu regime, suggesting that Mobutu's nationalist politics were nothing more than empty, rhetorical gestures without the content to back them up: "Given the external sponsorship and backing of his coup, he understood the need of counterbalancing, or even concealing, his dependence on Western support by projecting a more nationalistic vision for the country and a progressive policy agenda."[21] These externally-oriented frameworks of "neocolonialism" argue for a deep continuity from colonialism to neoliberalism while painting African governments as merely intermediary puppets for private interests.[22] Following Kwame Nkrumah's assessment in *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, Congolese intellectual Ernest Wamba dia Wamba describes the persistence of neocolonial structures:

> We are still in the epoch of imperialism… generating a world capitalist market through which capitalist relations of production are exported to non-capitalist countries, politically, economically, and ideologically subjecting these countries.… Some countries have even lost their national independence, let alone their capacity to self-sustain economically, politically or otherwise.[23]

The Congolese scholar has made a corresponding argument about the United States and Western interests specifically "building up" Mobutu and then imposing him on Congo.[24] Reaffirmed in world-systems and underdevelopment scholars' analyses of capitalist predation, these approaches present a rather daunting picture about the inevitability of global capital and the inefficacy of post-colonial power.[25] Did external financial influence mean that the Congolese nation-state was simply a mirage reflecting ripples of state power? Almost certainly not. Such a narrow interpretation obscures the flexibility of the Congolese state. More to the point of neocolonialism, there were still real economic consequences that came from policy shifts as nationalization measures changed ownership rules and explicitly pushed out certain foreign actors.[26]

Jean-François Bayart has offered a third, synthetic approach, linking the "nationalist wave" era with the rise of neoliberalism through the lens of domestic political corruption, patrimony, and "extraversion," which he defines as "mobilizing resources derived from their [African officials'] (possibly unequal) relationship with the external environment."[27] In showing how Africans

[20]Frank Gerits, "Anticolonial Capitalism: How Ghana Came to Embrace Market-led Development Theory (The 1970s-1990s)," *Southern Journal for Contemporary History* 47, no. 1 (2022): 4–26.

[21]Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo,* 146–47. For further discussion see Tukumbi Lumumba-Kasongo, "Zaire's Ties to Belgium: Persistence and Future Prospects in Political Economy," *Africa Today* 39, no. 3 (1992): 34–35.

[22]Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (New York: International Publishers, 1966), *ix–x*.

[23]Ernest Wamba dia Wamba, "History of Neo-Colonialism or Neo-Colonialist History? Self-Determination and History in Africa," *Working Papers,* no. 5 (Trenton: Africa Research & Publications Project, 1983), 2–4.

[24]Michael Vazquez, "The Guerrilla Professor: A conversation with Ernest Wamba dia Wamba," *Transition*, no. 85 (2000): 156–58.

[25]Ilunga Kabongo, "Déroutante Afrique ou la syncope d'un discours," *Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines* 18, no. 1 (1984): 20–22; Fernand Bezy, Jean-Philippe Peemans, and Jean-Marie Wautelet, *Accumulation et sous-développement au Zaire 1960–1980* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Presses universitaires de Louvain, 1981), 82–111, 207–10; Simon Gasibirege Rugema, "La coopération au développement: pour quelle efficacité?," in *Congo Zaire: la colonisation-l'indépendance-le régime Mobutu-et demain?*, eds. Colette Braeckman et al. (Bruxelles: Groupe de recherche et d'information sur la paix, 1989), 131–34.

[26]Gibbs, "International," 171–84.

[27]Jean-François Bayart, "Africa in the World: A History of Extraversion," *African Affairs* 99, no. 395 (2000), 218; For further discussion, see Kabongo, "Déroutante Afrique," 17 and Frederick Cooper's discussion of the postcolonial "gatekeeper

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853724000173 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"have been active agents in the *mise en dépendance* of their societies," Bayart argues that the centralizing "Zairianization" of foreign assets and subsequent redistribution among Mobutu's allies of 30 November 1973 represented extraversion *par excellence*: "[a] class action…intended to sweep the patrimony of foreigners into the pockets of the politicians, whilst keeping popular appetites at a distance."[28] When those who benefitted from these patrimonial schemes, or "informal privatizations" as Benjamin Rubbers describes them, were easily able to integrate themselves into the post-1980s world, Bayart concludes: "Privatisation—the remedy favoured by the western doctors for all the economic ills of the continent—does not represent as big a break with the previous dynamic of the postcolonial State as people like to think."[29]

The connection, however, is not mere analogy or parallelism, but is rather historical and more closely tied than Bayart or Rubbers make it out to be. While there was certainly a continuity in terms of who benefitted from nationalization and liberalization, this does not explain why or how this transition from one ideological world to another was actually possible. In answering this dilemma, the following sections disentangle how nationalization measures redeployed long-standing private interests for nationalist ends, tying together the stories of colonialism, neocolonialism, and neoliberalism while acknowledging the central role of Congolese politicians in shaping these fluctuations and interconnections.[30]

I begin in 1965 because the rise of Mobutu, while chaotic, established a political coherence at the very top such that it is possible to more clearly trace shifts and continuities in ideology.[31] I conclude with the oil crisis and economic downturn of 1974 as my goal is to provide a prehistory of the "neoliberal turn" — one that operates beyond the conventional periodizations.[32] For sources, I rely primarily on government correspondence, public bulletins, and Congolese political commentary. Since my central question is about the public nature of economic ideas, these sources speak to key aspects of public argumentation, persuasion, and political action.[33] In contrast to important work on the secrecy, deception, and high-level dealings within a cloistered Mobutu regime, this approach gets at economic politics and discourse in a much wider context based around multiple political leaders and the broader populace.[34]

state," where leaders lacked the "external coercive capacity" but would do anything to maintain their position of controlling access between inside and outside; Frederick Cooper, *Africa Since 1940: The Past of the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 5–6.

[28]Bayart, "Africa in the World," 218–19; Bayart, *The State in Africa*, 85; For further discussion of extraversion and underdevelopment in Congo, see Guy Gran, ed., *Zaire: The Political Economy of Underdevelopment* (New York: Praeger, 1979); Miles Larmer et al., "Introduction," in *Across the Copperbelt: Urban and Social Change in Central Africa's Borderland Communities,* eds. Miles Larmer et al. (Suffolk: James Currey, 2021), 4–5; Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo*, 141; and Young and Turner, *The Rise*, 27–30.

[29]Bayart, *The State in Africa*, 86, 226; Benjamin Rubbers, "L'effondrement de la Générale des Carrières et des Mines: Chronique d'un processus de privatisation informelle," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 46, no. 181 (2006): 124–25.

[30]For more on the redeployment of the state for private interests, see: Béatrice Hibou, *La privatisation des États* (Paris: Karthala, 1999); and Slobodian, *Globalists*.

[31]While there was still substantial turnover in prime ministers and those around Mobutu, the stability at the very top at least allows us to narrow the scope of ideological change; Young and Turner, *The Rise*, 117–21.

[32]Gregory Mann, *From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel: The Road to Nongovernmentality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 5, 172.

[33]This focus on economic ideas is in contrast to the more cultural elements of Mobutism, such as the insistence on adopting "traditional" Congolese names and wearing "authentic" Congolese garb in the place of Western fashion trends. For more on the cultural meaning of "authentic" and "traditional" in postcolonial Congo, see: Bokonga Ekanga Botembele, *La politique culturelle en République du Zaïre* (Paris: Les Presses de l'Unesco, 1975); Sarah Van Beurden, *Authentically African: Arts and the Transnational Politics of Congolese Culture* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2015); Bob White, "L'incroyable machine d'authenticité: l'animation politique et l'usage public de la culture dans le Zaire de mobutu," *Anthropologie et Sociétés* 30, no. 2 (2006): 43–63; and Bob White, *Rumba Rules: The Politics of Dance Music in Mobutu's Zaire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

[34]Kabongo, "Déroutante Afrique," 18.

The rise of "economic independence"

Despite the end of Katangese secession in January 1963, political discontent and uncertainty persisted throughout Congo for multiple years following the country's reunification. Paging through the 1964 and 1965 issues of *Mwana Shaba* ('Child of Copper') — the Kiswahili-French monthly journal for employees of the Belgian mining giant Union Minière — reveals multiple stories of fear and upheaval among workers and Katangese residents. In early 1965, for example, several residents vandalized Union Minière's offices and buildings throughout multiple mining towns. Augustin Loucalou, a Congolese journalist, was concerned. In an article entitled "Coupables et Victimes," Loucalou chastised workers and residents throughout the company towns: "It would be logical that we strive to justify the benefits which are granted to us by respecting the places and material put at our disposal. And yet, what have we observed on several occasions? Broken window-panes, doors and windows removed, thefts, and destruction."[35] Highlighting this vandalism of company offices, Loucalou lamented that no one would take responsibility for these activities, often placing the blame on children and youths.

The violence and lack of culpability concerned the journalist, but Loucalou also saw much bigger issues at stake. As he described it, the company was essential not just to the regional economy but to the regional society: "in all mining cities [the company] proved useful, it built hospitals, pharmacies, social centers, created schools, [held] evening classes, encouraged sports activities, financed the development of recreation centers, etc."[36] Loucalou forcefully reminded readers that in this postindependence period, they were still part of a transactional relationship with the company: "As aware we are of our rights, it is crucial that we also know our obligations. First is to never lose sight that the company could restrict its services to just what the government requires of it, that is to say, much less than what it has always done."[37] Even if it meant stricter discipline, the journalist argued, residents should better respect company materials if they wanted to continue to receive company services.

Why was Loucalou so concerned with the loss of these services and protecting company property? It would be easy to dismiss his concerns as the product of company propaganda force-fed to its employees in an era when company profits were excelling. Undoubtedly, *Mwana Shaba* editors — many of whom still remained from the colonial era — influenced the direction of the publication; most articles published in the periodical were repackaged marketing materials aimed at promoting new company developments or programs. At the same time, workers' and residents' reliance on and attachment to company services was undeniable. Union Minière had long filled in for the Belgian colonial state, providing housing, energy, food, and familial services in Katangese towns. A potential limit on services would mean social austerity by what had become a *de facto* company state, devastating a region that had for years relied on these informally constructed social services.

With the chaos of Katangese secession still hanging over the region, residents like Loucalou were understandably concerned by the potential for any new conflict with the Belgian mining giant as well as any social upheaval that might accompany the curtailment of existing services. It is difficult to fully determine whether Loucalou was expressing his own views or if he was forwarding the company and editorial line, but it would be misguided to assume that the journalist had no power in shaping the contents of this widely distributed bulletin. The precarious Congolese political situation, which had originally motivated company support for secession, meant that the company needed to cultivate local favor. Nationalization or expropriation could potentially upend the company's situation at any moment. Thus, at the very least, Loucalou's article was an indication of the uncertainty and conflict that continued to frustrate Congolese residents. More generously though, the

[35] Bibliothèque Saint François de Sales, Lubumbashi (BS), Augustin Loucalou, "Coupables et Victimes," *Mwana Shaba,* no. 6, June 1965.

[36] *Ibid.*

[37] *Ibid.*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853724000173 Published online by Cambridge University Press

journalist's concern pointed to the broader material and social attachments that people had developed with the mining giant.

Ultimately, in spite of whatever popular attachments residents had developed to the company, the vandalism throughout Katanga signaled that there was clearly simmering dissatisfaction and disillusionment amongst a significant share of the Congolese population who perceived the continued presence of foreign interests. Just a couple months before Mobutu assumed power in 1965, Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah had published his book on *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*. In it, Nkrumah argued that Congo represented the paradigmatic neocolonial state with foreign financial and military interests dictating the direction of the state and country.[38] In fact, an entire chapter of the book was dedicated to discussing the neocolonial role of Union Minière du Haut-Katanga. In Congolese domestic politics, nationalist sentiments had reached such heights that Moise Tshombe, Katangese politician and the prime minister of Congo in the days before Mobutu's takeover (July 1964–October 1965), felt it necessary to explicitly promise all foreign investors that under no circumstances would he nationalize institutions with their investments.[39] Moreover, his successor Mobutu, who had been recruited as a CIA operative, rose to power with the assistance of US political advisors dating back to the days of Belgian colonialism. Criticisms of his cozy relationships with foreign powers, particularly the US, could be easily transformed into narratives of neocolonialism.[40]

In order to push back against these broader perceptions and align himself with the anticolonial, Pan-Africanist leaders like Julius Nyerere in Tanzania or Nkrumah in Ghana, Mobutu needed to show to those clamoring for a more nationalist path that he was turning the page on this previous era.[41] To these ends, Mobutu developed several approaches. Soon after taking power in November 1965, Mobutu began lambasting the scourge of foreign financial influence. The most explicit articulation of this came from the central ideological document of his political party Mouvement Populaire de la Révolution (MPR): the N'Sele Manifesto. On 20 May 1967, Congolese leaders met in the suburb of N'Sele just outside of Kinshasa to put the party's political ideology in writing. At the center of the party's doctrine of "Nationalism" — a phrase that was later changed to "Mobutism" in the 1982 reprint as party politics became further personalized — was "economic independence."[42] This was an objective in which the "MPR is fully committed in a ceaseless struggle so that the country is no longer an economic colony of international high finance."[43]

In reality, the N'Sele Manifesto was the rhetorical culmination of a nationalization process that had begun around a year prior. On 7 June 1966, in the name of asserting Congo's "economic sovereignty," Mobutu's government enacted a decree that would require foreign companies to establish their head offices in Congo if they were to continue carrying out their activities there. On that same day, the Congolese government passed the Bakajika Law.[44] Despite desires to rework colonial land grant law during the previous independence years (1960–66), the status of many of the land and mining concessions had remained in foreign hands as the Congolese government continually postponed resolving ownership issues. The Bakajika Law brought all concessions under state

[38]Nkrumah, *Neo-colonialism*, x.

[39]*Ibid.*, 200; Alvin Wolfe, "Capital and the Congo," in *Southern Africa in Transition*, eds. John Davis and James Baker (New York: Praeger, 1966), 375.

[40]Gibbs, "International," 173.

[41]Thank you to the anonymous editor for offering this formulation.

[42]Three primary discrepancies mark the 1967 and 1982 versions of the N'Sele Manifesto: the shift from Congo to Zaire; a peculiar date change for the beginning of the Second Republic from 25 Nov. 1965 to 24 Nov. 1965; and this shift in framing the party doctrine from "Nationalism" to "Mobutism." It is important to note that the personalization of party politics was still very present in the original 1967 version as multiple images of Mobutu are placed on each page of the original pamphlet: "Manifeste de la N'Sele" (1982 [20 May 1967]), 13.

[43]"Manifeste de la N'Sele," 13.

[44]Wolf Radmann, "The Nationalization of Zaire's Copper: From Union Minière to Gecamines," *Africa Today* 25, no. 4 (1978): 35.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853724000173 Published online by Cambridge University Press

administration as it "'[retook] the full and free disposition of all land, forest and mining rights conceded or granted prior to 30 June 1960.'"[45] This did not necessarily mean that concessions would automatically be taken away from their colonial-era claimants, but that the government would review land and concessionary rights to either "1. reaffirm them completely; 2. modify them; or 3. reassert completely government ownership of the property in question."[46] Yet, as Jeswald Salacuse suggests, it was quite difficult administratively for the Congolese government to realistically review all requests and fully apply the new law.[47]

Even with these administrative obstacles, the Bakajika Law was transformative and set the foundation for the nationalization of Union Minière. In October 1966, negotiations between the mining giant and the Congolese government over the future of the company began in Kinshasa. The Belgian company's administrators were reticent to transfer its main administrative office to Congo due, in part, to the large tax implications in Belgium required by the liquidation of a company like Union Minière. More importantly, though, such a transfer would mean placing the company and its assets under a new set of rules and regulations — a fact that concerned the company's international shareholders. In response to these obstacles, Union Minière outlined an agreement that would provide the Congolese state with 18 percent of the Belgium-based Union Minière's shares and rights. They also intended to create a new Congo-based company which would receive Union Minière's mining rights and assets located physically in Congo and would grant half of the new shares to the Congolese state.[48]

The potential agreement was announced on Radio Kinshasa, but based on the Mobutu government's reaction, it seems to have been met with widespread criticism. In early December 1966, the Congolese government suddenly reversed course in negotiations and made an aggressive counterproposal to the Belgian company where they demanded a transfer of all Union Minière assets to a Congolese company while keeping their existing debt and liabilities under a Belgian counterpart. The company's Board refused. Mobutu's government quickly acted to take matters into their own hands, commencing the process of full nationalization. They formed a new Congolese company in Union Minière's place while blocking all of the Belgian company's exports. The new company's board was to be composed of a mix of Belgian, British, and Congolese directors. Thousands of European employees had pledged to continue working for the Congolese company while a portion intended to return to Europe. Financially, 55 percent of the new company shares were to go to the Congolese state, 15 percent were offered to the British investment holding company, Tanganyika Concessions, and 30 percent were offered to the public. Lastly, the new administrative head was to be located in Lubumbashi.[49]

In addressing this proposal to the national parliament, Mobutu argued that the newly nationalized company would help resolve the seeming paradox of a nation rich in resources and wealth but with excessive amounts of poverty. Finally, on 2 January 1967, the Congolese government took over Union Minière's assets and concessions. The new state-owned company was named Société Générale Congolaise de Minerais, or GECOMIN with the company's primary assets valued at 16 billion Belgian francs (~330 million USD in 1967 or ~2.7 billion USD in 2021).[50] As the central

[45]Jeswald Salacuse, "The National Land Law System of Zaire," Report to the University of Wisconsin Land Tenure Center and USAID, May 1985, 9–10.

[46]*Ibid.*, 10.

[47]*Ibid.*, 10–16. A 1971 constitutional amendment repealed the Bakajika Law and established that all Zairian land and subsoil belonged to the state as property. Following on this constitutional amendment, legislation in 1973 fully restructured the land law system enshrining rules on how property could be transferred, who maintained rights, and how to manage debt and mortgages on land. The result was that the state owned all lands in Zaire; individuals were allowed to obtain concessions from them but not rights to ownership.

[48]Radmann, "The Nationalization," 35–36.

[49]*Ibid.*, 35–37.

[50]Other company assets like investments, bank deposits, and metals stored outside of Congo were calculated to be worth around 11 billion Belgian francs, but in discussions over compensation Belgian officials argued that the real value of the

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figure in this new company's iconography, Mobutu had asserted himself domestically as the symbol of postindependence economic nationalism.

Economic nationalism through foreign finance

As the Mobutu government reveled in its opposition to the Belgian Union Minière, resisting any kind of compromise in nationalizing the company's assets, they did not necessarily have the same oppositional view towards the company's external investors and connected business executives. Tanganyika Concessions, a British investment and holding company, had been one of the founding organizations in the formation of Union Minière in 1906 and a primary investor over the next sixty years. During the 1966 negotiations over nationalization, the British investment company had entertained discussions with the Mobutu government to finance the new Congolese company. In the midst of the back and forth between Union Minière executives and the Mobutu government, the Congolese foreign minister Justin Marie Bomboko had reached out directly to Tanganyika Concessions officials to offer them 15 percent of the new state company in exchange for continued investment.[51] The Congolese government enthusiastically pushed for this deal as Bomboko reassured the investment group that they would experience minimal disruptions to their balance sheet:

> The Congolese Government still remains very ready to co-operate with Tanganyika Concessions Limited.… Nevertheless we wish to make known to you that these measures would not in any way affect the production of copper and other minerals extracted by the Union Minière. All steps will be taken to preserve the prosperity of the Company and to guarantee the rights of Tanganyika Concessions Limited. The Congolese Government intends to follow the same policy as the former directors of the Union Minière in regard to markets and prices.[52]

Tanganyika Concessions eventually declined the partnership, arguing that nationalization set a precedent for what they considered illegitimate confiscation without compensation.[53]

However, the debate over this deal demonstrated the ways that, even at this seemingly decisive moment of nationalization, those within Mobutu's inner circle were able to steer the Congolese government in multiple directions.[54] Bomboko, a key figure among the Congolese diaspora in Belgium during the late colonial period and later president of the anti-Lumumba Collège des Commissaires Généraux, which had sought to keep "'communist colonialism'" and "'Marxist-Leninist imperialism'" out of Congo, was well known for being friendly to external business interests.[55] During a Congolese state visit to the US, American diplomats noted the importance of working with him in order to further cultivate American business relationships in Congo.[56] His colleague Jules Sambwa, Governor of the National Bank in Congo and part of a slightly younger generation of

company was well above these numbers, near 40 billion francs: Radmann, "The Nationalization," 37–38; Bezy, Peemans, and Wautelet, *Accumulation*, 87.

[51]The National Archives, London (TNA), FCO 25/119, "Tanganyika Holdings interests in Union Miniere," 1966–67.

[52]Torre do Tombo, Lisboa (TT), AOS/CO/UL-54, "Message from Monsieur Bomboko communicated by Monsieur Cardoso," 26 Dec. 1966.

[53]TNA, FCO 25/119, "Tanganyika Holdings."

[54]*Ibid.*

[55]Bomboko was the first Congolese graduate of Université Libre de Bruxelles and was part of a larger network of students and political intellectuals that had developed around Brussels and Leopoldville/Kinshasa; Jules Gérard-Libois and Benoit Verhaegen, *Congo 1960*, Vol. 2 (Bruxelles: Centre de Recherche et d'Information Socio-Politiques, 1961), 871–72, quoted in Monaville, *Students of the World*, 116n37.

[56]National Archives and Records Administration, College Park (NARA), RG 59/Entry 1613/Box 2626 Subject Numeric Files, 1970–73: Political & Defense, "Kinshasa 2596: Mobutu Trip," Amembassy Kinshasa to Secstate Wshdc, 21 May 1970.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853724000173 Published online by Cambridge University Press

intellectuals, graduating with a degree in economics and finance in 1966 under Roland Beauvois at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, was considered similarly sympathetic towards "orthodox economic theories and practices."[57] Others within the government, though, were sure to articulate that Congo "belongs to no one" as Congolese Foreign Minister Cyrille Adoula — an adamant opponent of expanding communist influence within Africa — stated in his 1970 visit to Romania.[58]

In the end, after Tanganyika Concessions' rejection of the proposed compromise, the government allocated 60 percent of GECOMIN shares to the state and offered 40 percent of shares to the public. Yet, many within the government had clearly been willing and eager to bring in foreign investors for financial support even if it meant compromising a mining industry owned by the Congolese state and its population.[59] The Mobutu government's openness towards Tanganyika Concessions pointed to the continued attachment to the underlying structures and institutions that had enabled colonial economic activity.

During the first few weeks following nationalization, the new GECOMIN quickly faced a massive stockpiling issue. Having alienated Belgian and European investors, the state company struggled to export goods as all of the channels for the external sale of minerals remained restricted or blocked. Each day the stockpile of mined copper increased, putting further pressure on the new company administration due to accumulated production costs and unproductive capital in the form of unsold inventory.[60] Eventually, in order to relieve this economic pressure, GECOMIN administrators signed a new agreement on 17 February 1967 with the Belgian investment and purchasing company, Société Générale des Minerais (SGM), to organize the commercialization and sale of the company's mineral production.[61] In a span of just over a month and a half, the Mobutu government's relationship with Belgian financiers had already come full circle.

Later that year, Kinshasa hosted the yearly Organization of African Unity (OAU) meeting — an event that was intended to further demonstrate the alignment between Congolese national interests and Pan-African solidarity.[62] On the heels of nationalization efforts and a 1967 monetary reform by the Congolese Central Bank, such regional outreach could further silence some of the bubbling criticism, particularly among students and scholars, of the country's close ties with American advisors and their reliance on external support during Mobutu's rise to the Presidency.[63] Alongside this Pan-African meeting, Mobutu had wanted to host an International Cultural and Economic Fair that would demonstrate Congo's accomplishments and development successes over the previous years of independence. However, in 1967, the city of Kinshasa was not yet prepared organizationally or infrastructurally for such an immense production.[64]

Over the next two years, Thomas Tumba, Minister of Land, Mines, and Energy and the president of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Kinshasa, spearheaded an effort to plan the first

[57]NARA, RG 59/Entry 1613/Box 2626 Subject Numeric Files, 1970–73: Political & Defense, "No. A-86 Bibliographic Data: Jules Sambwa," 15 Apr. 1971.

[58]Adoula, who had previously led Congo as prime minister from 1961–64, had been a labor organizer but also a part of Mobutu's Binza group. As a result, he had long navigated between the more conservative and leftist factions within Congo; Pedro Monaville, "Decolonizing the University: Postal Politics, The Student Movement, and Global 1968 in the Congo" (PhD Dissertation, University of Michigan, 2013), 287; NARA, RG 59/Entry 1613/Box 2626 Subject Numeric Files, 1970–73: Political & Defense, "Congo-Kinshasa Foreign Minister in Romania," 25 Mar. 1970.

[59]Radmann, "The Nationalization," 38.

[60]BS, "La Naissance de la GECOMIN," *Mwana Shaba*, no. 141, 15 Apr. 1967, 3.

[61]SGM had also helped with financing and commercialization for Union Minière during the colonial era and would now receive 4.5 per cent of GECOMIN Sales; *ibid.*, 3; Agence Zaire Presse, "La Géante Gecamines," *La Longue Marche*, n.d., 15–16; Lumumba-Kasongo, "Zaire's Ties," 36.

[62]The Library of Independent Congo at the RMCA, Tervuren (LIC), Thomas Tumba, "La Foire Internationale de Kinshasa," *Congo-Afrique*, no. 36 (1969), 277–81; Young and Turner, *The Rise*, 59–60.

[63]Monaville, *Students*, 166–200. The 1967 monetary reform and the power of the Congolese Central Bank necessitates its own future article, but I will simply note that the simultaneous currency revaluation and rise in tariffs echo Mobutu's ambiguous positions presented here.

[64]Tumba, "La Foire," 277–81.

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biennial Foire Internationale de Kinshasa (Kinshasa International Fair or FIKIN). Similar to Bomboko, Tumba, a "prominent" businessman himself who had studied accounting as a university student in Belgium, was well known among Western officials as a particularly important partner given both his openness to foreign business and his central role in organizing FIKIN. Within Mobutu's government, Tumba was a key part of a larger entourage that met regularly with potential business partners across the US and Europe, including Morgan Guaranty, First National City, Shell, and Mobil Oil. He also frequently traveled to the US in his capacity as President of the Chamber of Commerce to attend trade fairs. Based on these longstanding business ties and his central role in Congolese commercial activity, US Department of State officials had described Tumba as both "friendly" and "cooperative" in his work with the United States.[65]

The inaugural 1969 FIKIN — which acted as the global announcement of Mobutu's economic vision — was more than simply a moment of performative hospitality for international leaders and tourists.[66] The various symposiums and exhibitions brought government officials, Congolese business leaders, and foreign business leaders into the same rooms where they discussed direct investment contracts and foreign credit strategies that could meld with changing government policy, including a new investment code that same year.[67] In the days leading up to the fair's opening, business leaders from Congo and abroad coordinated a meeting in Kinshasa for the Christian Action Center for Business Leaders and Executives in Congo (CADICEC). At the CADICEC meeting, public officials discussed the importance of private industry in Congo. Moreover, they shared business best practices with the goal of making Congo, through private investment, one of "the premier powers of the Third World."[68] These intimate pre-FIKIN meetings between company directors and Ministry of Finance officials set the foundation for developing new financing deals for Congolese infrastructure projects over the next decade.

Formally opening on 30 June 1969, the ninth anniversary of Congolese independence, FIKIN declared that the country was open for global business barely two years after the nationalization of all land and mining claims.[69] The fairgrounds featured exhibitions from around the world, including those from the United States, Britain, Canada, the USSR, Hungary, Romania, China, Japan, Portugal, and Poland. The organizers had also designed an entire section for African countries, with a dedicated pavilion for the Organization of African Unity, which included representatives from Tunisia, Tanzania, Ghana, Uganda, and the resistance party National Liberation Front of Angola (FNLA), which, with its leadership's close ties to Mobutu, was based in Kinshasa.[70] Most notably, though, the fair highlighted a renewed cooperation between Congo and Belgium with several pavilions dedicated to the former colonizer. This included the "Square of Cooperation," which featured a building for Congo, a building for Belgium, and a joint building for the GECOMIN-SGM partnership.[71] The planners at the Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Kinshasa even aligned the close of the fair with Belgian National day on 21 July 1969.[72] International cooperation and capital lurked around every corner.

At the same time, with its immense grounds, long-term construction, expansive organizational structure, and massive exhibitions in the nation's capital, the fair itself was promoted as a

[65]NARA, RG 59/Entry 1613/Box 2626 Subject Numeric Files, 1970–73: Political & Defense, "Kinshasa 3712: Mobutu Visit: Biographic Reporting," 17 July 1970.

[66]The fair was to be held every two years alternating with a complementary Foire Nationale de Kinshasa on even numbered years, which still drew on an international audience and was abbreviated FIKIN as well; Tumba, "La Foire," 277.

[67]For more on the 1969 investment code, which offered tariff exemptions and several tax holidays, see World Bank Development Research Group, "Aid and Reform: The Case of the Democratic Republic of Congo," n.d., 10.

[68]Daniel Pasupasu, "Les sources de financement pour le développement des entreprises en République Démocratique du Congo," *Symposium National Cadicec pour Managers* (Kinshasa: Éditions CADICEC, 1971).

[69]Tumba, "La Foire," 277–78.

[70]At this time, the FNLA in Kinshasa was known as the Angolan Revolutionary Government in Exile (GRAE).

[71]LIC, "Superficie totale de la Foire," *Congo-Afrique*, no. 36 (1969), 276.

[72]Tumba, "La Foire," 277.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853724000173 Published online by Cambridge University Press

microcosm of national development success. The GECOMIN-SGM pavilion was particularly impressive. Guests entered through a low wide entrance and were then greeted by an enormous, high-ceilinged hall with GECOMIN spelled out in the middle of a large circular indoor fountain. On the left was a full-sized Lectra Haul rig. Next to the truck sat a scale model of Katanga's landscape marked by GECOMIN's mining concessions and a towering stack of copper bars. Circling these displays were smaller exhibitions for each of GECOMIN's subsidiaries and Belgian partners that carried out different aspects of the mining giant's work, including SGM (BE), METALKAT, LATRECA, and Hoboken Co. (BE). Aesthetically, each section demonstrated the scale of these operations: enormous images of open pit mines engulfed attendees; a map of global trade routes demonstrated the interconnection of copper trade across the six continents; aerial photos of the processing plant in Hoboken, Belgium showed the importance of this distant industrial partner; posts of cobalt alloys stood double the height of most attendees; and different metal cylinders hung from the ceiling, creating a forest of minerals. Lastly, as visitors exited the pavilion they passed by a three panel display of Mobutu that read "MOBUTU OYE, MPR OYE, GECOMIN OYE" — a common nationalist refrain that recentered Mobutu and his political party.[73]

The Kinshasa fair ground was populated with a number of pavilions just like the GECOMIN-SGM one. The fair's promotors argued that the thousands of foreign visitors navigating through these exhibitions would see firsthand the "successes of the new regime and the progress made by the Republic since November 1965," when Mobutu took over as president.[74] To further promote the event, the fair organizers established a series of national objectives for each year, which were then advertised domestically and internationally. With its slogan of "Commerce — Industry — Agriculture," this first fair in 1969 highlighted the need to boost domestic production and global sales of nationally-produced goods from Congo.[75] Global exports through expanded national production in both agriculture and industrial mining were to legitimize Congo as a key player in the world economy.

While lasting only three weeks, the inaugural FIKIN brought to the fore the tension at the heart of the 1960s and '70s Congolese economy — economic nationalism and the celebration of Congolese national industry alongside elaborate gestures towards international economic cooperation and financial investment. In promoting the event himself, Mobutu had explicitly expressed his desire to give "foreign investors the opportunity to participate in the economic development of the country."[76] During the waning days of the 1960s, as uprisings against capitalism, war, the state, and neocolonialism were erupting in Congo and across the globe, the Mobutu government was attempting to resolve this vexing dilemma over ensuring economic security while appeasing the nationalist elements within Congolese politics and society. FIKIN represented an opportunity to reframe the narrative of global influence in Congo. In FIKIN, the fair planners had found a way to weave nationalist discourse, a celebration of Congo's global ascendance, and an argument for the nation's industrial exceptionalism into a broader framework that embraced international investment, global trade, and business partnerships.

Coming out of the 1969 fair, it was clear that despite the gestures towards economic independence and nationalization, relations with foreign businesses and investors were of central importance to the Mobutu government. Mobutu's 1970 official visit to the United States was full of meetings and lunches with US investors and businesses, and in June 1971, Kinshasa hosted the Second Foire Internationale de Kinshasa at the designated fair grounds outside the nation's capital. Following the international success of the inaugural 1969 fair, 1971 was supposed to further promote the economic achievements and opportunities in Congo for citizens and foreign investors alike.

[73]BS, "La gecomin à la FIKIN 1969," *Mwana Shaba*, no. 169, Sep. 1969.
[74]Tumba, "La Foire," 280.
[75]LIC, "Indépendance An X," *Congo-Afrique*, no. 36 (1969), 275.
[76]*Ibid.*, 280.

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The mining company, which was renamed la Générale Congolaise des Mines (Gécomines) in 1970 and then la Générale des Carrières et des Mines du Zaire (Gécamines) in late 1971, again had their own dedicated pavilion, now with even more copper artifacts alongside scale models of installations to demonstrate the company's accelerating industrial success.[77] During the fair, the state-owned mining company aired a short, animated film of the well-known Belgian cartoon, Tintin, showing off to FIKIN visitors the company's achievements as well as the "complete transformation" of Congolese society since the last time Tintin had visited in the 1930s. Beginning in the mines of Katanga and traveling by rail and river through Kinshasa to the primary national port at Matadi, the short film highlights Gécomines's impressive refining, loading, and shipping infrastructure. Tintin then travels the world, tracing the company's global distribution networks with its Belgian partner Société Générale des Minerais (SGM) while cataloguing the various implementations for Gécomines's minerals from copper in Belgian beer production, to cobalt in the American aviation and petroleum industries, to the multiple metals used in the Japanese radio-electronics industry. Adjacent to the film screening sat a large globe which mapped these different commercial routes and implementations of Gécomines-SGM products worldwide. Together, the two companies were not simply Belgian or Congolese companies, the film suggested, but rather "global" mining companies, shaping the daily lives of people and businesses across the world.[78]

Defined by this energetic Tintin video, the forest of metallic tubes, a globe of commercial trade, scale models of factories and enormous open pit mines, images of new administrative buildings, and diagrams of electrolysis factories, FIKIN 71 once again communicated both the immense scale and global interconnection of the Congolese industrial mining operation. Expanding upon its internationalist aesthetic, over fifty different flags flew at the center of the fairgrounds and nearly 25,000 international exhibitors participated. As the FIKIN commission argued, the event was to encourage these foreign business people to discover a new market for investment while local importers established wider commercial contacts for international exchange.[79] FIKIN thus offered a particularly visible space in which, as Congolese intellectual Ilunga Kabongo describes it, the "xenophobia of the 1960s" slowly faded over time as foreign commercial agents — many recognized as colonizers of the past — became an integral part of the postcolonial milieu.[80]

Declining conditions and makeshift solutions

While land and mining concessions had been nationalized and a large share of capital investment remained foreign, what of the last factor in production: labor? Over 1,600 foreign engineers and managers had remained with GECOMIN following nationalization, but the Congolese government had made a concerted attempt to Africanize this labor force, particularly within management ranks. Over time, board members and administrators were slowly filled by Congolese administrators.[81] Yet, these changes were limited and underlying national labor conditions indicated a much wider set of issues concerning workers.

Despite strong profits from 9 million Congolese francs in 1967 to 23 million in 1969 and continued revenue growth through 1974, company executives, politicians, and citizens all noted their deep concerns over Congo's unemployment situation.[82] In June 1969, Louis Kambula, a resident of Kolwezi in Katanga, expressed his own observational concern over youth unemployment in

[77]BS, "Spécial Fikin 71," *Mwana Shaba*, no. 193, Sep. 1971; Lumumba-Kasongo, "Zaire's Ties," 36; Agence Zaire Presse, "La Géante," 15–16.

[78]Société Générale des Minerais and Belvision, "Tintin et la SGM," YouTube video, 1969, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3z1FhCj7l8Q).

[79]BS, "Spécial Fikin 71," *Mwana Shaba*, no. 193, Sep. 1971.

[80]Kabongo, "Déroutante Afrique," 19.

[81]BS, "La Naissance de la GECOMIN," *Mwana Shaba*, no. 141, 15 Apr. 1967, 3.

[82]The "Zaïre" replaced the Congolese franc as part of the 1967 monetary reform; Agence Zaire Presse, "La Géante," 16.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853724000173 Published online by Cambridge University Press

mining towns. The man described how throughout the Western mining region many boys and girls struggled to find work, clothes, and food despite many of their parents and elders achieving recent retirement. When these youth approached GECOMIN for work, they were nearly always told that there was no work and that they must wait. Company management acknowledged the pressing issue, noting that urban unemployment was not just a problem within mining towns but was widespread throughout the country. With increasing postcolonial migration to cities, company officials worried that they would soon have a serious economic and social crisis on their hands in which there would not be enough food or jobs to serve a growing urban population in Katanga. The company administrative council, the personnel department, and the CEPSI research group (Centre d'étude des problèmes sociaux indigènes) were all supposedly trying to resolve this youth unemployment issue, but the pace of industrial and technological change was overwhelming. To provide industrial jobs for these youth, the mining company estimated that they would need to construct a large number of new factories — a solution that they argued was simply not realistic or possible even in a strong copper market.[83]

In order to cope with this growing structural problem of over 5000 unemployed children of former employees, GECOMIN began developing a decentralized agricultural program, which they called "the return to the land." On the heels of the nationwide "year of agriculture" in 1968, the company aligned this new program with national ruralization objectives that were supposed to train and attract young men into the countryside to help bolster the country's agricultural production while relieving unemployment stress within the larger cities.[84] In particular, the Mobutu government had encouraged GECOMIN's Personnel Department to create a set of youth houses around the mining centers to attract those who had been left unemployed as industrial jobs shrank. The men who came to these youth houses would take on ranching obligations and agricultural work. They received plots of land, which they would then clear and cultivate together while also developing their industries, homes, and leisure activities. Cultivated crops were to be sold to traders or company hospitals with the profits shared by the residents. As a part of this "return to the land" program, the company had also developed an education curriculum that taught the residents of these agricultural communities a variety of skills: from building houses to cultivating crops and ranching animals to masonry, woodwork, and canal construction. In March 1969, 394 people had joined these agriculture-centric communities. GECOMIN hoped for 1000 residents by the end of the year with the broader goal of assisting the 5000 unemployed youth who often lived without consistent shelter throughout Katanga's mining towns.[85]

While this decentralized, communitarian agricultural model explicitly sought to compensate for the exploitation and dispossession created by capitalist change, it still emphasized an individualistic obligation towards intense work: "Its only chance of success lies in the will and love of work."[86] As such, the short-term goal for this "return to the land" program was to turn these young men into laboring bricoleurs — craftsmen with a wide set of skills.[87] The long-term vision was something more familiar to the post-1980s development objectives: to foster small rural communities made up of a collection of skilled residents in order to reduce pressure on urban mining centers.[88] While not necessarily encouraging specialization or industrial agricultural techniques, these communities would have the added benefit of providing much needed agricultural foodstuffs for a

[83]BS, Louis Kambula, "Echos de nos cités," *Mwana Shaba*, no. 166, June 1969.

[84]*Ibid*.; BS, "Une visite à l'a.s.i.c lubudi," *Mwana Shaba*, no. 151, 15 Mar. 1968; BS, "Le retour à la terre," *Mwana Shaba*, no. 167, July 1969.

[85]BS, "Le retour à la terre," *Mwana Shaba*, no. 167, July 1969.

[86]*Ibid*.

[87]*Ibid*.

[88]Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

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mining region that had occasionally struggled with food supplies and had imported food from other distant regions of Congo.

This "return to the land" program revealed the increasing economic fragility and widespread crisis among the laboring age population within Congo while also setting a foundation for early ruralization programs. Even amidst strong growth and export numbers, rising unemployment, food shortfalls, an increasing urban population, and dependence on the mining industry for jobs and revenue were all starting to show the cracks in the national edifice. The acute concern over unemployment pointed to broader shifts in the relationship between finance, company, and worker. Retiring workers were no longer replaced as the company slowly implemented new technology and management practices, especially those driven by new IBM computer systems, that would begin to cut back on labor costs within the freshly nationalized company.[89] A mining economy that, for years, had focused on providing services — such as power, healthcare, and housing — in dense population centers seemed to be shifting away from that model in favor of smaller, resident-run rural communities.

As technological change fostered rapid economic change, the Mobutu government and Congolese officials continued to double down on the nationalist elements of their vision as the route out of this deteriorating economic situation. This was, in part, carried out in the cultural domain through a program of *authenticité*, which sought to reclaim precolonial cultures to "end the cultural alienation attributed to the colonial experience."[90] In 1971, the name of the country was officially changed from Congo to Zaire. Citizens were to adopt Zairian names over Western ones with the President Joseph-Désiré Mobutu changing his own name to Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku-Ngbendu Wa-Za-Banga. Western dress — suits and ties particularly — was discouraged and Zairian or other non-Western garments encouraged.[91] And, the government continued to promote international cultural events, including massive parades for visiting African leaders as well as one of the most famous boxing matches of all time — "The Rumble in the Jungle" between George Foreman and Muhammad Ali in October 1974.

Economically, facing high energy prices and a dip in prices for Zaire's main exports, such as copper, the Mobutu government seized upon the 1973 oil price shock as an opportunity to further develop national production through state industry. In outlining the country's economic plan for the latter part of the 1970s, the Zairian government argued for a massive expansion of national oil exploitation, especially off the Atlantic coast with expanded installations at Banana and Matadi.[92] In particular, they touted Petrozaire as the future of the country and the new key to economic independence. The partially state-owned petroleum company, which became the only supplier of petroleum products in Zaire on 10 January 1974, was to be the "happy manager of an uncertain future of the modern world in petro products."[93] Coupled with the completion of the Inga I hydroelectric dam in 1972, this new emphasis on oil exploitation, especially offshore, was to resolve concerns over high energy prices and the precarity of the international petroleum shipping economy.

Beyond energy production, the government also aimed to bolster its domestic "finance, manufacturing, agriculture, transport, service industry, and scientific work."[94] This renewed commitment to the national economy sharpened around the persistent political argument for making the country self-sufficient. Zaire's economic expansion during the 1960s and early '70s had resulted in a number

[89]BS, "L'informatique de gestion," *Mwana Shaba*, no. 166, 15 June 1969.

[90]Van Beurden, *Authentically African*, 108.

[91]*Ibid.*, 108; Jean Kestergat, *Du CONGO de Lumumba au ZAIRE de Mobutu* (Bruxelles: Paul Legrain, 1986), 251; Lumumba-Kasongo, "Zaire's Ties," 38–40.

[92]RMCA, Doos 191/235, L'Institut de Gestion du Portefeuille, "Le Portefeuille de la République du Zaire," no. 8, June 1974.

[93]*Ibid.*; Kenneth Adelman, "Energy Crisis Brightens Zaire's Future," *Africa Today* 22, no. 4 (1975), 50; Young and Turner, *The Rise*, 172.

[94]RMCA, Doos 191/235, L'Institut de Gestion du Portefeuille, "Le Portefeuille de la République du Zaire," no. 8, June 1974.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853724000173 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of unique construction projects based around this ideological commitment. For example, the national construction company Foncière du Zaire consciously chose to construct the Lubumbashi Commercial Center — a large circular building divided into thirty-six sectors that allowed for flexible, street-like selling areas — using asbestos-cement sheets and aluminum materials from Simétal, Cimshaba, and Latreca in order to "promote national production as much as possible."[95] To similar ends, the government articulated a deep desire to further develop the domestic service and finance industries: "[the] financial sector is one of the fundamental elements of the organization of the Zairian Portfolio.… Our country is unable to claim control of its economic life so long as it lacks control over the banking system."[96] At FIKIN 1974, the National Institute for the Management of Zairian Assets presented a thirty-five minute film called "Le Portefeuille de la République du Zaire."[97] Showcasing a variety of development projects that the Zairian state had undertaken during the 1970s — from the expansion of Air Zaire to new oil installations to agricultural expansion — the film was also screened in different cities throughout the nation for a domestic public unable to attend the fair.[98] This film reiterated the Zairian political approach of the 1970s — a discourse of national developmental success that attempted to capture the eyes of the domestic population but also those of the foreign investors it so deeply coveted.

Even with the push for greater economic self-sufficiency and the redistribution of foreign assets to Mobutu's close confidants under the header of "Zairianization" on 30 November 1973, the government continued to give private and foreign interests a vital role in large-scale national development projects.[99] Officials from within the Department of the National Economy regularly insisted on the need for money from the World Bank and similar international organizations.[100] They acknowledged that any large state initiatives had to work closely with the agents of private and foreign capital. Throughout the 1970s, Zaire worked with financiers from multiple countries to fund dams, buildings, bridges, tunnels, deep water ports, and limited stretches of railway. The Inga I dam construction had received substantial financing from the Italian government and the European Development Fund.[101] Similar projects included: the central bridge at Matadi carried out by the American consortium IECO; a supplemental study of and construction along the main rail lines and tunnels completed by the Japan Railway Technical Service (JARTS); and the study of a deep water port funded by Franco-Belgian investment interests operating through the Zaire Maritime Company.[102]

Whether this cooperation with foreign financial interests was the result of intense economic precarity or the product of past experiences with private investment, which had helped advance state development projects, is not as clear-cut as we might assume. Proponents of Western-centric "neocolonialism" narratives have largely insisted on the precarity and economic insecurity explanation, yet the large international fairs and government investment portfolio reports suggest a Mobutu administration that was more intentionally operating in the liminal space between economic nationalism and liberalization.[103] In spite of all of the rhetoric over financial self-sufficiency and

[95]BS, "A la Foncière du Zaire: 1.500.00 Zaires d'investissement à Lubumbashi," *Mwana Shaba*, no. 210, 15 Feb. 1973.

[96]*Ibid.*

[97]*Ibid.*

[98]*Ibid.*

[99]Bayart, *The State in Africa*, 83–86; Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo*, 148–50; Young and Turner, *The Rise*, 326–28.

[100]RMCA, Doos 191/241, Département de l'Économie Nationale, "République du Zaire Mouvement Populaire de la Révolution: Potentiel Économique," May 1976.

[101]BS, "Le barrage d'inga," *Mwana Shaba*, no. 210, 15 Feb. 1973.

[102]RMCA, Doos 191/241, Département de l'Économie Nationale, "République du Zaire Mouvement Populaire de la Révolution: Potentiel Économique," May 1976.

[103]For work on external influence in postcolonial Congo, see Gibbs, "International," 172; Gabrielle Hecht, *Being Nuclear: Africans and the Global Uranium Trade* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 193; John Kent, "The Neo-colonialism of Decolonization: Katanga Secession and the Bringing of the Cold War to the Congo," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 45, no. 1 (2017): 115; Loffman, "Belgian Rule," 61; Lumumba-Kasongo, "Zaire's Ties," 48;

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independence, for this vital period of time between 1965–74, foreign investment had, in many ways, offered an avenue towards, rather than retreat from, greater economic sovereignty.[104] Yet, by the time of Prime Minister Léon Kengo's speech in the early 1980s, the government's relationship to private capital had fully shifted. What had been used to try to fortify economic sovereignty through state development began to undermine it as officials embraced the ideas, policies, and rhetoric of the Western neoliberal institutions that had been ever-present over the previous two decades.

Conclusion

In reframing 1960s and '70s Congolese economic politics, we perceive a much clearer answer as to why Congo was so susceptible to economic fragmentation and neoliberal decentralization — one that considers the role of foreign investors, international institutions, and domestic actors. It is easy to latch onto the commodity crisis of the mid-1970s, the interest rate hikes and IMF restructuring of the late '70s, and the liberalization rhetoric of the 1980s as the genesis moments for neoliberalism in Central Africa. However, this economic shift was part of a longer, domestic process. Throughout an era in which economic nationalism and self-sufficiency were so politically and rhetorically important to the meaning of the Congolese nation-state, state officials had consistently tried to orient their work around an external vision. National success became intimately tied with Congo's importance and notoriety within the international economy. Moreover, international investment and foreign business relationships had offered useful avenues for advancing state development objectives and thereby sustaining simultaneous claims of economic sovereignty. Perhaps these hopes for economic sovereignty were a mirage all along, but at the time, it appeared reasonable that the independent state could take international investment to kickstart economic activity without compromising national industries or economic centralization objectives. In taking this bargain, though, Congolese political leaders had laid the political and intellectual groundwork for foreign financial interests to seize upon any economic or political shock to further intensify existing capital privatization, ruralization, and trade liberalization.

This work establishes a foundation for better understanding why people bought into neoliberal ideas and an exploitative Mobutu regime. I hope to push back against those who imply a level of false consciousness or ideological naïveté — a notion that influenced even the likes of Wamba dia Wamba: "imperialist states have been working very hard to force the people into crisis, i.e., to work on their mentalities, impose a certain conception of the world on them…to orient the people's attention away from the real causes of their miseries."[105] More broadly, my goal has been to reconceptualize this key transition from state-directed development to neoliberalism across Africa, taking on the specific conditions, policies, and discourses in order to flesh out Wamba dia Wamba's suggestion that "national independence victories have been lending to more capitalist expansion and development or underdevelopment rather than to socialist transformation of capitalist relations of production."[106] Now, was Mobutu's Congo an anomaly due to its exceptional material endowments and historical experience with extraction? Certainly, but this is to assume that the dilemma between nationalization and liberalization was only meaningful in postcolonial

Mouvance Progressiste du Congo (Zaire), *Congo (Zaire): Démocratie néo-coloniale ou deuxième indépendance?* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1992); Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo,* 29; Lazlo Passemiers, *Decolonisation and Regional Geopolitics: South Africa and the "Congo Crisis", 1960–1965* (London: Routledge, 2019).

[104]In a way, this helps us understand why post-1970 Mobutist politics was so focused on cultural — dress, names, art shows, etc. — rather than primarily economic nationalism. Zairian nationalism always operated alongside a commitment to the international businessman, the global export economy, and an openness to foreign capital and influence. Cultural nationalism offered an outlet for the Mobutu government to more adeptly navigate between economic centralization and liberalization.

[105]Wamba dia Wamba, "History of Neo-Colonialism," 3.

[106]*Ibid.*, 4.

states with companies and industries comparable in scale to Union Minière du Haut-Katanga and the Congolese mining industry. All postcolonial states dealt with some dilemma of this kind: whether it be questions about nationalizing transportation and production industries or ones about aligning geopolitically with capitalist or socialist countries. Additionally, the Congolese case had clearly resonated across the continent with anxious Portuguese officials even casting Mobutu's policies as assuming "the dream of Kwame Nkrumah" to become the "great nationalist leader of Black Africa."[107] While Mobutu had developed a peculiar economic ideology based in a unique set of circumstances, the political-economic debates that emerged and contradictions he embraced were universal to the postcolonial condition.

[107]TT, AOS/CO/UL-54, F. da Silva Pais, "Perspectives du Régime Mobutu au 28 Mars 1967," 28 Mar. 1967.

Cite this article: Vale P (2024). Between Economic Nationalism and Liberalization: Ideas of Development and the Neoliberal Moment in Mobutu's Congo, 1965–74. *The Journal of African History* 65(1), 66–84. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853724000173