

BOOK REVIEW

Daniel Tödt. *The Lumumba Generation: African Bourgeoisie and Colonial Distinction in the Belgian Congo*. Translated by Alex Skinner. Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2021. Africa in Global History series. 428 pp. \$80.99. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-3110708691.

The abrupt end of colonial rule in the Congo marked a major turning point in the history of decolonization. Academic and popular discussion has blamed the brutality of the Congolese civil war in the 1960s in part on the unwillingness of Belgian authorities to formulate a plan to surrender authority to the Africans. The formation of a Congolese elite in the late colonial period certainly drew the attention of scholars in the 1960s, but relatively few have examined this topic in later decades. *The Lumumba Generation* by Daniel Tödt is a new consideration of the convoluted negotiations between Congolese seeking preferential treatment with Belgian officials by claiming to promote assimilation to European norms of behavior. Tödt skillfully draws together a wide range of secondary literature, particularly regarding the formation and negotiated definitions of belonging within a loosely constituted middle class. He also examines the interplay between class identity, the state, and the role of law in Belgium and the Congo.

The formation of an elite in the Congo highlighted the contradictions of colonial rule. Especially after World War 2, Belgian authorities wanted to showcase a growing middle-class African community that was Christian, dressed and lived along European lines, and was still loyal to European domination. This group was overwhelmingly male, even as a few women did also manage to receive state confirmation of their assimilated status. Although officials mocked the alleged snobbishness of the bourgeois Congolese, they also tried to monitor middle-class Congolese behavior. Some of the most fascinating reading in *The Lumumba Generation* is the rich collection of details about everyday life documented by officials determined to set firm lines between acceptable and unacceptable behavior.

Administrators did not want this group to gain political power and push aside the Belgians. Self-identified members of this group of new bourgeoisie demanded more political rights for themselves on the grounds that they had met the vague criteria set out by colonial officials. Much as in other colonies,


Belgian officials tried to slow down African demands through an interminable series of consultations and bureaucratic maneuvers. Belgian settlers often opposed even minimal reforms on behalf of the bourgeois Congolese. The creation of a new and more advanced rank of bourgeois status did not lead to new economic and political opportunities. As Tödt correctly observes, these limited reforms in the 1950s corresponded to French assimilation policies a decade earlier. Belgian officials also employed the vague notion of a common Euro-African community, which failed to paper over the continuation of colonial domination, as could also be seen in the British Central African Federation and French efforts to retain Algeria and its sub-Saharan territories at the end of the 1950s.

Congolese middle-class men turned to apolitical social clubs, such as alumni organizations of prominent Catholic secondary schools, as a means of building networks. Although these associations did not overly worry colonial officials, they ultimately provided experience for organizing that allowed their members to then form groups promoting ethnic solidarity and finally political parties. By 1958, middle-class frustration with their lack of political equality drove many elites toward pushing for independence rather than settling for favored status under continued Belgian rule. Although the main narrative ends at independence, some of the figures active in defending bourgeois status in the 1950s went on to become secondary political figures during the Congo crises of the 1960s, such as Antoine Omari and Jean Bolikango. These and a host of other aspiring elite men tried to transition toward independence through a switch from defending their bourgeois credentials to the formation of political groups based on ethnic affiliation, with only fleeting success.

There are some issues that this admirable study could have addressed in more detail. One wishes the comparative focus on global bourgeoisies could have been explored more explicitly throughout the main narrative. Another major challenge of this particular view of African elite politics lies with its sources. Tödt draws on interviews with the rapidly dwindling number of elderly Congolese or family members of individuals who tried to obtain assimilated status in the 1950s. However, the preponderance of government and missionary sources poses problems for assessing who belonged to this amorphous elite group. How does one consider the relative wealth of these individuals, particularly regarding how they could develop income and control labor? Colonial officials and elite publications generally focused on property and income from formal wage labor, especially in terms of houses and Western consumer goods. How people consumed goods was a prime concern of Europeans, not so much the ways they actually generated wealth (especially outside of illegal activities such as embezzlement). This leaves out a great deal: control over fields and labor, revenue derived through extorting income from other Congolese by manipulating their positions working for companies and particularly the state bureaucracy, and efforts to form their own networks of patronage among less fortunate Congolese.

While neither Tödt nor his sources tried to provide a materialist definition of who belonged to the bourgeoisie, examining how this Congolese middle class accumulated wealth in the 1940s and 1950s would allow for a much better understanding of the later development of middle-class status after independence. State authorities created extensive patronage networks in the 1960s. For decades, local officials and rebel leaders in eastern Congo coerced other Africans by imposing their own taxes and permits. Such techniques of raising income and controlling other people clearly must have developed prior to independence, suggesting that the venality of the first generation of post-colonial elites was not due to the alleged lack of maturity of Congolese who had grown up under Belgian paternalism (as Western diplomats and leaders often claimed).

Tödt's work offers significant contributions to the historiography of colonialism in Congo. He deftly ties together changing policies in Africa and Belgium. This engagement with a broader literature on the formation of middle-class identities is a badly needed contribution to the scholarship on the Congo. *The Lumumba Generation* is a valuable addition to the history of colonialism in the Congo and the transition to independence.

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