

Prophet and Profit: Patrice Lumumba's Resurrection in Congolese Urban Painting^{1*}

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Mise en ligne : décembre 2023

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.51185/journals/rhca.2023.0507>

Abstract

This article contributes to the study of Patrice Lumumba by examining his iconification in Congolese popular painting. I explore the ubiquity and lucrative iconification of the dead Lumumba in popular culture. Rather than illuminate his political trajectory—which has been the subject of an enormous body of literature, both old and recent—I examine the prophetic and Christlike aura that has been posthumously bestowed upon Lumumba. Although Joseph Kasa-Vubu, Congo's first president, came close to claiming the sacralized Kongo prophetic mantle, it was the dead Lumumba who inherited it and who became, through popular culture narratives and imaginary, the last link in the Kongo prophetic chain, the prophet of independence. The article highlights the conflation of politics and religion in Lumumba's canonization, which first occurred on the global stage and gained momentum there before being naturalized in Congo.

Keywords: Patrice Lumumba, Congo, independence, popular culture, urban painting, memory, cultural imaginaries

*Prophète et profit : la résurrection de Patrice Lumumba dans la peinture urbaine congolaise**

Résumé

Cet article contribue au regain d'intérêt autour de la personne de Patrice Lumumba, notamment son importance dans l'imaginaire global, son ubiquité et son iconicité lucrative à travers la peinture populaire congolaise. Il ne s'agit pas ici d'illuminer la trajectoire politique de Patrice Lumumba—un thème prolifère sur lequel un nombre considérable d'études, sans cesse renouvelées, s'est déjà penché—mais d'examiner l'aura prophétique et christique qui a fini par envelopper Lumumba de façon posthume. Lumumba, et non Joseph Kasa-Vubu, hérite du manteau prophétique sacralisé de la tradition messianique kongo et devient, à travers le discours de l'imaginaire populaire, le dernier maillon dans la chaîne prophétique kongo, le prophète de l'indépendance. Cependant, cette consécration, à travers la concaténation du politique et du religieux, ne lui est conférée au Congo que sur le tard, alors que la figure de Lumumba mort revêt très tôt sur la scène internationale un caractère canonique inouï.

Mots-clés : Patrice Lumumba, Congo, indépendance, cultures populaires, peinture urbaine, mémoire, imaginaires culturels

¹ A shorter and preliminary version of this article was delivered during an invited lecture for the exhibit "A Congo Chronicle: Patrice Lumumba in Urban Art" at the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, New York, March 2, 2006.



“Mort, Lumumba cesse d'être une personne pour devenir l'Afrique tout entière [...] en lui, tout le continent meurt pour ressusciter”—Jean-Paul Sartre²

“Que le monde nouveau naisse dans le sang ou dans le dialogue, l'humanité s'achemine vers une ère nouvelle, l'ère de Lumumba”—López Alvarez³

The passion of Patrice Lumumba looms disproportionately large considering his rather meteoric and ephemeral political career. His life and legacy have generated a significant body of literature that reflects the impact of his tragic trajectory on Congo's postcolonial moment.⁴ So short-lived, yet so momentous, was Lumumba's rise and fall that his life and vision have never faded from Congolese peoples' memory but remained etched deeply in their collective consciousness. There is no other Congolese leader that has plowed such a deep furrow into people's imaginary. Recently, Lumumba has appeared in memorial sites, including a statue installed in Kinshasa, on the thoroughfare that bears his name, and a mausoleum in Shilatembo, a neighborhood in Lubumbashi (formerly Elisabethville), the city where he met his demise at the merciless hands of Belgian operatives. While these installations mark Lumumba's overdue ubiquity in Congo's urban-cape, his pervasiveness in popular arts—which has been recently studied under the label “Lumumba in the Arts”⁵—signals his haunting (re)apparition in collective imaginaries and ascension to sainthood. He has eclipsed his two erstwhile rivals, Joseph Kasa-Vubu and Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, to become Congo's true prophet of independence. Of all the genres, perhaps urban visual arts, especially “popular” painting, represent the most ubiquitous site of Lumumba's iconification, a genre that has contributed to his ascent to sainthood. This article contributes to the existing literature on Patrice Lumumba by examining his iconification in urban visual arts.

The historiography of “Lumumba in the Arts” has significantly enhanced our understanding of Lumumba on multiple fronts. First, it has evinced Lumumba's rendering in the arts as both a subject and an icon⁶. Next, his Janus-faced iconography has also oscillated from demonization to canonization to finally settle, after his death, on an array of beatific images, not least of which is his Christlike depiction. This interdisciplinary literature, as De Groof further articulates, has also shown how “the past can be reorganised in the present through the production of images”⁷. Yet, the “Lumumba in the Arts” literature has steered clear of examining the ways in which Lumumba has been reimagined by Congolese artists not only as the prophet of Congo's independence, but also as a Kongo prophet. Through a critical analysis of Congolese popular painting, this article argues that Lumumba has been reimagined as an avatar in the Kongo prophetic lineage while being simultaneously invested with a Christlike aura. The article further examines Lumumba's prophetic and preternatural aura not only by imputing it to the tragic circumstances that led to his death but also by revealing how it occluded his checkered political career, thus inviting a more nuanced interpretation of Lumumba as a global iconic figure. Given that these paintings emanate not from the “people”, in

² Van Lierde Jean (1963), *La pensée politique de Patrice Lumumba (préfacée par Jean-Paul Sartre)*, Paris, Présence africaine, pp. XLIV-XLV.

³ López Alvarez Luis (1964), *Lumumba ou l'Afrique frustrée*, Paris, Éditions Cujas, p. 196.

⁴ de Vos Pierre (1961), *Vie et mort de Patrice Lumumba*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy ; Clément Pierre (1962), “Patrice Lumumba (Stanleyville 1952-1953)”, *Présence africaine*, 40, pp. 57-78; López A. L., *Lumumba ou l'Afrique frustrée...*, *op. cit.*; Césaire Aimé (1967), *Une saison au Congo*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil; Heinz G. and Donnay H. (1970), *Lumumba: The Last Fifty Days*, New York, Grove Press; Govender Robert (1971), *The Martyrdom of Patrice Lumumba*, London, Neillgo; Kanza Thomas (1978), *Conflict in the Congo: The Rise and Fall of Lumumba*, Middlesex, Penguin Books; Benot Yves (1989), *La mort de Lumumba ou la tragédie congolaise*, Paris, Éditions Chaka; Willame Jean-Claude (1990), *Patrice Lumumba : la crise congolaise revisitée*, Paris, Karthala; de Witte Ludo (2000), *L'Assassinat de Lumumba*, Paris, Karthala; Nzongola-Ntalaja Georges (2014), *Patrice Lumumba (illustrated, reprinted)*, Athens, Ohio University Press; Gerard Emmanuel and Kuklick Bruce (2015), *Death in the Congo: Murdering Patrice Lumumba*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; Zeilig Leo (2015), *Lumumba: Africa's Lost Leader*, London, Haus Publishing; Ramondy Karine (2020), *Leaders assassinés en Afrique centrale 1958-1961: Entre construction nationale et régulation des relations internationales*, Paris, L'Harmattan; Tödt Daniel (2021), *The Lumumba Generation: African Bourgeoisie and Colonial Distinction in the Belgian Congo*, Berlin, De Gruyter; Reid Stuart A. (2023), *The Lumumba Plot: The Secret History of the CIA and a Cold War Assassination*, New York, Knopf.

⁵ For the most recent and comprehensive iteration, see de Groof Matthias (ed.) (2020), *Lumumba in the Arts*, Leuven, Leuven University Press.

⁶ See de Groof M., *Lumumba in the Arts...*, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁷ de Groof M., *Lumumba in the Arts...*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

the way Karin Barber unpacks this term in her distinction between “popular arts” and “people’s arts⁸”, and because of their (global rather than local) ectopic niche market⁹, this article opines that the Christlike passion of Lumumba has been appropriated and commodified in a way that generates profit for its promoters. The currency it has gained, this article further argues, recasts his death in a somewhat revisionist light that further obfuscates the nebulous international plot that shattered Congo’s postcolonial future.

(K)ongo Prophets

Scholars trace the beginnings of (K)ongo prophetism to Beatrix Kimpa Vita, the “saviour of Congo¹⁰”. This section revisits the (K)ongo prophetic genealogy and establishes Lumumba as its first postcolonial avatar. Congo gave birth to conjoined twins, a prophetic tradition and a profiteering system writ large, which in turn engendered horror and humanity, to borrow from Hunt¹¹, and produced a culture of resistance to state oppression that remains sequenced in Congolese people’s DNA¹². The prophetic tradition or, simply put, prophethood in Congo’s history seems to have been bestowed upon one people, the Bakongo people. In the 18th century, Kongo prophetess Beatrix Kimpa Vita led a Christian revivalist movement in Angola and stood up against foreign domination represented by the powerful European Capuchin priests. Although she had been baptized a Catholic, she embraced the *marinda* traditional cult following her initiation and claimed to be possessed by the spirit of Saint Anthony¹³. Her ambition was to rebuild Kongo dia Ntotila from its ashes. She railed against the pope, the Catholic Church, and accused white missionaries of destroying the land because many of them participated in the slave trade in order to fund their missionary operations in the Kongo and abroad. While some scholars situate Kimpa Vita’s vision at the intersectionality of an incipient political order and religious syncretism¹⁴, Thornton and Axelson go a step further, arguing that Kimpa Vita possessed all the traits of a harbinger of larger developments that would transcend religion and cannot be limited to the temporal and spatial confines of Kongo dia Ntotila. According to Thornton, “she prefigures modern African democracy movements as much as she can be seen as an antislavery figure¹⁵” while for Axelson (as if he was referring to Lumumba) “[i]t is not impossible that she came close to offering the Congo a new future¹⁶”. “The outstanding feature of the doctrine taught by Kimpa Vita¹⁷”, Axelson further opines, unintentionally drawing another parallel with Lumumba, “is its emphasis on the intrinsic worth and dignity of the Congolese and their country¹⁸”.

Following the fragmentation of Kongo dia Ntotila, the Christian prophetic tradition waned in Congo until its most momentous climax with the powerful ministry of Simon Kimbangu (1887-1951) in the early 1920s¹⁹. Moments of heightened European intervention, with its attendant racial hierarchies, missionary activities, and land and labor extractions, tended to generate radical prophetic responses in the Kongo region with varied degrees of political overtones. Kimbangu’s prophetic movement echoed Kimpa Vita’s millenarism and represented, perhaps, the most widespread and last-ditch effort in the twentieth century to

⁸ Barber Karin (1987), “Popular Arts in Africa”, *African Studies Review*, 30(3), pp. 1-78.

⁹ Jewsiewicki Bogumil (1999), “Popular Painting in Contemporary Katanga: Painters, Audiences, Buyers, and Sociopolitical Contexts”, in *A Congo chronicle: Patrice Lumumba in urban art*, New York, Museum for African Art, p. 18.

¹⁰ Axelson Sigbert (1970), *Culture Confrontation in the Lower Congo*, Gummessons, Falköping, p. 136.

¹¹ Hunt Nancy (2016), *A Nervous State: Violence, Remedies, and Reverie in Colonial Congo*, Durham, Duke University Press.

¹² Gondola Didier (2020), “Résistances au Congo belge : comment libérer un trop-plein colonial aux multiples relents?”, in I. Goddeeris, A. Lauro & G. Vanthemsche (eds.), *Le Congo colonial : une histoire en questions*, Bruxelles, Renaissance du Livre, pp. 239-251.

¹³ Thornton John K. (1998), *The Kongolese Saint Anthony: Donna Beatrix Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1684-1706*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press; Mudimbe Valentin-Yves (1997), *Tales of Faith: Religion as Political Performance in Central Africa*, London & Atlantic Highlands, NJ, The Athlone Press, p. 71.

¹⁴ Kouvouama Abel (2018), *Une histoire du messianisme. Un « monde renversé »*, Paris, Karthala, p. 40.

¹⁵ Thornton J. K., *The Kongolese Saint Anthony...*, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

¹⁶ Axelson S., *Culture Confrontation in the Lower Congo...*, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

¹⁷ On July 2, 1706, Kimpa Vita was burned alive at the stake as a heretic along with another Kongo prophetess, Appolonia Mafuta Fumaria, whose teachings had inspired her movement. The two were by no means the first figures in the long Kongo prophetic lineage. Almost a century before they burst onto the scene, Francisco Kassola’s thaumaturgic qualities and gift for healing won him unstinting praises from Portuguese missionaries.

¹⁸ Axelson S., *Culture Confrontation in the Lower Congo...*, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

¹⁹ For a critical review of sources and the literature about Kimbangu, see Vellut Jean-Luc (ed.) (2005), *Simon Kimbangu. 1921 : de la prédication à la déportation. Les Sources*, Bruxelles, Académie Royale des Sciences d’Outre-Mer.

challenge the colonial order. This being the case, it seemed a foregone conclusion, a befitting consecration, that it was a Kongo politician who would emerge at the threshold of independence to take up Kimbangu's prophetic mantle.

In the late 1950s, it was widely believed that Joseph Kasa-Vubu, the leader of Congo's leading political party, the Alliance des Bakongo (ABAKO), would assume a prominent role as the country's independence prophet. Akin to his two predecessors, Kasa-Vubu belonged to the Kongo group and seemed poised to inherit Kimbangu's prophetic aura. After all, it was Kasa-Vubu who first demanded "*Indépendance immédiate*". It was Kasa-Vubu whom the colonial administration lambasted as a radical leader bent on thwarting Belgium's policy of incrementalism and gradual decolonization. It was, again, Kasa-Vubu who found himself in the crosshairs of political repression and bore the brunt of colonial ire following the January 1959 insurrection that shattered Belgian complacency. Yet, Kasa-Vubu's promising prophethood quickly fizzled out; his aura dimmed and faded, eclipsed by the rise and especially the fall of Patrice Lumumba. Lumumba not only emerged as the prophet of Congo's independence but was also recognized as the "prophet of Négritude"²⁰, as Sartre wrote in 1963.

Early in his career, Lumumba seemed to have been an accommodationist of some sort, currying favor with the colonial authorities, and giving his full-throated support to the Belgian colonial œuvre. Acting as a model *évolué* in a "model colony" served his ambition well, as the young Lumumba, freshly minted from his *immatriculé* status²¹ in September 1954, jockeyed for a leadership position among Stanleyville's "African bourgeoisie in the making"²², the so-called *évolués*. In several of his writings before 1958, he had avowedly acclaimed Leopold II as a "great builder and liberator" who freed Congolese from "atavistic fear"²³, "famines", and "epidemics". He sycophantically extolled the work of Belgian colonizers who not only "developed our intelligence" but also "enabled our soul to evolve"²⁴. Most importantly, Lumumba's encomium heralding a harmonious "Belgian Congolese Community", which he committed to his prison notes, posthumously published as *Le Congo terre d'avenir est-il menace ?*, came at a time when Kasa-Vubu and other leaders had only contempt for any compromise that could result in a colonial aggiornamento. Oddly enough, despite being the first radical Congolese politician to defy Belgian gradualism and demand *indépendance immédiate*, Kasa-Vubu—elected ABAKO president in 1954 before ascending to the country's presidency in 1960—did not follow his illustrious forerunners to become the last avatar of Kongo prophetism. By pegging his political fortune to federalism, albeit shorn of its secessionist pitfalls, and by throwing his lot with his powerful Kongo base, Kasa-Vubu lost momentum, thus failing to capitalize on the groundswell of popularity he had garnered early on²⁵. He would be overshadowed by his prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, not just politically but in the prophetic realm as well.

All told, Lumumba's meteoric rise and passion relegated Kasa-Vubu to the recesses of collective memory²⁶. While the latter is only vaguely remembered as a once-firebrand who quickly devolved into a milque-toast figure, a spineless leader who dawdled when faced with the challenges of Congo's independence, unable to turn the tide of the "Congo Crisis", the former has been placed on a prophetic pedestal despite his foibles. While this article makes the case that Lumumba, rather than Kasa-Vubu, embodied Kongo's prophetic tradition, it also argues that his lack of a strong ethnic base—as opposed to Kasa-Vubu's reliance on the powerful Kongo group—played out to his advantage, perhaps not in terms of electoral dividends

²⁰ Van Lierde J., *La pensée politique de Patrice Lumumba...*, *op. cit.*

²¹ Registration as an *immatriculé* gave its Congolese recipient (along with his wife and children) similar rights to a European resident. In 1958, out of a population of nearly 14 million, only 217 people—all Congolese males—enjoyed the status of *immatriculés*.

²² Tödt D., *The Lumumba Generation...*, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

²³ de Vos P., *Vie et mort de Patrice Lumumba...*, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

²⁴ Rubango Nyunda ya (1997), "Patrice Lumumba en son temps : un modéré ?", in P. Halen and R. János (eds.), *Patrice Lumumba entre Dieu et diable. Un héros africain dans ses images*, Paris, L'Harmattan, p. 299.

²⁵ So portentous was this reversal of fortune that it has become customary to remind readers that Kasa-Vubu remained the marked man (*l'homme à abattre*) even as late as January 1959 because, as Benot and others have noted, he was the first Congolese leader to publicly demand "*émancipation immédiate*", Benot Y., *La mort de Lumumba...*, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

²⁶ There is, for instance, not a single biography of Kasa-Vubu in the English language. We owe the first French biography of Kasa-Vubu to Gilis Charles-André (1964), *Kasa-Vubu au cœur du drame congolais*, Bruxelles, Éditions Europe-Afrique; yet, the bulk of the written accounts about Congo's first president came from his younger daughter who made it her lifelong mission to promote the legacy of her late father: M'Poyo Kasa-Vubu Justine (2020), *Kasa-Vubu: Biographie d'une indépendance*, Bruxelles, Samsa Éditions. In the same hagiographic vein, see Ngoma-Binda Phambu (2022), *Kasa-Vubu Président du Congo: Idées et vertus d'un homme d'État modèle*, Paris, Paari.

(his staunch nationalism did that), but in the race to prophethood²⁷. Without a large ethnic base insistent on curtailing his nationalistic vision, Lumumba was destined to attain prophetic heights. In a strange volte-face, Lumumba became the prophet of independence not because he “invented independence²⁸”, as Sartre observed, but because his radicalization peaked at a time when the clamor for a unitary state became a leit-motif that required a finely-tuned nationalistic instrument that Kasa-Vubu’s ABAKO could not provide²⁹. It was precisely this nationalist vision, coupled with his gruesome death at the crest of the Cold War, that catapulted him into the international pantheon of martyrs and prophets.

Frayed Prophet

Patrice Lumumba lived and died during a decade that boasted outstanding figures that followed a political trajectory similar to his, most notably Martin Luther King, Jr. and Che Guevara. Not only do we remember them as secular figures that shaped their respective epoch, but we also memorialize them through recurrent hagiographic representations, partly because their untimely death secured their place in popular memory by hallowing their words. Just like Che Guevara and Martin Luther King, Lumumba died young as a beleaguered and embattled leader. Lumumba too, like them, fell at the hands of his enemies and, like them, was immediately vaunted as a post-colonial “martyr”. But there are also salient differences between Lumumba and his American counterparts, the most significant being the ephemerality of his tenure. Given his short-lived government of just over two months, liberating his people or even setting in motion their mobilization around lofty ideas was hardly possible. Lumumba stands out not for what he accomplished but for the blunders that led to his downfall, most hauntingly his impromptu Independence-Day speech. No one better captured the momentousness and audacity of Lumumba’s speech than Ludo De Witte. As he explains, Lumumba’s speech was a singular and foundational event³⁰. It was indeed an *e-pluribus-unum* manifesto that shifted the ground and sent tremors across the entire African continent. There, in front of the Belgian King, stood a Congolese leader, a prime-minister-in-waiting, the first ever to address the entire nation. The speech created a domino effect that started with the secession of Katanga and South Kasai, Congo’s two richest provinces, the intervention of U.N. forces, Lumumba’s dismissal from his position of prime minister, and the rise of Mobutu.

Another fateful mistake was Lumumba’s decision not only to keep Mobutu within his inner circle, against the advice of some of his closest and most loyal advisers, but also to appoint him chief of staff of Congo’s national army. This decision had monumental consequences for his political career and ultimately led to his assassination. Lumumba made Mobutu. The latter played the role of the “guardian angel³¹” to the hilt, especially when Lumumba visited Belgium, but when he got his cue from Lumumba’s foreign enemies, he did not hesitate to stab him in the back. Lumumba armed the very hand that would strike him. Finally, Lumumba’s apocalyptic vision—that only by sacrificing his life could he save Congo from civil war and foreign control—never came to pass. In essence, Patrice Lumumba was saved and redeemed by his untimely death. Death gave him a second, flawless life and hoisted him in the pantheon of mythical heroes. As I argue in the next section, the iterations of “Lumumba Lives!” allowed luminaries and less prominent activists, scholars, and artists to beatify the Congolese leader. Malcom X joined in the paean during his 1964 speech celebrating the founding of the organization of Afro-American Unity, halting Lumumba and calling him the “greatest Black man who ever walked the African continent³²”.

The dead Lumumba registered a type of devotion that went beyond mere affective bond and ideological filiation. Although confined to the fringes, a cult of the dead Lumumba took hold in a few areas in Congo, whereby Lumumba rapidly underwent beatification. He became the central figure of a trinity in a new Kitawala splinter group that emerged in the Kisangani area following his death. As Nicole Eggers describes in her study of Kitawala, Lumumba continues to be celebrated in the Fizi territory of South Kivu among the

²⁷ Some scholars, namely René Lemarchand and Luc de Heusch, have even argued that Lumumba was no longer a “tribal man” and that his nationalistic vision had eroded his ethnic loyalty to the Batetela people; see Turner Thomas (2000), *Ethnogenèse et nationalisme en Afrique centrale. Aux racines de Patrice Lumumba*, Paris, L’Harmattan, p. 44.

²⁸ Van Lierde J., *La pensée politique de Patrice Lumumba...*, op. cit., p. IX.

²⁹ This is consonant with Tödt’s argument that Lumumba’s radicalization occurred only after the founding of the MNC, Congo’s main nationalist party. Tödt D., *The Lumumba Generation...*, op. cit., pp. 334-335.

³⁰ De Witte L., *L’Assassinat de Lumumba...*, op. cit., p. 34.

³¹ Kanza T., *Conflict in the Congo...*, op. cit., p. 112.

³² X Malcom (1970), *By Any Means Necessary: Speeches, Interviews, and a Letter by Malcom X*, New York, Pathfinder Press, p. 85.

Église du Dieu de nos Ancêtres (EDAC), with hundreds of devotees gathering every year to erect altars, make sacrifices in his name, and summon “his divine guidance and his *power* to heal their communities of the various spiritual, economic, and political afflictions plaguing them³³”. Another example comes from Kikwit, where de Boeck observed in the late 1990s a cult of the dead Lumumba among a local branch of Bundu dia Kongo. Their appropriation of the dead Lumumba went beyond the veneration of “a model ancestor”. Not only did he serve as a *porte-parole* of *Nzambi ya Mpungu*, but he also vicariously embodied the power of this Kongo ancestral God³⁴.

Figure 1: “Lumumba et Kimbangu dans les nuages” by Burozi. Lubumbashi 1997



Source : HO.2013.57.121. Collection: RMCA Tervuren. © RMCA Tervuren. Reprinted with permission

The late 1990s also marked the apparition of Lumumba’s adoration in popular painting. Burozi’s 1997 “*Lumumba et Kimbangu dans les nuages*” (Lumumba and Kimbangu in the clouds) epitomizes this genre. It is as visually stunning as it is revelatory in its concatenation of the two figures. While the bespectacled Lumumba appears in his statesman attire, Kimbangu’s beatified presence and face—furrowed by decades of internment and torture—seem to lend a preternatural aura to the prime minister. There is every reason to believe, strange as it may sound, that Burozi intended to portray Lumumba not just as Congo’s prophet but also as a Kongo prophet. I will return to the exploration of this popular genre in the last section of this article to unpack its genealogy and fascination with Lumumba’s way of the cross.

No Country for A Dead Prophet

Ironically, the decades that followed Lumumba’s death witnessed a curious act of prestidigitation by the man who most profited from his death, not Joseph Kasa-Vubu, but Joseph-Désiré Mobutu. Mobutu first outmaneuvered and finally neutered both Kasa-Vubu and his prime minister, Moïse Tshombe, in a lopsided

³³ Eggers Nicole (2023), *Unruly Ideas: A History of Kitawala in the Congo*, Athens, Ohio University Press, p. 179. For additional examples of the veneration of Lumumba among the Kitawalists, see also Mwene-Batende Gaston (1982), *Mouvements messianiques et protestation sociale: le cas du Kitawala chez les Kumu du Zaïre*, Kinshasa, Faculté de Théologie catholique.

³⁴ De Boeck Filip (1998), “Beyond the Grave: History, Memory and Death in Postcolonial Congo/Zaire” in R. Werbner (ed.), *Memory and the Postcolony*, London, Zed Books, p. 36.

tug-of-war whose denouement was never in doubt, considering he had been anointed by the West and enjoyed strong backing from the CIA³⁵. Mobutu then staged his second military coup on November 24, 1965 and assumed the presidency. Dealing with a country still reeling from a botched decolonization process and the haunting specter of Lumumba, Mobutu sought to both contain and hijack the spread of Lumumbism as well as to dim Lumumba's nationalistic aura by disassociating Lumumba from the nationalist ideology and struggle. In June 1966, after less than a year at the helm of the new country, he orchestrated a newfangled public relations campaign to rehabilitate Lumumba as a means to ingratiate himself with progressive African countries where Lumumba's popularity remained at an all-time high. First, Lumumba was declared a "national hero" and one of Kinshasa's main thoroughfares, which had borne the name of Leopold II, was remained after him. Mobutu took advantage of President Julius Nyerere's visit to Kinshasa in November 1967 to break the ground for the construction of an ambitious project, the Interchange Tower of Limété (*Tour de l'échangeur de Limété*), located at one of the major intersections of the newly-christened Boulevard Lumumba. Construction began in earnest two years later and plodded along in fits and starts until the whole project came to a standstill in 1974 without the erection of the Lumumba monument. Then, in May 1968, a new banknote of 20 Makuta with Lumumba's effigy was unveiled, only to be "withdrawn from circulation", leaving Mobutu as the only face on Congo's currency³⁶.

Once Mobutu managed to secure a firm grip on Congolese politics and society, he unmoored his regime from Lumumba's uncompromising nationalistic ethos. As a result, Lumumba's *image* was no longer publicly cultivated in its entanglements of materiality, visuality, and sonicity³⁷. By that, I also mean that Lumumba's imaginary rather than his memory evanesced in Congolese official iconography much in the same way that Michel Rolph Trouillot vividly described the deliberate process of erasing Toussaint L'Ouverture from Western historiography³⁸. This is what one may call the "second (official) death" of Patrice Lumumba, consistent with Jewsiewicki's affirmation that he had been banished from the "political life and public space"³⁹—a scheme engineered by the same man who betrayed him and actively plotted to sideline him politically, pursuing nothing short of his physical elimination.

In a stark contrast to Lumumba's fall into a well-orchestrated oblivion in Congo, his *image* never lost its luster abroad. Following the news of his murder, his life and pan-Africanist vision of an independent Africa have been lauded and celebrated the world over in a wide variety of media. Pierre Petit is right in reminding us of the parallel between Lumumba's ubiquitous imagery and imaginary in popular culture and his apparition in state-sanctioned material, what Petit terms "official miniatures". From numismatic and philatelic issues and reissues to postcards, badges, medals, statues and official portraits, Lumumba has generated a rare fervor in "a more diversified range of iconography than Mandela, another global African icon"⁴⁰. Indeed, one can make the argument that the global beatification of Lumumba gathered momentum abroad rather than in Congo itself where, as I mentioned above, the cult of the dead Lumumba remained confined to marginalized offshoot religious groups with no mainstream appeal. Undeterred by censorship under Mobutu's regime⁴¹, it percolated here and there, through people's imaginary, buoyed by a nostalgia about the future

³⁵ Weissman Stephen R. (2014), "What Really Happened in Congo: The CIA, the Murder of Lumumba, and the Rise of Mobutu", *Foreign Affairs*, 93(4), pp. 14-24.

³⁶ Petit Pierre (2016), *Patrice Lumumba. La construction d'un héros national et panafricain*, Bruxelles, Académie royale de Belgique, p. 77 ; Omasombo Tshonda Jean (2020), "Lumumba, a Never-Ending Tragedy and the Unfulfilled Mourning Process of Colonisation", in M. de Groof (ed.), *Lumumba in the Arts... op. cit.*, p. 52.

³⁷ Popular songs associated with Lumumba, most notably the storied "Indépendance Cha Cha" by African Jazz, disappeared from the official repertoire during independence-day celebrations. They were replaced by musical paeans to Mobutu, the so-called "*animation politique et culturelle*". See White Bob (2008), *The Politics of Dance Music in Mobutu's Zaire*, Durham and London, Duke University Press; Covington-Ward Yolanda (2016), *Gesture and Power: Religion, Nationalism, and Everyday Performance in Congo*, Durham and London, Duke University Press; and Onyumba Tshonga (2001), "Musique et évolution politique en R.D. Congo", *AnnalesEquatoria*, 22, pp. 7-20.

³⁸ Trouillot Michel Rolph (1995), *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, New York, Beacon Press.

³⁹ Jewsiewicki Bogumil (1996), "Corps interdits. La représentation chrétienne de Lumumba comme rédempteur du peuple zaïrois", *Cahiers d'Études africaines*, 36(141-142), p. 134.

⁴⁰ Petit Pierre (2020), "Official Miniatures : The Figure of Patrice Lumumba in the Global and the National Contexts", in M. de Groof (ed.), *Lumumba in the Arts... op. cit.*, p. 373. Yet Lumumba's iconicity has yet to be commodified in mundane objects such as t-shirts, posters and mugs for the global market to a similar extent as the likes of Che Guevara's, Martin Luther King's and Malcolm X's.

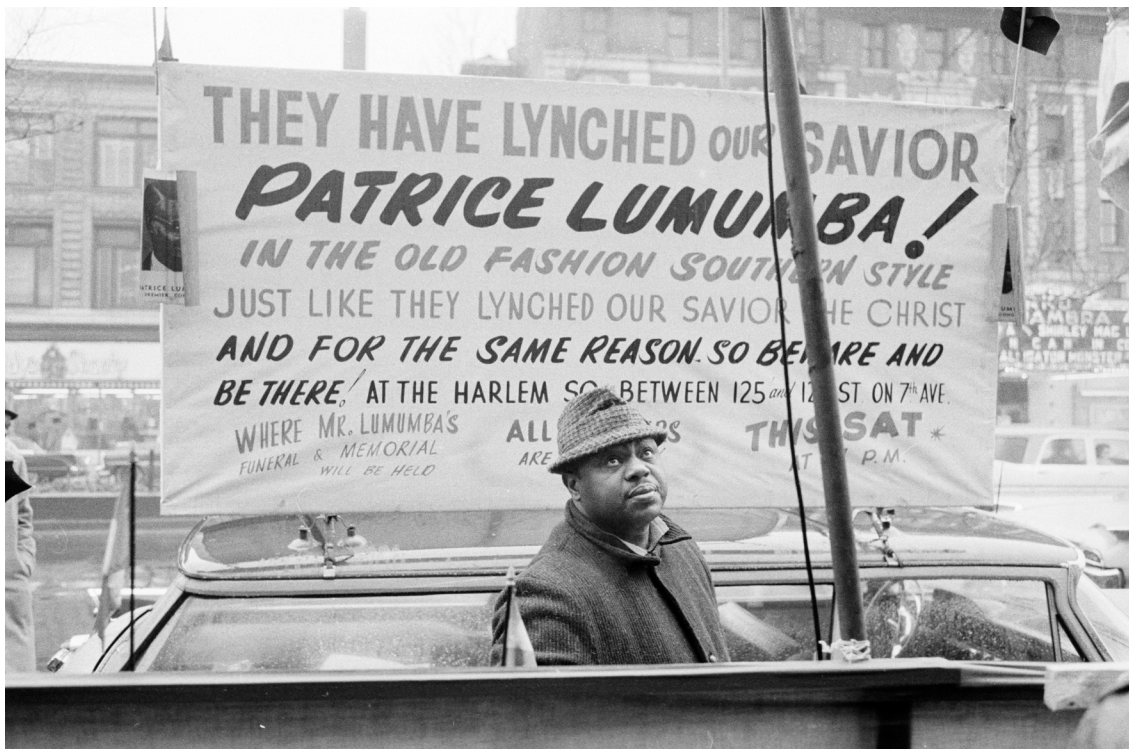
⁴¹ "[A]vant 1990, on évitait de parler directement de Lumumba pour des raisons politiques" [Before 1990, people avoided speaking plainly about Lumumba for political reasons], see Jewsiewicki B., "Corps interdits...", art. cité, p. 129.

of a free and prosperous Congo evinced by Lumumba's prophetic vision, a "dream deferred", to quote from Langston Hughes' celebrated poem. Still, there is no clear evidence that the cult of the dead Lumumba emerged in Congo before the late 1980s or even the early 1990s, which is when it caught the attention of the handful of white scholars affiliated with the University of Lubumbashi⁴².

The Black Atlantic Prophet

Before I examine the "lucrative" commodification of "Lumumba in the Arts" in Congo, let us look back at the reception of the dead Lumumba abroad, especially in one corner of the Black Atlantic. In Harlem, news of Lumumba's assassination cast his most ardent supporters adrift, leaving them to peer into a leaderless "emptiness of the moment"⁴³. Bereft of its most recognizable global person, the "Holy African Triumvirate" that Maya Angelou so revered lost its essence⁴⁴. "Lumumba is dead! What are we going to do?"⁴⁵, bemoaned Angelou after her friend Rosa Guy broke the news of Lumumba's gruesome murder to her. In the crucible of the Black Atlantic liberation movement, the cult of the dead Lumumba took on a sense of ubiquitous immanence imbued with manifest attributes of humanism, (inter)nationalism, Pan-Africanism, anti-imperialism, and black power, depending on where it emerged. The most vivid example of this global appeal was captured by Paul Stewart Slade in all its intersectionality. Slade was a globe-trotting American photo-journalist who joined the staff of *Paris Match* in 1953 and who happened to be in Harlem when news of Lumumba's assassination swirled around the African American community in Harlem.

Figure 2: "Gathering in the Memory of Patrice Lumumba in Harlem, New York", March 1961



Source : © Paul Slade/Paris Match via Getty Images, Editorial# 166712599

⁴² Spanish poet Luis López Alvarez, Lumumba's close friend, witnessed a short-lived cult of Lumumba in Province Orientale that seemed imbued with a tinge of Christian thaumaturgy, attributing to Lumumba the ability to heal and resurrect by the laying of his hands upon the sick and the dead, López Alvarez L., *Lumumba ou l'Afrique frustrée...*, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

⁴³ Angelou Maya (1982), *The Heart of a Woman*, New York, Bantam Books, p. 144.

⁴⁴ "Patrice Lumumba, Kwame Nkrumah and Sékou Touré", Angelou rhapsodized, "were the Holy African Triumvirate which radical black Americans held dear, and we needed our leaders desperately". *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Quoted in Guy Rosa (1996), "Castro in New York", *Black Renaissance*, 1, p. 10.

Convened by some prominent Black activists, following a climactic demonstration at the U.N. headquarters⁴⁶ on February 15, 1961⁴⁷, and billed as a diasporic version of the Congolese *matanga* (wake ceremony), a funeral and gathering in the memory of Patrice Lumumba saw a large crowd of African Americans converge in the heart of Harlem on Saturday, February 25, 1961. Ahead of the gathering, placards were placed outside of Hotel Theresa, a storied magnet of African American social life in Harlem, the same hotel where Lumumba had stayed during his visit to the U.S. The main placard (Figure 2) advertising the event panegyricized Lumumba as a Christlike savior. The funeral itself was held in Lewis Michaux's famed National Memorial African Bookstore at the corner of Seventh Avenue and N. 125th Street. A simulacrum in the likeness of Lumumba lay in a coffin, wearing shades and a bow tie, hinting at an intimation of the "thereness" of the body⁴⁸. Outside of the bookstore, one by one, activists took to the makeshift stage to pay their homage to their prophet⁴⁹. It is not for nothing that Angelou referred to Lumumba's death as a flashpoint in her radicalization into a literary firebrand and civil rights activist. The same could be said for countless other Black American artists and activists⁵⁰. As Meriwether explains, citing letters that filled the black press, "Lumumba had been crucified on a cross of racism by the white world⁵¹" as the main casualty of Cold War politics.

The dead Lumumba also "quickly became an icon of the Black Arts movement", which celebrated his "unyielding resistance to the forces of neocolonialism which finally killed his body, but not his spirit⁵²". The proliferation of this genre of elegiac meditation among African American artists – Dworkin further suggests – "covers the developmental range of responses to Lumumba's death, reaching beyond simple mourning and toward a textual resurrection⁵³".

Lumumba
was made
a martyr
and now (Lumumba) shall live forever
in the black
in the white,
in the yellow,
and in the red
for these people
know that
Patrice
L U M U M B A
is not dead
LUMUMBA LIVES !!!⁵⁴

⁴⁶ Organized by the Cultural Association for Women of African Heritage, this controversial demonstration contributed to the radicalization of several Black activists in the U.S. See Blyden Nemata Amelia Ibitayo (2019), *African Americans and Africa: A New History*, Newhaven, Yale University Press, p. 191.

⁴⁷ Angelou M., *The Heart of a Woman...*, *op. cit.*, p. 157. See also Dworkin Ira (2017), *Congo Love Song: African American Culture and the Crisis of the Colonial State*, Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, p. 225; Meriwether James H. (2002), *Proudly We Can Be Africans: Black Americans and Africa, 1935-1961*, Chapel Hill and London, The University of North Carolina Press, p. 233.

⁴⁸ The "thereness" of the dead body (or its corporeality) foregrounds it, in Verdery's words, as "an important means of *localizing* a claim". Verdery Katherine (2000), *The political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change*, New York, Columbia University Press, p. 27, emphasis in the original. I will add here that the "thereness" also seeks closure, as the recent repatriation of Lumumba's remains reminds us, and provides a site to anchor and renew commemoration rituals.

⁴⁹ Invited speakers included Thomas Kanza, Lumumba's head of the Congolese mission at the U.N.; the Reverend Oberia Dempsey; Dr. Louis Michaux; and a few other diasporic activists.

⁵⁰ Since naming played such a crucial role, prominent African and African-American activists (including Malcom X and Bongi Makeba to name just two), as well as ordinary people, christened their children Lumumba, while other activists changed their own names to Lumumba (Dworkin I., *Congo Love Song...*, *op. cit.*, p. 232), so that his spirit could live on.

⁵¹ Meriwether J. H., *Proudly We Can Be Africans...*, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

⁵² Dworkin I., *Congo Love Song...*, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Joans Ted (1961), "LUMUMBA LIVES!", from *All of Ted Joans and No More*, quoted in Dworkin I., *Congo Love Song...*, *op. cit.*, p. 239.

The Second Coming

While the dead Lumumba was canonized abroad, elegized in varied genres and forms, immortalized in state-sponsored media, and enshrined as the embodiment of anti-imperialism and Black liberation, at home, in Congo, his legacy faded away and vanished from the collective imaginary. Writing a decade after Lumumba's death, Kanza ruminated on Lumumba's waning currency at home: "[Lumumba] was held in the highest honour by other peoples, in Africa and elsewhere" but "denied by his own people"⁵⁵. As I explained before, Mobutu cunningly declared Lumumba a "national hero" in June 1966 but never encouraged any official celebration, iconification, or cultivation of Lumumba's words and deeds, unless when it suited his own political agenda. He did, for instance, promise the erection of an impressive monument celebrating Lumumba, a project smacking of irony that remained *lettre morte*. He had Lumumba's face printed on one Congolese banknote in 1970, but then in a slapdash about-face replaced the note with a coin bearing his own effigy. Acting as the perfect usurper and conjurer-in-chief he was, Mobutu reanimated the evanescent Lumumba, appropriated some of his nationalistic ideas, notably the concept of "*authenticité*", and then unceremoniously crucified him again⁵⁶.

There is, however, one singular surface where the image and memory of Lumumba took a life of their own locally. The genre⁵⁷, as exemplified in figures 3 and 4, first cropped up on canvas in Katanga in the early 1970s before migrating to academic books and becoming a fixture in Western museums and private collections. It has greatly contributed to Lumumba's iconicity with its serialized iterations of the Christlike passion of Lumumba, from the way of the cross to his agony and, ultimately, death. Laurent Tshibumba Kanda Matulu is probably the most prolific and recognizable leading figure of this genre, thanks to his peripatetic career: he was constantly on the move in Katanga and Kasai in search of a suitable and lucrative market for his art. His mysterious disappearance, amidst persistent rumors he was among the civilian casualties during the 1978 unrest in Katanga⁵⁸, only added to his notoriety⁵⁹. A self-taught painter, Tshibumba plied his art as a mere trade, apprenticing for a couple of years under Burozi before settling in Lubumbashi⁶⁰. Like many of his peers, he eked out a living by painting bucolic landscapes, *Inakale*⁶¹, *mamba muntu* (mermaid)⁶², and portraits on commission that people would buy and hang in their living room to signal their aspiration to the bourgeois class that had become one of the hallmarks of Mobutu's Zaïre.

⁵⁵ Kanza T., *Conflict in the Congo...*, *op. cit.*, p. 325.

⁵⁶ Mobutu's successors' inability and/or unwillingness to rescue Lumumba from the doldrums of national nothingness remains out of kilter with the place Lumumba occupies in the (inter)national consciousness.

⁵⁷ Fabian, who discovered this genre while studying the Jamaa religious movement in Shaba in the 1970s, calls it "art of memory". Fabian Johannes (1998), *Moments of Freedom: Anthropology and Popular Culture*, Charlottesville and London, Virginia University Press, p. 13.

⁵⁸ Fabian Johannes (1996), *Remembering the Present: Painting and Popular History in Zaire*, Los Angeles, University of California Press, p. XIV.

⁵⁹ According to Vincke, Tshibumba met Gilles Moal, a French overseas official, in 1980 and received a handsome commission from him to paint a series of pieces. The partnership was short-lived due to Tshibumba's "demise" in 1982. See Vincke Édouard (1995), "Tshibumba Kanda Matulu, peintre populaire zaïrois: de ses sources à sa seconde vie", *Matau. Journal of African Culture and Society*, 13-14, p. 306.

⁶⁰ Jewsiewicki B., "Popular Painting in Contemporary Katanga", art. cité, p. 23.

⁶¹ Also known in Lingala as "*biliaki ngai bikoki*" (which could be translated figuratively as "no way out" or "outnumbered"), this painting was an instant conversation starter and gained in popularity throughout the country, Vincke E., "Tshibumba Kanda Matulu", art. cité, p. 308.

⁶² The symbolism of the mermaid, also called *mami wata*, is pervasive in Congolese painting. See Jewsiewicki Bogumil (2003), *Mami Wata. La peinture urbaine au Congo*, Paris, Gallimard, Le temps des images.

Figure 3: “La mort historique de Lumumba, Mpolo et Okito”, acrylic on flour sac, by Tshibumba Kanda Matulu, circa 1970-73



Source : © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Virginia.

Offered at a giveaway price and rendered usually on repurposed flour sacks with low-quality acrylic and oil paint—sometimes even house paint—applied in thick brushstrokes, these paintings had a short life expectancy as material objects. At first glance, they neatly fit Barber’s framework that “consumption is actually a work of production⁶³” because, as Jewsiewicki argues⁶⁴, iterations of the same painting were tailored to the specific taste and desire of individual customers. An expatriate market developed soon after, probably around 1974-75, when Tshibumba moved from Kipushi to Lubumbashi and encountered people like Johannes Fabian, Léon Verbeek, Édouard Vincke, and Jewsiewicki himself who had been recently hired by the University of Lubumbashi⁶⁵. Tshibumba painted Lumumba’s passion by commission for his expatriate clientele. Had it not been for the mix of lucrative investment and genuine heuristic value they saw in these paintings, Tshibumba probably would not have secured the rather quaint notoriety he has posthumously garnered in the West. Clearly, the creation of aesthetic value to generate profit comes also in the form of canonization of what Barber posits as “non-canonical, informal and, at times, interstitial ‘popular’ forms” that may have been initially “produced by the people and for the people⁶⁶”. This is how Jewsiewicki explained it to me: “We”, referring to the aforementioned scholars, “changed the status of these paintings by transforming them into works of art⁶⁷”, thus endowing them with all the trappings of a canonical genre. Yet, in the end, Tshibumba did not achieve the international success that his Western patrons had envisioned for him, perhaps, as Jewsiewicki confessed, because they possessed neither the flair nor the acumen of the likes of Pierre Hafner and Didier de Lannoy who, respectively, propelled Moke and Chéri Samba to great heights⁶⁸.

⁶³ Barber Karin (2018), *A History of African Popular Culture*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 166.

⁶⁴ Bogumil Jewsiewicki, personal communication with the author, July 19, 2022.

⁶⁵ Jewsiewicki B., “Corps interdits...”, art. cité, p. 135.

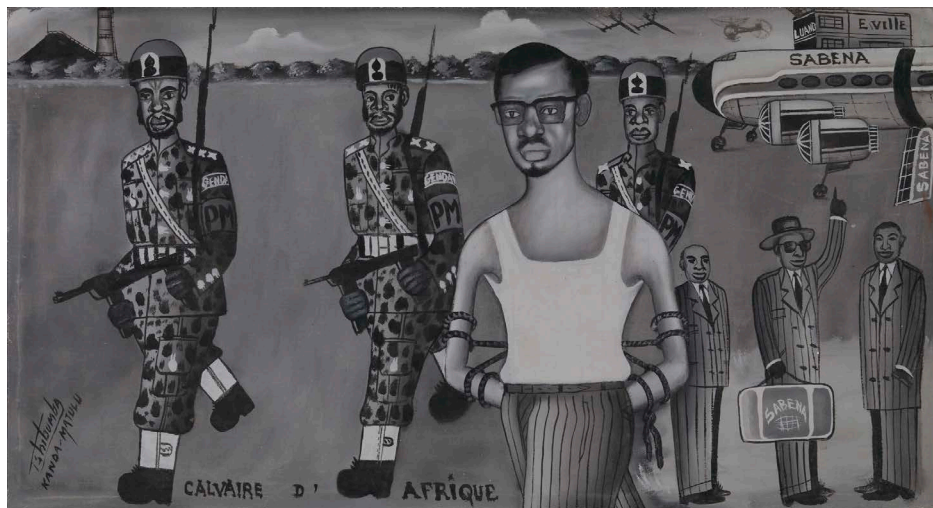
⁶⁶ Barber K., “Popular Arts in Africa”, art. cité, p. 24.

⁶⁷ “On a changé leur statut en les faisant devenir des objets d’art” (Bogumil Jewsiewicki, personal communication with the author, July 19, 2022).

⁶⁸ Jewsiewicki B., “Popular Painting in Contemporary Katanga”, art. cité, pp. 14-15.

According to Jewsiewicki, Tshibumba may have developed a keen interest in the passion of Lumumba in the mining town of Likasi, where the figure of Lumumba was associated with that of Lumpungu, a Songye chief who was accused of “*pratiques barbares*” by the Belgian colonial authorities and sentenced to a public hanging in the town of Kabinda in 1936⁶⁹. Yet, Tshibumba’s depiction of the passion of Lumumba appropriated key features of the Christlike visual narrative that developed internationally, especially along the Black Atlantic axis. Indeed, Jewsiewicki is right in asserting, “Tshibumba and other popular painters did not invent the representation of Lumumba as Christ⁷⁰”. This is what Tshibumba himself conveyed to Fabian when the latter brought up the theme of the passion of Lumumba: “[...] when I followed his history, I saw that Lumumba was like Lord Jesus. He died the same way Jesus did: between two others⁷¹.” Tshibumba went to great pains to explain to Fabian that he was painting the way-of-the-cross paintings of Lumumba for Fabian and Étienne Bol because there was no market for it in Lubumbashi or in the rest of the country for that matter⁷². “If I were to show it in Lubumbashi [...] at the Bon Marché [store]”, Tshibumba bemoaned, people would scoff and demure: “Ah, why do you paint Lumumba tied up, this is bad⁷³.” Tshibumba admitted he could paint a couple of Lumumba paintings per day⁷⁴ and, indeed, Jewsiewicki mentioned owning at least ten different copies of the canonic “Calvaire d’Afrique”, depicting Lumumba escorted off the plane upon his arrival in Elisabethville⁷⁵.

Figure 4: “Calvaire d’Afrique”, acrylic on flour sac, by Tshibumba Kanda Matulu, circa 1970-73



Source: © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Virginia

⁶⁹ Jewsiewicki Bogumil (1997), “Figures des mémoires congolaises de Lumumba: Moïse, héros culturel, Jésus-Christ”, in P. Halen & J. Riesz (eds.), *Patrice Lumumba entre Dieu et diable: Un héros africain dans ses images*, Paris, L’Harmattan, pp. 356-383. See also Jewsiewicki Bogumil (1999), “Congolese Memories of Lumumba: Between Cultural Hero and Humanity’s Redeemer”, in *A Congo chronicle: Patrice Lumumba in urban art*, Museum for African Art, pp. 79-81.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Nugent Gabriella (2020), “From Camera to Canvas: The Case of Patrice Lumumba and Congolese Popular Painting”, *Journal of Contemporary African Art*, 47, p. 91.

⁷¹ Fabian J., *Remembering the Present...*, *op. cit.*, p. 122. See figure 3.

⁷² Lumumba paintings rarely circulated in Kinshasa. People, like Papa Wemba’s father, Kikumba Omasombo Onangembe Jules, who continued to cultivate the memory of the dead Lumumba, displayed the official black-and-white photograph of Lumumba in their living room. “My father was fond of Lumumba. He wasn’t interested in politics, but was very fond of Lumumba”, Papa Wemba told me during a series of interviews. “A big portrait of Lumumba hung in our living room for as long as my father was alive” (Papa Wemba, interview by the author, Kinshasa, March 23, 2009).

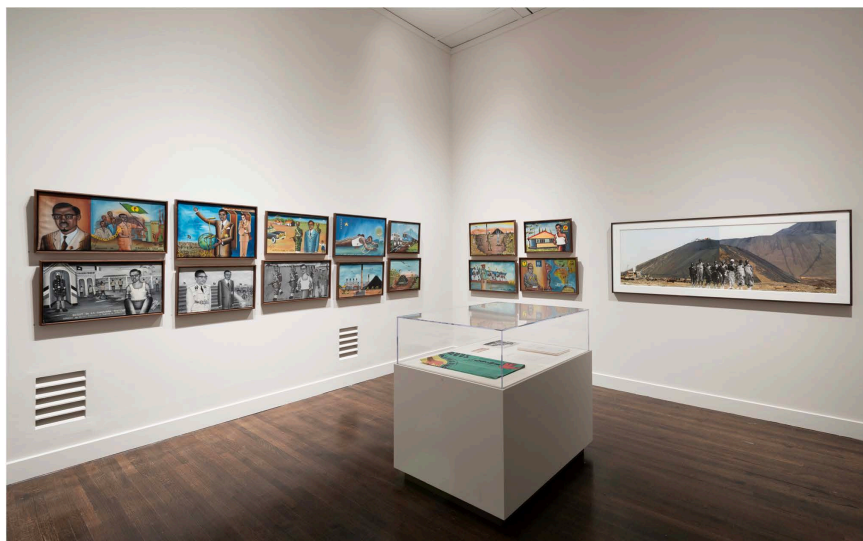
⁷³ Johannes Fabian (1998), “The history of Zaire as told and painted by Tshibumba Kanda Matulu in conversation with Johannes Fabian [in 1974]”, *Archives of Popular Swahili*, 2(1). Online, accessed 13/06/23. URL: <http://pca.socsci.uva.nl/aps/tshibumbaintro.html>.

⁷⁴ Fabian J., *Remembering the Present...*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

⁷⁵ Jewsiewicki B., “Figures des mémoires congolaises”, art. cité, p. 373. See figure 4.

This is to say that popular painting in Congo, especially the kind that frames a social discourse and claims to articulate a historical narrative, has all the earmarks of an ectopic genre that flourished only because it catered to and was promoted by foreign collectors⁷⁶. How this genre came to survive local neglect, ephemerality and conflict, and to increase in valence, even to acquire a canonical status, requires explanation. Jewsiewicki succinctly described the dilemma as “buy or disappear” (*“acheter ou disparaître”*⁷⁷). Between 1993 and 1997, to “save” these paintings from oblivion and likely “destruction”, he and Léon Verbeek hired Congolese agents to purchase more than 3,000 paintings from their local owners, among them 200 paintings signed by Tshibumba⁷⁸. These transactions took place sometimes under duress, as some people parted with their paintings for prices ranging from 10 to 30 USD in order to survive, or because they could not take those paintings with them as they fled conflict zones. By their own admission, these expatriate collectors did not just promote Congolese artists. They also shaped the entire creative process by influencing the creation of what became known as the “colonial history” genre.⁷⁹ In so doing, they developed their own careers, gaining visibility in the field through their participation in the removal of African cultural *patrimoine* and in its decontextualization⁸⁰.

Figure 5: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Installation, “History from below the mountain. Tshibumba Kanda-Matulu and Sammy Baloji”



Source: David Stover © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Virginia

⁷⁶ Biaya waded into this discussion with his usual sharp-eyed observation: “*Tshibumba Kanda se mue en peintre ‘historien’ pour les hommes de science [i.e., Fabian et al] dont il devient, paradoxalement, le peintre populaire livrant la matière première pour leurs travaux*”. Biaya T. K. (1992), “Et si la perspective de Tshibumba était courbe”, in B. Jewsiewicki (ed.), *Art pictural zaïrois*, Québec, Les éditions du Septentrion, p. 157. See also Strother Zoë S. (2001), “African works: anxious encounters in the visual arts”, *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 39, pp. 5-23, which compellingly critiques Fabian’s approach.

⁷⁷ Bogumil Jewsiewicki, personal communication with the author, July 19, 2022.

⁷⁸ Jewsiewicki B., “Popular Painting in Contemporary Katanga”, art. cité, p. 24.

⁷⁹ Fabian recounts how he convinced Tshibumba to dedicate his art to historical subjects, especially the life of Lumumba. “Could you do more of those?” Fabian asked Tshibumba during a session he conducted with him on December 6, 1973, Fabian J., *Remembering the Present...*, *op. cit.*, p. 9. By the time their collaboration ended, Tshibumba had delivered 101 commissioned paintings to Fabian. see Blommaert Jan (2008), *Grassroots Literacy: Writing, Identity and Voice in Central Africa*, London, Routledge, p. 100.

⁸⁰ “*J’ai fait largement mon profit, en faisant ma carrière grâce à ces tableaux*” (Bogumil Jewsiewicki, personal communication with the author, July 19, 2022). While Jewsiewicki sold his collection to the Royal Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren in 2008, Fabian’s large collection, including 102 original Tshibumba artworks, were acquired by the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam in 2000 for an undisclosed amount. Étienne Bol, whose father Victor Bol had amassed an important collection directly from Congolese artists while teaching Francophone literature at the University of Lubumbashi, sold a total of 53 paintings, including 33 by Tshibumba, to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) in Richmond. Ash Duhrkoop, who served as Andrew W. Mellon Curatorial Research Associate for African Art at the VMFA, oversaw the acquisition and curated an exhibition in 2019 that included Tshibumba’s Lumumba

Congo Profits and Penance

Drawing on Alain Corbin's work⁸¹, historian Karine Ramondy gestured to the "dead body" of African leaders as a vital fecund field that sutures past and present and where sediments of memory lay dormant in people's imaginary in wait for epistemological excavation⁸². "Dead bodies" afford the living with one critical opportunity once they become symbols, mused American anthropologist Katherine Verdery: "[T]hey don't talk much on their own (though they did once)⁸³." They are made to speak by ventriloquist priests, politicians, scholars, and artists. A dead prophet, especially, is a convenient trope as he can no longer assert his agency, as he has lost his ability to be unpredictable, to rebuke us, to point a finger at us, to force us to confront our demons. A dead prophet becomes a commodity we perpetually reinvent and traffic, a figure that owes his mystique to the fact that he means different things to different people, that he has become an idea. Lumumba no longer speaks on his own authority, by and for himself. He speaks by proxy and that proxy by and large is increasingly represented by his resurrection through urban painting.

Questions remain, however, as to whether Lumumba's representations through urban painting really reflect Congolese peoples' longing for a true prophet, for a founding father, after the false prophets of independence have deceived them and led them astray. Is "Lumumba in the Arts" yet another example of the Western episteme interfering with and commandeering the painful process of Africans trying to retrieve the memory of their past? Or is it only a ploy that has allowed Western scholars to deploy their theoretical contraptions and manufacture their narratives? The fact that these paintings emanate not from the "people", in the way Karin Barber defines this term in her distinction between "popular arts" and "people's arts"⁸⁴, the fact that there is no local market for them in Congo, as remarked by Jewsiewicki⁸⁵, the fact that they do not engage the collective memory of the people or reflect upon the preoccupations of daily life, which are Fabian's two main categorizations of popular cultures⁸⁶, cast a long shadow of "inauthenticity" over this genre. Mirroring the meaning of cultural objects that Sarah Van Beurden explores in her study, these paintings have undergone a valuation as "art objects", heuristic artifacts, and lucrative commodities. Additionally, through the process of "cultural guardianship", which for Van Beurden serves merely as justification for their removal and legitimization of a (post)colonial order, these paintings may also have lost their authenticity⁸⁷.

If this genre is not popular culture per se, then what is it? Channeling Stuart Hall, I am tempted to ask: what is Congolese in Congolese popular painting? This much is clear: "Lumumba in the Arts" has become a liturgy in the cult of the dead Lumumba. This genre tends to parallel actual representations of Lumumba, the kind we see in photographs⁸⁸ and footage depicting his martyrdom, arrest, and detention, only to fill the unbearable void of the prophet's trials and tribulations with a stock of passion-of-the-Christ clichés. Yet, this "excessive iconicity", Monaville has perceptively observed, "might have acted as a mask in [Lumumba's] reception, diverting from deeper engagements with the specific form and content of his political and intellectual contributions to the anti-colonial struggle⁸⁹". It seems fair to conclude, then, that the ubiquity of Lumumba's visuality on urban canvas at once overexposes "Lumumba the prophet" and eclipses "Lumumba

paintings alongside Congolese artist Sammy Baloji's photomontages. Interview with Ash Duhrkoop, Zoom, September 14, 2023. Other Tshibumba paintings were auctioned off by Bonhams—a privately-owned international auction house headquartered in London—in 2016 with a list price ranging from 15,000 to 20,000 British Pounds for each painting. I mention these lucrative deals not to indict anyone but simply to indicate how the collection of African artifacts for heuristic purpose, even by well-meaning and respectable Western scholars, can result in unintended deleterious consequences for African art and its local production and market.

⁸¹ Corbin Alain (2005), *Histoire du corps*, Paris, Seuil.

⁸² Ramondy K., *Leaders assassinés en Afrique centrale...*, op. cit., p. 231.

⁸³ Verdery K., *The political Lives of Dead Bodies...*, op. cit., p. 28.

⁸⁴ Barber K., "Popular Arts in Africa", art. cité.

⁸⁵ Jewsiewicki B., "Popular Painting in Contemporary Katanga", art. cité.

⁸⁶ Fabian Johannes (1978), "Popular Culture in Africa: Findings and Conjectures", *Africa*, 48(4), pp. 315-334.

⁸⁷ Van Beurden Sarah (2015), *Authentically African: Arts and the Transnational Politics of Congolese Culture*, Athens, Ohio University Press, pp. 12-13. For a fruitful discussion of "authenticity" in African popular culture see Hall Stuart (1993), "What Is 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?", *Social Justice*, 20.1/2 (51-52), p. 108. See also Lindholm Charles (2010), *Culture and Authenticity*, Malden, Blackwell Publishing; Grazian David (2010), "Demystifying Authenticity in the Sociology of Culture", in J. R. Hall, L. Grindstaff and M-C M. Lo (eds.), *Handbook of Cultural Sociology*, London and New York, Routledge, pp. 191-200.

⁸⁸ We should think of these photographs as visual archives embedded in people's memory and that are retrieved to mediate and source the production of paintings in what Strother calls a "process of representation that necessarily involves dialogue with other images". See Strother Z. S., "African works: anxious encounters...", art. cité, p. 20.

⁸⁹ Monaville Pedro (2022), *Students of the World: Global 1968 and Decolonization in the Congo*, Durham, Duke University Press, p. 65.

the politician”. It also participates in the sacralization and inviolability of his “political body” through a palimpsestuous process whereby Lumumba’s “*corps naturel*”, tortured, mangled, mutilated, and dissolved, is reinscribed in people’s imaginary—through the arts—as a “sacred” and “immortal” body⁹⁰. By extolling *fatum*, Tshibumba’s and Burozi’s Christlike iterative representations of Lumumba unwittingly end up assuaging (post)colonial guilt and exempting the web of international actors that shattered Congo’s democratic experiment. Reflecting on the genesis and trajectory of his personal “collection”, Jewsiewicki could not help but come to grips with his own guilt, stemming from a sense of betrayal. “It’s no longer the same object”, he admitted candidly, “the relationship between the object and the public for which it was made is broken. We have to be acutely aware of that⁹¹”.

Coda: Memory as a Burial Site

I visited Kinshasa in December 2022 in search of a coda to my musings about “Lumumba in the Arts”. On my way from Ndjili Airport to the family home in Binza UPN, a neighborhood perched in Kinshasa’s southernmost hills, I spotted in the tropical twilight a mural at the intersection of Masikita and Yumbu avenues (figure 5). The following day, I managed to track down the creator of this public *œuvre*, an artist named Dayan Lukau (aka Ebo). We met one evening at his makeshift studio in Binza Delvaux. Ebo, who appeared to be in his late twenties, sported a pair of ripped and distressed jeans, a necklace with a fetish-like pendant, and had a toned-down Rasta look. As I walked into his studio, by way of welcome a tepid smile flickered across his serious face. Although he looked the part, Ebo seemed nonplussed and nervous. Sensing his hesitancy to converse in French after a few minutes into the exchange, I immediately switched to Lingala. Now at ease, Ebo became rather effusive. Trained as a sculptor and painter at Kinshasa’s Académie des Beaux-Arts, he painted the uncommissioned mural on June 30, 2020, he told me, to celebrate the 60th anniversary of Congo’s independence. When I asked him what he meant by “*Je ne suis pas mort*”, Ebo acknowledged that Lumumba is indeed dead, “but his spirit lives on. Several people, including myself, have inherited Lumumba’s spirit”, he added. “I have Kimbangu’s spirit in me and Lumumba’s spirit in me because we are revolutionaries. You see, like Kimpa Vita and Kimbangu, and Matswa⁹², Lumumba too sought to liberate and elevate Black people.”⁹³ As I pressed him to further explicate the association between Kimbangu and Lumumba as well the insertion of Lumumba within a prophetic Kongo tradition, Ebo did not bat an eye. “They all shared the same vision and knew Black people’s worth”, he retorted. As for his spelling of Kongo with a “K” (“*Je réfléchis [sic] pour le Kongo*”), Ebo claimed that the real and authentic spelling of the country should be Kongo, not Congo. He assured me that he used “Kongo” instead of “Congo” not as a nod at the bygone kingdom but, instead, to register the country’s protracted crisis.

⁹⁰ Ramondy K., *Leader assassinés en Afrique centrale...*, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

⁹¹ “*Ce n’est plus le même objet. La relation entre l’objet et le public pour lequel il a été fait est rompu. On doit en être pleinement conscient*” (Bogumil Jewsiewicki, personal communication with the author, Zoom, July 19, 2022).

⁹² Little was known about André Matswa’s life and anticolonial involvement in the interwar period until I published a biography of Matswa based on a trove of untapped colonial archives and oral sources. Gondola Didier (2021), *Matswa vivant: Anticolonialisme et citoyenneté en Afrique-Équatoriale française*, Paris, Éditions de la Sorbonne.

⁹³ Dayan (Ebo) Lukau, Interview by the author, Binza Delvaux, Kinshasa, December 16, 2022.

Figure 6: “L’Incarnation” mural in Binza-UPN, Kinshasa, by Dayan “Ebo” Lukau (b. 1987), created on June 30, 2020



Source: Photograph © Didier Gondola (December 16, 2022)

Still wanting to parse the agnostic syllogism associating Lumumba with the Kongo prophetic tradition, I resolved to speak with Lumumba’s son, Roland Gilbert Okito Lumumba. Upon our initial phone contact, he invited me to his place, the former Prime Minister’s residence located on Boulevard du 30 Juin. He greeted me at the door and led me into a disordered *salon* brimming with a miscellany of “traditional” masks, statues, and other artifacts, including paintings, some of which depicted his father. I was captivated by a dual portrait, rendered side by side on the same canvas, of a youthful Lumumba next to his spouse Pauline, resplendent with poise and dignity in her advanced years⁹⁴. The juxtaposition of the two subjects, one lively and the other mellowed by age, was intriguing.

Roland was only two-years old when his father was murdered. Yet, through collective memory, acting both as an archive and a burial site, he had been able to retrieve and preserve fragments of his father’s life. When I broached the topic of the Lumumba/Kimbangu connection, he told me in a vocal timbre reminiscent of his father’s that Kimbanguists hail Lumumba, perhaps not as a prophet, but as someone who advanced the cause of the Kimbanguists and the Kitawalists by promoting religious toleration as prime minister. This is because Lumumba was very attentive to African spirituality. He was also a traditionalist and unflinchingly opposed to any version of state religion. He admired Kongo people for their sense of unity and devotion to their past. He may not have been Kongo, but he fought for Congo, no matter how you spell it⁹⁵.

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⁹⁴ Pauline Lumumba, the mother of four of Patrice Lumumba’s children, including Roland, passed away in 2014 at the age of seventy-seven.

⁹⁵ What better proof of that, Roland added, than the appointment by Lumumba of Charles Kisilokele, Kimbangu’s son, as minister of state in his cabinet. Lumumba also chose Kasa-Vubu, he further contended, as President to acknowledge Kongo people’s autochthonous legitimacy in Léopoldville; Roland Gilbert Okito Lumumba, Interview by the author, Gombe, Kinshasa, December 24, 2022.

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