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KATANGA SECESSION: THE GROWTH AND MANIPULATION OF ETHNIC
ASSOCIATIONS

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African borders today resulted from European colonial efforts during the 19th and 20th centuries. The nations, separated largely by the physical features of the land, cut across ethnic ties and divided ancient tribal communities. In many regions of the African continent, these new borders split powerful tribes making them minorities in the newly formed nations. In the process of decolonization, political allegiance often paralleled strict ethnic associations and the idea of self determination provoked movements in many parts of the continent. This universal right for people to determine their future political status has frequently brought conflict. With the United Nations' strict limitations surrounding self determination and the many external interests that remained after the colonial period, communities in the process of self determination faced large barriers that often reinforced the authority of the European constructed borders. A 1963 decision by the Organization of African Unity recognized colonial borders as the basis of independent state borders, disregarding the ethnic and tribal separations formed by such boundaries.¹ This declaration presented more difficulties to those attempting self determination. In the newly formed Republic of Congo, the Katanga province's quest for self determination was an attempt to reconstruct a powerful tribe turned ethnic minority. Although undeniably shaped by external powers, indigenous leaders, specifically Moise Tshombe, spurred the Katanga secessionist movement by asserting an autochthonous identity as the foundation of their claim to statehood and forging alliances with powerful white settlers. Although unsuccessful in secession, this pronouncement negated the efforts of Patrice Lumumba's central government to create a unified Congo by strengthening ethnic authority in the richest province in the Congo Basin.

¹ Larmer and Kennes, "Rethinking the Katangese," 743.

Beginning in the late 1800s, the Congolese people sustained a series of oppressive governments, often prioritizing wealth over the good of the common people. King Leopold II of Belgium united the Congo basin in 1885, including two hundred fifty ethnic groups previously belonging to chieftain-kingdoms.² Leopold named this region *Etat Independant du Congo* or Congo Free State (CFS), instigating forced labor policies to exploit the Congo's wide array of natural resources, including rubber, ivory, and minerals such as copper, diamonds, gold, uranium (for nuclear technology), niobium, and tantalum (for space aeronautics).³ Katanga, the most economically important and minerally rich province of the newly formed CFS, faced the biggest changes.

Previously controlled by the powerful Lunda-Bayeke kingdom, colonizers swiftly dissolved this empire's rule, dividing the kingdom into three different regions: the Katangese province, parts of Angola, and Northern Rhodesia.⁴ Once a robust political and military empire feared for three hundred years from the Kasai highlands to Angola,⁵ the Lunda empire was conquered by a small yet powerful tribe of warriors known as the Bayeke. This tribe, led by Chief Msiri, migrated into the Lunda area of Tanganyika and overthrew the emperor, Mwata Yamo III.⁶ In 1891, with the arrival of King Leopold II, a Belgian lieutenant killed Msiri in order to solidify European power in the province. Belgium rule in Katanga brought a significant emphasis on education and infrastructure but neglected any initiation of economic and social

² Khaled Diab, "Congo's Colonial ghost," <https://www.theguardian.com>, (April 21, 2010).

³ Diab, "Congo's Colonial ghost."

⁴ Larmer, Miles and Erik Kennes, "Rethinking the Katangese Secession." *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 42, No. 4 (May 12, 2014): 741-761. <https://doi-org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/10.1080/03086534.2014.894716>.

⁵ Gonze, Collin. "Katanga Secession: The New Colonialism." *Africa Today* 9, No. 1 (February 1962): 4-16. <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/stable/4184284>.

⁶ Gonze, "Katanga Secession," 4.

development within the region, instead, the colonists focused on “export-oriented economic activity.”⁷ The Belgians initiated major limitations on internal travel for Katangese people and a ban on political parties or alliances,⁸ attempting to control their newfound population. These measures inadvertently created isolated communities based on ethnic associations. In the 1960s, during “the rapid process of decolonisation,” a majority of political parties sprouted from deeply loyal ethnic communities, dividing the region’s political landscape into a fight for ethnic dominance.⁹

Accounting for just 13% of the total population of CFS across a large expanse of land, Katanga’s mineral resources were easily subject to human exploitation. Due to Katanga’s sparse indigenous population, large corporations fueled mass migrations of Baluba Kasaian peoples to urban Katangese centers to bolster the workforce. The growing political mobilization of these “foreigners” worried many Katangese elites. In 1957, Kasaian migrants made up 22% of the population compared to 6.3% Lunda population.¹⁰ Furthermore, during the 1957 elections in Elisabethville, the economic center of Katanga, the four elected chief magistrates were all from non-indigenous ethnicities.¹¹ Desperately seeking the preservation of their power, Lunda elites established *Groupement des Associations de L’Empire*,¹² linking “contemporary political expression to powerful pre-colonial identities.”¹³ Gassomel proved ineffective in establishing political success in the new democratic environment due to the increasingly small Lunda population. In realizing this, an alliance of indigenous elites across the Katanga province created

⁷ Larmer and Kennes, “Rethinking the Katangese,” 744.

⁸ Ibid, 744.

⁹ Larmer and Kennes, “Rethinking the Katangese,” 744.

¹⁰ Ibid, 745.

¹¹ Ibid, 745.

¹² The *Groupement des Associations de L’Empire* is also known as Gassomel.

¹³ Larmer and Kennes, “Rethinking the Katangese,” 745.

the *Confederation des Associations Tribales du Katanga*.¹⁴ The leaders of Conakat, most notably Moise Tshombe, created an organization that simultaneously aligned itself with settler and mining interests while also remaining critical of the migration that supported the mining workforce.¹⁵ The organization united most ethnic identities of the region, drawing power from their alliance with colonial institutions.

Efforts for political dominance by Conakat were interrupted in 1960 with the sudden news of an impending political independence for the Congolese. Patrice Lumumba, a member of the Congolese resistance, was elected on June 23, 1960 as “the first democratically elected prime minister” of the post-independence government.¹⁶ Lumumba had pioneered Congolese nationalistic ideals, consistently advocating for “uncompromised self determination,” and organizing democratic protests challenging Belgium for independent rule.¹⁷ He called for complete national unity, disregarding the great diversity present in the Congo Basin and threatening the powers that tribal chiefs had over their communities. In a speech at the 1961 All-African Conference in Leopoldville, Lumumba championed independence declaring,

“We were aware that as long as the country was dependent, as long as she did not take her destiny into her own hands, the main thing would be lacking [...] We have declared our desire for speedy independence without a transition period and without compromises with such emphasis because we have suffered more mockery, insults and humiliation than anybody else. What purpose could delays serve when we already knew that sooner

¹⁴ The *Confederation des Associations Tribales du Katanga* can be shortened to Conakat.

¹⁵ Larmer and Kennes, “Rethinking the Katangese,” 746.

¹⁶ David, Smith, “Is colonialism still to blame for the Democratic Republic of Congo’s woes?” *The Guardian*, July 3, 2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jul/04/colonialism-democratic-republic-of-congo-independence>.

¹⁷ Pak Nung Wong. “Discerning an African Post-colonial Governance Imbroglia: Colonialism, Underdevelopment and Violent Conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Liberia and Sierra Leone.” *African and Asian Studies* 11, No. 1 (2012): 66-94. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156921012X629330>.

or later we would have to revise and re-examine everything? We had to create a new system adapted to the requirements of purely African evolution, change the methods forced on us and, in particular, find ourselves and free ourselves from the mental attitudes and various complexes in which colonisation kept us for centuries. We were offered a choice between liberation and the continuation of bondage. There can be no compromise between freedom and slavery. We chose to pay the price of freedom.”¹⁸

His administration planned to increase taxation from 20% of receipts to 50% of receipts and to buy all shares of Katanga enterprises held by the Belgian government.¹⁹ These decisions were an attempt for greater autonomy and not unlike the neighboring taxation of 80% of receipts in Northern Rhodesian government coffers, a minerally rich area similar to Katanga.²⁰ These limitations imposed on free enterprise alongside Lumumba’s controversial ethnic beliefs and aim for a unitary government, ensured an array of opponents in the Katanga province who viewed Lumumba as a radicalist. Lumumba’s election threatened Katangese elite, many of whom had strong ties to western powers, inciting fears of losing control of Katanga’s parliament. Tshombe consistently criticized Lumumba’s character and political ideals, calling him “an erratic demagogue.”²¹ In 1960 amidst a crisis in the capital city after the mutiny of Lumumba’s troops, Moise Tshombe declared Katanga’s independence from the Congo, eleven days after Congo’s independence from Belgium, accusing the central government of communist leanings.

Without a stable military force, the capital of Leopoldville fell into turmoil leaving no options for engaging with the Katangese secession. Patrice Lumumba appealed to the United

¹⁸ Schmidt, Thomas. “Speech at the All-African Conference in Leopoldville.” *Marxists and Anti-Imperialists in Africa*. <https://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/lumumba/1960/08/25.htm>.

¹⁹ Gonze, “Katanga Secession,” 5.

²⁰ Gonze, “Katanga Secession,” 5.

²¹ Wong, “African Post-colonial Governance,” 66-94.

Nations but only received support to restore the capital area. He then appealed to the United States but the state department denied his request believing Lumumba exhibited communist ideals.²² Without Katanga, 50% of the Congo revenue disappeared.²³ Out of desperation, Lumumba requested aid from the Soviet Union to pacify the Katanga secession in August, 1960. The Soviet Union gave the Congo four planes full of military supplies.²⁴ This move provided justification for western powers to assist in the removal of Lumumba from power. On September 14, 1960, Joseph Mobutu overthrew Lumumba in a coup d'état, sending him to Elizabethville where he was tortured and executed in January of the following year.²⁵ With ethnic associations on the forefront of people's mind, Godefroid Munongo and Moise Tshombe formed an alliance in an attempt to reconstitute the Lunda-Bayeke empire as Katanga's driving political force. Tshombe had married the daughter of a Lunda king and Munongo had close ancestral ties to the Bayeke leadership, together their alliances and contemporary roles in politics ensured support and resources.²⁶ Munongo became commander of the newly formed Katanga secret police which employed many Belgian officers and mercenaries. After secession, he imprisoned the entire Katanga parliamentary opposition.²⁷ The total number of government officials is still unknown though the police released 950 former parliamentary members in June, 1961.²⁸ Moise Tshombe's partnerships with a powerful array of entities including UK and Belgium government officials,

²² Gonze, "Katanga Secession," 5.

²³ Ibid, 5.

²⁴ Ibid, 5.

²⁵ Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Mobutu Sese Soku." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, October 10, 2018. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mobutu-Sese-Seko>.

²⁶ The assassination took place when the country had fallen under four separate governments, the central government in Leopoldville under Joseph Mobutu's dictatorship leadership, a rival central government in Stanleyville spurred by Lumumba's followers, and the secessionist government in Katanga (Moise Tshombe's leadership) and South Kasai (Jason Sendwe's party).

²⁷ Gonze, "Katanga Secession," 4.

²⁸ Ibid, 4.

mining companies, settlers, mercenaries, and Lunda-Bayeke tribal members, ensured his leadership tactics would not hinder the secession's success.²⁹

Moise Tshombe and Godefroid Munongo asserted an indigenous ethnic identity as the basis of their claim to statehood. Fueled by the economic and political change brought by Belgian colonists, along with the assertion of power made by non-indigenous peoples, Katangese elite viewed the secession as a means to reinstate indigenous control. Founding a secessionist government on the ideals of the pre-colonial Lunda kingdom brought a unified history to a community seemingly unconnected while simultaneously connecting the elite to more impoverished masses. Godefroid Munongo and Moise Tshombe's alliance exemplifies this attempt for historical interconnection, considering that both men often disagreed about the correct role of external powers in Katanga's economy and government. In the summer of 1961, Munongo, sensing irrevocable tensions between Katanga and Belgium, publicly appealed to the Soviet Union for help. In that same statement, he called for an alliance with Antoine Gizenga, leader of the central government in Stanleyville, from which the two most powerful provinces could form a common front against Leopoldville.³⁰ Tshombe retracted the appeal shortly after, attempting to maintain western support for the secession. Despite their differences, Moise Tshombe and Godefroid Munongo attempted to reconstruct the alliance between the Lunda and Bayeke tribes. Interestingly, they undertook these efforts while "express[ing] reservations about the idea that chiefs should be granted any exorbitant prerogatives."³¹ Instead, Katangese elite forged the alliance while precariously balancing the amount of power delegated to the chiefs of

²⁹ Ibid, 5.

³⁰ Gonze, "Katanga Secession," 4.

³¹ Edouard Bustin. *Lunda Under Belgian Rule: The Politics Of Ethnicity*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 204.

the tribes in question. Facing Luba rebel fighting on the North border, “the chiefs were too essential to the internal order and security of the beleaguered state to be pacified with titles and trinkets.”³² Instead, chiefs were given ambiguous authorities and promised “a share of executive power at the local level,” a promise that never fully came to fruition.³³ Hoping to maintain a civil government, Tshombe and Munongo spread this autochthonous identity through public and media space, calling for chiefs to extend support for the secession as well.

This emphasis on ethnic loyalty, although a basis for unification, also alienated other powers in the region. The initial threat posed by Kasain immigrants strengthened after secession as “the presence of ‘alien’ elements whose language, customs, and traditions differed considerably from those of the resident tribes [had] made them all the more conscious of their mutual differences.”³⁴ Previous election results had revealed the distinctive tribal groupings and reinforced their solidarity. In 1959 Conakat’s increasingly xenophobic attitude created serious internal stresses for the party.³⁵ When Conakat declared its support of a Katangese government appropriated by “authentic Katangese,”³⁶ the *Association des Baluba du Katanga* (Balubakat) withdrew from the party. The change was “indicative of the ethnic solidarity prevailing among the Baluba: if substantial cultural differences existed between the Kasain tribes and those of the Katanga, they are at any rate not so fundamental as to leave each indifferent to the other’s fate.”³⁷ In instances such as this, ethnicity serves as both a unifying and dividing force, precariously balancing peace and conflict. This competition between the Conakat and Balubakat, both major

³² Bustin, *Lunda*, 204.

³³ *Ibid*, 204.

³⁴ Rene Lemarchand, "The Limits of Self-Determination: The Case of the Katanga Secession." *The American Political Science Review* 56, no. 2 (1962): 406. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1952375>.

³⁵ Lemarchand, "Limitations of Self-Determination," 411.

³⁶ Larmer and Kennes, "Rethinking the Katangese," 746.

³⁷ Lemarchand, "Limitations of Self-Determination," 411.

constituent units, accelerated with the emergence of electoral campaigns, sometimes ending in bloodshed. The political and social changes aligning with new democratic institutions tightened ethnic association, causing “alternative ‘autochthony’/’allochthony’ dichotomies.”³⁸ These increases of such dichotomies paralleling autochthonous or allochthonous principles distinctly manifested itself in the election results of June 1959. After first predicted to equal one another, unforeseen events skewed the parliamentary seat election results in Conakat’s favor.³⁹ Balubakat members claimed they were victims of election fraud, exasperating already tense relations.⁴⁰ When Tshombe declared a Katanga secession, Jason Sendwe, the leader of the Balubakat party, retaliated by formally recognizing the Lumumba administration. This recognition provided the basis for the region to challenge the secessionist regime, declaring an independent “Province of Lualaba” in October 1960. The new state formed an alliance with Stanleyville Lumumbists and Tshombe was made to recognize the loss of northern and central Katanga.⁴¹

The tendency to identify ethnic loyalties in political allegiance was also aggravated by the presence of a politically conscious settler community, often allying themselves with the native Lunda and Bayeke leaders. Undoubtedly, the Katanga secession “benefited powerfully during its initial period from crucial military and technical assistance extended by Belgium.”⁴² Moise Tshombe’s strategically placed partnerships with both Belgian settlers and mercenaries ensured broader economic and political gains towards Tshombe’s career. Even after the UN deported all mercenaries in Katanga, white settlers supplied Tshombe with military leadership in

³⁸ Erik Gobbers, “Ethnic associations in Katanga province, the Democratic Republic of Congo: multi-tier system, shifting identities and the relativity of autochthony.” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 54, No. 2 (June 2016): 211-236. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X16000185>.

³⁹ Lemarchand, “Limitations of Self-Determination,” 413.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 413.

⁴¹ Bustin, *Lunda*, 201.

⁴² Bustin, *Lunda*, 201.

exchange for the preservation of their privileges, rather than a unified Congo.⁴³ This partnership allowed a strong military power to emerge in Katanga, solidifying efforts for maintained autonomy.

Moise Tshombe excelled in his manipulation of multiple entities to secure wealth and prestige during the Katanga secession, playing on already tense ethnic associations and revealing himself as an independent agent. Both historians and Tshombe's contemporary counterparts simply viewed him as a puppet for foreign powers to use. Lumumba once said, "Tshombe is simply an instrument of the Belgians," yet research implies a firm awareness of global relations. This orthodox perspective undoubtedly promoted the destruction of Lumumba's career in establishing powerful enemies with strong internal goals. Conakat's accumulation of power throughout Katanga did not signify a reconstruction of the Lunda-Bayeke empire but rather the increase of wealth and prestige for the Tshombe family. While colonial powers may have provided extra monetary support, especially when threatened by the nationalistic ideals of Lumumba's administration, Tshombe sought a secession in hopes of establishing personal power in a mineral rich region in the heart of Africa. Tshombe clearly distinguishes a beneficial partnership from one that exploits him in leadership. In March of 1960, Tshombe exploded at the Conakat Executive Council meeting asserting "... that he no longer intended to be for sale to the settlers. 'These gentlemen have collected much money in Conakat's name. They have made themselves the keepers of our money... The financial situation is in the hands of the settlers; the breach must be clear and even brusque.'" ⁴⁴ Having firmly established relationships with European government officials, large local corporations, and the settler population, these

⁴³ Gonze, "Katanga Secession," 16.

⁴⁴ Katanga Secession Gerard

loyalties did not prevent Tshombe from compromising his own political agenda. The Lunda-Bayeke alliance for recreating a historical empire merely veiled Tshombe's plans of increased domination.

Considering the United Nations requirements to achieve autonomy based on self-determination, Katangese authorities failed to create an adequate governing body. “‘The freedom of the people of the territory to choose the form of government which they desire,’ and ‘freedom from interference by another government as to internal affairs’ are essential”⁴⁵ components of establishing an independent will of the people. One must also consider the general welfare of the Katangese involved and “the economic deprivations entailed by the secession.” Such insecurities risked the entire survival of many Katangese communities, clearly failing to meet the requirements of self-determination.⁴⁶ Even more prevalent was the threat of global consequence if the Congo's four separate governments each attained autonomy. Caught up in the politics of the cold war, The USSR openly backed the Stanleyville government led by Antoine Gizenga, Lumumba's deputy prime minister of the new Republic of Congo, since the *Parti Solidaire Africain* appealed to a modern idea of governance by crossing ethnic loyalties. With this support, it was possible for Gizenga to create a viable state. “From the standpoint of the internal political situation in the Congo, the secession would have played directly into the hands of the Gizangists and perhaps have invited a much firmer ‘commitment’ on their part than presently exist[ed], thereby making the prospects of national unification all the more distant.”⁴⁷ Each of these factors led the United Nations to condemn the Katanga secession in hopes of a unified Congo state. Internationally led efforts were undertaken to restore the authority of the

⁴⁵ Lemarchand, “Limits of Self-Determination,” 416

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 416.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 416.

moderate and pro-western regime in Leopoldville over the entire country, in order to prevent an aggressive, left-leaning state with Soviet backing in the heart of Sub-Saharan Africa.⁴⁸

These external powers, although a major part of the secession's demise, also provided the resources for Moïse Tshombe to initially declare the movement and solidify power. While it is important to understand these complex relations between external powers and indigenous leaders in Katanga, very little information displays the collective will of the people. Strong leaders monopolized the media as well as the Katangese secessionist government. Their aims of great power and wealth left their people without resources, economically or socially. Tshombe had attempted to bring a unifying identity to the Katangese people in order to form a strong nation yet he neglected the overall needs of the people, opting for wealth and power towards his own family. This corrupt style of government which focuses on internal greed rather than the common good has prevailed in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Today, one of the most minerally rich countries in the world is also one of the poorest and ethnic divisions remain a large source of conflict. These deeply held loyalties -- qualities that often form the cultural, social, and spiritual foundation for an individual -- may at times unify a community, but if threatened, ethnic associations also have the power to rip apart communities as individuals strive to preserve those qualities of life that are most important.

⁴⁸ Nzongola-Ntalaja, Georges. "Patrice Lumumba: the most important assassination of the 20th century." *The Guardian*, January 17, 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2011/jan/17/patrice-lumumba-50th-anniversary-assassination>.

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