PROJECT MUSE®

Diagnosing the Crisis in the Republic of Congo

David Eaton

Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute, Volume 76,
Number 1, 2006, pp. 44-69 (Article)

Published by Cambridge University Press

➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/197764>

DIAGNOSING THE CRISIS IN THE REPUBLIC OF CONGO

David Eaton

In 1991 in the Republic of Congo, a national conference in the capital Brazzaville brought together representatives of religious, civic and political organizations throughout the country to end more than two decades of single-party Marxist government. Acting in the wake of *perestroika* and spurred by Western insistence on multi-party pluralism, the conference inaugurated a peaceful transition to Congo's first democratic elections based on universal suffrage. The senses of unity and of reconciliation widely shared in the country at this time were accompanied, however, by doubts and uncertainties at the passing of the old order.

The existential disorientation which accompanied the advent of liberal ideals and institutions had been explored on the eve of the conference in *La Semaine Africaine*, the astute long-running national news weekly published by the Catholic Church. A front-page editorial entitled '*Alliances contre nature*' ('Unnatural alliances') spoke in vivid terms of the period of transition in which Congolese found themselves. Familiar forms were dissolving, the authors observed, and much of what was increasingly urgent to know had become more complex and less knowable. The consequences were profound, threatening society with forces potential in individuals as political actors.

The country is liquefying, decomposing in an hallucinatory process of metamorphosis of men, institutions and ideas. It is not easy to know who thinks what, who will have interest in what, who is capable of what, who is decidedly the enemy of whom, who will in the end make alliance with whom ... (unsigned *La Semaine Africaine* 1990; my translation)

Given the uncertainties – indeed, the crises of institutions and of knowledge – which accompanied these shifts, how did Congolese come to interpret the transformations of the years which followed, and to diagnose the troubles through which the country subsequently passed? Many have documented and debated struggles during these first postsocialist years for greater openness and accountability in political life.¹ Others have analysed the role of economic interests, in particular those related

DAVID EATON is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at California State University at Chico. His doctoral research at UC Berkeley focused on men's lives and response to AIDS in the Republic of Congo. He has also carried out field research in Rwanda, the former Zaïre and Cameroon.

¹ See, among many others, Menga (1993), Quantin (1994), Baniafouna (1996), Nsafou (1996), Yengo (1995), Cahen (1996), Gauvrit (1997), Gruénais (1997) and Young (1999) on the opportunities and problems of democratization during this time.

to Congo's oil reserves, in shaping the course of events.² In this article, I bring forward elements of alternative political imaginations, informed by regional traditions and local practice as well as by events and changes of global scope, through which Congolese understood and expressed their hopes and anxieties during this period of massive social change.³

In what follows, I consider a range of interpretations of postsocialist governance given during this time by Congolese, beginning with the contested category of 'democracy'. These interpretations theorized an arena of plural uncertainties and partial knowledge, in which personal intention and choice remained incompletely knowable even by actors themselves. Using syncretic idioms which were the product of long histories in the region, they represented the political evolution of the country as conditioned by familial loyalties and generational conflict, by the relation of affliction to spiritual and occult powers, by the nature of secrecy and the limits of transparency, and by the embodied and animalistic qualities of the human social order.

Let us consider first the political and economic circumstances through which Congo passed in arriving at these conjunctures of the 1990s.

THE COLONIAL LEGACY AND THE SOCIALIST ERA

At independence in 1960 from French colonial rule, the Republic of Congo was distinguished by its high levels of education and urbanization. The former colony of Moyen-Congo, as well as the larger territory of Afrique Equatoriale Française, had been administered through Brazzaville, the main destination for migrations from rural areas over several decades. Higher education and civil service opportunities had flowed especially to the country's southern peoples – Lari and Vili speakers, as well as other peoples sharing Kongo traditions – along the main railway line from Brazzaville to Pointe-Noire on the coast. More inland 'northern' peoples such as Mbochi and Kouyou speakers found paths to influence instead often through military service, and came to comprise the dominant majority in the national army. Brazzaville itself grew as a city of twin ethnic *quartiers* – Bakongo for 'southerners', Poto-poto for 'northerners' – flanking a central *ville* in which government and business elites conducted their affairs (see Balandier 1955).

Congo's national experiments in socialism began soon after independence, when trade union federations and youth organizations began

² See, for example, J. F. Clark (1997b, 2002), Glaser et al. (1998), Verschave (1998) and Yengo (1998). The country's trajectory over several decades shows strong commonalities with those of other oil-producing states in Africa and elsewhere, as Watts (1996) has characterized these with particular reference to Nigeria: crises of state solvency and legitimacy stemming from centralization, neglect of agriculture and rural production, rural-urban drift, import substitution and consumer spending sprees through the early 1980s.

³ Bernault suggests that the events of this period recall the extraordinary 'cultural fluidity, political creativity, and turbulent richness of identities' of the electoral campaigns of the late 1950s in Moyen-Congo, immediately preceding the constraints imposed by the postcolonial state (Bernault 1996: 360–3).

to mobilize against the perceived corruption of the conservative pro-French government of Abbé Fulbert Youlou, first president of the country. Massive strikes and street demonstrations in Brazzaville led Youlou, a southerner, to yield power to the military in 1963. The limited powers of the subsequently appointed president, Alphonse Massamba-Debat, a moderate socialist and also a southerner, waned over several years under the increasing pressure of leftist elements of the army, unions and youth groups. The *Mouvement National de la Révolution* was declared the country's only legal political party in 1964, and in 1968 a coup confirmed the ascendancy of the charismatic Marien Ngouabi, a paracommando captain and a Kouyou 'northerner', as the head of a military regime. This revolutionary government became increasingly committed to Marxist-Leninist principles in rhetoric if not always in practice. In 1970, the newly founded Congolese Labour Party (the *Parti Congolais du Travail*, or PCT) declared Congo a People's Republic, with a Soviet-style constitution and governing structure (see Radu and Somerville 1989: 160–72; Bazenguissa-Ganga 1997a: 75–159).

Congo thus became the first of three sub-Saharan African states – joined later by Ethiopia in 1974 and Benin in 1975 – to be ruled by military juntas espousing a Marxist-Leninist 'scientific socialism'. As Radu and Somerville (1989) noted in their trenchant analysis of Congo's political development, there was no long struggle in a socialist liberation movement as in Mozambique and Angola, nor were there explicit efforts to systematically develop an 'African socialism' as in Tanzania, Zambia or Guinea (Radu and Somerville 1989: 187–90).

As in Benin, Congo's large intelligentsia and its powerful unions shaped domestic policies. In Congo, however, offshore oil production provided a larger proportion of state revenue from the early 1970s on, while rural agricultural production continued to be almost entirely neglected in favour of the needs of politically decisive urban constituencies. Internally, the seven years which followed the establishment of the People's Republic in 1970 saw frequent and sometimes violent domestic challenges to the military government from unions, student groups and other officers, and a series of trials and purges within the small elite of the PCT. Radical rhetoric, links with China and the Soviet Union, and close state control of the economy remained essential components of government policy, although attention was also devoted to maintaining Congo's close relationship with France.⁴

The Ngouabi government attempted to meet the demands of the country's radicalized youth in part through its 1972 commitment to compulsory and free education for all citizens aged from six to sixteen, which followed the earlier nationalization of mission schools in 1965. State revenues from oil production, subject to fluctuation in world prices, also supported the growing state bureaucracy which

⁴ See Radu and Somerville (1989) for further concise analyses of these trends, especially pp. 172–6, 186–96, 206–9 and 213–5.

guaranteed employment for many graduates and protected salaries for union workers. These revenues also fuelled hidden networks of influence and an at times conspicuous luxury consumption among the governing elite, again as in Youlou's time a source of recurrent popular discontent and political critique. At the same time, they further stimulated urban migration from the politically marginalized countryside, where existing sugar and palm oil industries collapsed and timber production was negatively affected following nationalization of foreign holdings in these sectors (Radu and Somerville 1989: 208–15).

The 1977 assassination of Ngouabi – still unresolved – led to the brief presidential mandate of General Yhombi Opango, a northern-born Lari. Opango's opulent personal habits were unpopular with many Congolese, as were his efforts to cut civil service positions and workers' salaries and to rehabilitate relations with France and the USA. In 1979, a PCT Central Committee meeting removed Opango and confirmed Colonel Denis Sassou-Nguesso, an Mbochi-speaking northerner, as leader of the party and president of the country (Radu and Somerville 1989: 177–86). Despite the difficulties of Congo's political and economic environments, Sassou-Nguesso was able to consolidate and maintain his position at the centre of power for the twelve years that followed.

THE COMING OF DEMOCRACY

Roots of the civil war which was to devastate Brazzaville in 1997 can be seen in the country's economic trajectory during the 1980s. The Marxism advanced by Sassou-Nguesso's PCT had become more nominal over these years. Despite ties developed by Congo with the Soviet Union, China and Cuba, France continued to be the country's most important trading partner and the main source of foreign aid.

The state became further dependent on French support in the wake of the collapse of world oil prices in 1985, with petroleum accounting for 90 per cent of the country's foreign exchange in the late 1980s. Borrowing based largely on projected oil revenues inflated the national debt from US\$1.2 billion in 1980 to \$4.5 billion in 1990, and made the country the most indebted per capita on earth. The government agreed to IMF-recommended structural adjustment policies beginning in 1986 (Clark 1997a: 66–7). In the early 1990s, at the end of decades of apparent relative national prosperity under single-party government, the republic faced continuing external pressures for such policies to trim its state bureaucracy and to open its books and markets in petroleum.

The 1991 national conference was crucial in engineering a bloodless transition to Congo's first national elections based on universal suffrage in the following year, but the high hopes for national unity which had followed the conference faded quickly over the next two years. The newly elected coalition government of President Pascal Lissouba foundered on conflict over ministerial appointments and alleged electoral irregularities, with former President Sassou-Nguesso's PCT withdrawing from the coalition at the end of 1992. An increasingly

open ethnicization of political party action led to sporadic but increasing political violence in Brazzaville.

As in some other countries of equatorial Africa, democratization had thus come not only with greater civil liberties and free elections, but also with unpaid salaries, the breakdown of social services, the continuing deterioration of national infrastructure, and increasing unemployment⁵ among (in the case of Congo) a highly educated and urbanized population. The strains of economic crisis and structural adjustment were compounded by the diffusion of arms and the recruitment of private militias. These heightened the stakes of the republic's newly partisan politics, and led to outbreaks of factional warfare beginning in mid-1993 which left hundreds dead and thousands homeless by the end of the year. In my own field research in Brazzaville at this time, I met increasing numbers of refugees displaced from quarters under attack by government or opposition forces.

'Democracy? I'm terrified of democracy', said one Congolese man to me as the violence intensified in the capital. Angolans spoke even more bluntly about their country's experience; outside their embassy building in Brazzaville was a large photograph of piles of corpses bearing the simple caption '*Voilà votre démocratie*'. For the people of Congo, as those of Angola, the eventual consequences of these struggles over national representation could hardly have been more grave, with more than 10,000 killed when Brazzaville was razed and emptied in the war in 1997.

How did the hopes of Congo's national conference come to this? The liberal imaginations of reform which had brought new openings and possibilities for many in the country proved inadequate to overcome certain real conditions of Congolese – and Western – thought and action in a demanding and increasingly dangerous international context. I turn next to these international dimensions of unfolding events, and then to the changing comprehension of some Congolese themselves – especially residents of Brazzaville – of the nature of these events and corresponding implications for their own involvement.

LIBERAL VISIONS AND ILLIBERAL REALITIES

The ethnic tensions and party-linked violence which increasingly troubled daily life in Brazzaville through the early 1990s were fuelled in part by struggles between France and the USA for influence in the region. The French seemed to be handing over their fiscal share of the 'white man's burden' to the IMF and the World Bank during this time, culminating in the 1994 devaluation of the CFA franc. Popular feeling in Brazzaville was expressed in the complaints of many Congolese that the French had abandoned 'us, their children'. Expectations of a new

⁵ Congo's situation in these regards has been especially comparable to Cameroon and the Central African Republic, two countries also within the franc CFA zone as members of CEMAC (*Communauté Economique et Monétaire de l'Afrique Centrale*).

American godfather ran high in some quarters as President Lissouba broke a long-term exclusive relationship with Elf, a French parastatal privatized in 1994, to strike a deal with Occidental Petroleum, an American company (see Clark 2002).

US policy at this time sought to open markets and minds in a global 'third wave of democratization'. A glossy US Information Agency brochure entitled '*Qu'est-ce la démocratie?*' ('What is democracy?'), made available in Brazzaville and elsewhere, spelled out the essentials. Using images of Pericles, Locke and Voltaire to illustrate its exposition of principles of democratic government, rights and the rule of law, the brochure explained the virtues and rewards of joining the mainstream of Western political civilization. There was no mention of African states or circumstances in the document. In conversation, US State Department attachés in Brazzaville were heard to phrase it rather as their duty to transform this 'Marxist hellhole' run by 'a bunch of guys in suits'.

In the liberal vision expressed by the new government, the death of the all-giving socialist state – a death that Lissouba's prime minister Jacques Yhombi-Opango had both prophesied and helped bring about – was to make way for a new polity flourishing with openness of exchange and pluralism of expression. Indeed, in the early 1990s, a proliferation of new voices – in political parties, syncretic religious movements and independent presses – filled emerging domains of public expression.

Clearly, the *temps du mono* – the time of one (party), of *monopartisme* – was past. In the 1980s, the red and gold placards of the ruling workers' party had been ubiquitous in public spaces, bearing phrases such as 'We must be demanding of ourselves . . .' and 'Let us redouble our efforts in the face of the international crisis'. The collective subject in these exhortations had been imagined and imposed through leaders who were portrayed as embodying the revolution and the aspirations of the masses (Figure 1); Sassou's supporters called him *Rassembleur* (gatherer of things, people, forces), *Ya mokolo* (older brother and proprietor of the nation) and *Papa Bonheur* (father of well-being and satisfaction; also the title of a hit song by Zaïrean musician Koffi Olomide).

In the early 1990s, these placards lay broken and dust-covered in back offices, abandoned archives of a national sensibility. In the wake of the national conference, liberalization was bringing a more complex – and, to many, a more uncertain and more troubling – constellation of forces into open evidence. Sassou, operating from his northern Mboshi homeland, had become one of a handful of potentates who deployed their regionally based powers in unpredictably shifting alliances. Bernard Kolélas, mayor of Brazzaville, spoke for Lari peoples of the country's south-east as successor to the ancestral legacy of the prophet André Matsoua of a half-century earlier. Pascal Lissouba – now president and hailed as '*Le Professeur*' by his supporters for his work in biology and his promotion of science and modernization – rallied 'Niboleks': a newly salient quasi-ethnicity composed of peoples to the west in Niari, Bouenza and Lekoumou provinces. None of these leaders was able to actualize their claims to fully represent the nation; and meanwhile, each spent much in

FIGURE 1 Crowd holding aloft portraits of leaders of the revolutionary movement which came to power in 1968. The portrait to the right is of Marien Ngouabi, president from 1969 to 1977. Published in *Etumba*, official journal of the Parti Congolais du Travail, 10 February 1989.

mobilizing ethnically based militias – Kolélas’s *ninjas*, Sassou’s *cobras* and Lissouba’s *zoulous*.⁶

In mid-1993, conflict over contested elections broke into factional warfare within the capital. Barricades, set up at first to paralyse people moving around during scheduled *villes-mortes* days of protest, now became front lines of fortification for neighbourhoods under siege.

⁶ See Bazenguissa-Ganga (1997b: 215–17) for a description of the recruitment and training of these militias, as well as of the government’s *Réserve ministérielle* at the Aubervillois camp in the province of Bouenza.

Gunfire could be heard throughout the city at all hours, and thousands fled their homes in the quarters of M'Filou, Bacongo and Makélékélé especially, carrying stories of soldiers and armed youths in hoods and masks burning, raping and killing. The salience of ethnoregional categories in understanding these actions and mobilizing response was heightened as the proliferation of violence – and the uncertainty, partiality and dissemination of information about events – intensified the isolation and fear of families and neighbourhoods.⁷ This fear fed on itself and catalysed further blame, violence and segregation.⁸

A Zaïrean woman visiting Brazzaville at this time from across the river in Kinshasa was perplexed. 'This is a little country', she said, 'and Brazzaville is a little city, but the people can't live with each other. What are they going to do – split into even smaller countries? ... And in Zaïre', she continued, 'there is not this system of barricades. A Zaïrean will not tolerate staying in her quarter for weeks without circulating – she will ask: "Do you think [then-President] Mobutu is going to send me food?"'

The devaluation of the franc CFA by 50 per cent in January 1994 came as a further blow to the country, especially to urban dwellers in Brazzaville. Bread, manioc, rice and cement doubled or tripled in price during this time. The effects of devaluation were compounded by barricades and reported sabotage which had interrupted transport to the capital over the previous months (Baniafouna 1996: 197–8).

Many Congolese spoke in public at this time of the terrible damage being done to the social tissue and of the imperative and overriding need to stop the deterioration of the situation. 'No nation has ever benefited from ethnic oppression or civil war', said one former minister. A spokesperson for a national women's conference challenged each group in society to take active steps immediately to save the country. Throughout the city, posters appeared with the appeal 'We thirst for peace'. The chief of staff of the armed forces declared on television that no violation of Congolese law by military personnel would be permitted.

Yet these and other institutions, through which attempts were made to defuse enmity and to imagine a morally tolerable national community, were limited in their ability to address the direct sources of the violence: the unresolved disagreements among political elders who authorized the continuing depredations of the militias. It was only in late January 1994 that some stability was restored and broader conflict averted for the

⁷ For accounts of the stages of armed conflict in Brazzaville and its expansion into other areas of the country, see Ekholm-Friedman and Sundberg (1995), Dorier-Apprill et al. (1998) and Bazenguissa-Ganga and Yengo (1999).

⁸ Bazenguissa-Ganga (1997b: 235–7) describes how populations came to identify previously unrecognized ethnic divisions within themselves, conflating regional origin with political party affiliation. He sees the violence as crystallizing with the production of an ethnic 'martyr's body' for both Nibolek and Tchek (i.e. Lari-speaking) ethnoregional identities. Refugees recounted atrocities committed by the other side in a serial propagation of 'news' and commentaries, often published in the city's partisan journals or even on video cassettes. These dehumanized the other ethnicity, made members of each side fear for their lives, and spurred demands for group vengeance.

moment, through a compromise reached publicly by junior members of the national assembly on behalf of the older generation.

The previous thirty years of relative peace and prosperity – *la paix congolaise* – made it difficult to imagine the yet more severe trials which would ensue. Revenues from Congo's offshore oil reserves, first opened to French-led exploitation in the 1970s, had sustained into the 1990s images of the country as an African 'little Switzerland'. Sophisticates of Brazzaville, once the capital of French Equatorial Africa, conceived of themselves at a centre of civilization both bantu- and francophone. But the culmination of the increasingly ethnicized factional conflict in the civil war of 1997 would demolish not only the capital itself but also many modern expectations of what it meant to be Congolese.

PLURAL UNCERTAINTIES, PARTIAL KNOWLEDGE

The authors of the editorial in *La Semaine Africaine* cited in the opening paragraphs of this article, writing at the beginning of the momentous transitions of the 1990s, had expressed fears and doubts similar to those experienced in other states also new to liberal institutions of late capitalism. Few Congolese at that time, the authors observed, understood exactly what democracy consisted of, or what were the organs essential for its functioning. But, in a line of interpretation more specifically rooted in equatorial African histories, the authors went on to emphasize certain consequences of this unfamiliarity and of resulting nascent and still only vaguely grasped configurations of power. These uncertainties of the moment seemed to establish a field of power in which concealment and secrecy allowed 'unnatural alliances' with forces of evil.

To remain viable in this democracy, each advances masked ... Very few know ... what objectives the true democrats will be prepared to fix, the day when, removing their masks, and emerging from the night, they will finally recognize each other and join together ... (unsigned *La Semaine Africaine* 1990)

Actors advancing masked, emerging from the night – these are explicit dimensions of political traditions quite distinct from those of public life in the modern West.⁹ Further elements of equatorial thought become evident as the authors continue, calling upon esoteric specialists capable of speaking truths and exposing bodily realities beneath the appearances of power.

Will intellectuals and experts wait in the shadows to know to whom, finally, in all prudence, they will sell their souls? Or will they take the liberty to make pass over this land the purifying wind of critical intelligence, capable

⁹ See especially Siroto's reconstruction of 'agential masking' in struggles for power between corporate groups among Bakwile [Bekwil] in the north-west of the present-day Republic of Congo (Siroto 1969).

of naming the things which exist and those which must exist – even to the extent of mistrusting the most well-established appearances, and at the risk of revealing behind certain masks shocking nudities? (ibid.)

Here, intellectuals and experts are called upon to exercise capacities of ‘critical intelligence’ which resemble both divinatory clairvoyance – the double vision of the *nganga*¹⁰ – and the prophetic gifts which animate syncretic and millennial cults long common in the region.¹¹ Further, the hoped-for wind which could purify the land evokes regional beliefs in such winds as bringers of epidemic illness and accompanying therapeutic mobilization. Thus, alongside characteristically liberal sentiments and analyses in this most moderate and temperate of Brazzaville’s major journals stood other interpretations, informed by other traditions, through which reservations were expressed about these new and troubling postsocialist economies of knowledge and power.

The terms of this editorial limned the stakes of the coming decade. In these years, the persons and institutions which might have sustained a sufficiently free and critical social intelligence would prove unable to arrest a trajectory of increasing ethnic division and armed conflict. Retrospective essays in years following the 1991 national conference would emphasize the illusion and error of the early expectations of this era. Rather than a singular and purifying source of revelation naming ‘the things which exist and which must exist’, there came an increasing pluralization of political understanding about the nation and its affairs. A host of new perspectives were heard in the mass media, coming from emergent religious movements, political parties and independent presses. Self-consciously partial and partisan discourse, often and increasingly inflected through ethnic categories, flourished in domains of public speech and assembly previously dominated by institutions with more catholic and universal pretensions.

Some of the new journals which appeared for sale in Brazzaville’s streets with the lifting of state censorship under the new governments of the early 1990s not only exposed enmities and divisions but also inflamed them. Often flamboyant and merciless in their caricatures of political opponents and of rival ethnic groups, these journals added another medium for interpretations of power and identity which also passed through communities of oral exchange via *songui-songui* (gossip and rumours) and the ubiquitous *radio trottoir* (‘streetside radio’).¹²

¹⁰ See Janzen (1982: 14) for one description of types of *nganga* – healing practitioners, in this case, BaKongo – consonant with broader categories of Bantu therapeutic specialization.

¹¹ See Andersson (1968), Sinda (1972), Balandier (1976), MacGaffey (1983), Kouyouma (1988), Tonda (1988), Gruénais (1992), Devisch (1996), Dorier-Apprill (1996), Tonda (1997: 105–8) and Gruénais (2001).

¹² For analyses of leading journals in Brazzaville during this period, see Dorier-Apprill et al. (1998: 149–70), Gakosso (1997) and Thomas (2002: 174–91). See also Diamani (1995) for a description of political caricature and derision in a Zaïrean paper at this time. He notes that *radio trottoir* was given the status of a national institution in popular discourse across the river in Kinshasa, where it was often referred to as RTZ: *Radio Trottoir Zaïroise*. See also Nlandu-Tsasa (1997) and Yoka (1984) on this topic.

The precarious nature of public discourse in these venues was widely recognized. One independent paper's name itself, *La Rue meurt* (roughly, 'the street dies', or 'dying streets', but also homonymic to *rumeur*, 'rumour') punned triply on the decline of the public sphere, its occult dimensions and its dependence on uncertain, plural and orally transmitted information. Its banner proclaimed '*Prête-moi l'oreille, pas votre confiance*' ('Lend me your ear, not your trust') and '*Dans un kilo de mensonge, il y a dix grammes de vérité*' ('In a kilogramme of lies, there are ten grammes of truth') (Figure 2).

The proliferation of openly partisan voices in the newly democratic country – whether perceived as vital contributions to democratic debate or as looming dangers to national unity – presented divergent and fragmented perspectives on increasingly urgent political questions. These characteristics became acute with the decay of public security

FIGURE 2 'Give me your ear, not your trust.' Detail of banner header of the journal *La Rue meurt*, no. 80, 12–17 May 1995.

and the coming of war. Citizens were reduced to monitoring conflicting reports in the mass media and interpreting the cascade of rumours in networks of local knowledge passed mouth to ear through disparate and increasingly isolated communities. It was impossible to remain unaware that every voice was partisan, that much of what was said was uncertain, and that much of crucial importance was inescapably hidden from any individual's experience and understanding.

Although the stakes of such incomplete, uncertain and concealed knowledge were heightened in the country by the increasing violence, these problems of understanding were of course not entirely new. The nation's three decades of socialist governance, managed as it was by a small, mostly military elite within a single-party system, had produced a system in which a radical discourse provided the main available public means both to obscure and to critique hidden networks of influence and competitions over state-mediated access to resources. The flux of this language, its centrality in mobilizing and guiding national sentiment, its capacities for distortion, its debatable relationship to observable social facts, and the censorship often entailed and imposed in its use had long been the subjects of explorations and critiques in both literary and political domains (see for example Dongala 1973; Moudileno-Massengo 1975).

Further postsocialist disjunctures stemmed from the contradictions evident earlier in the compromises forced on socialist leadership in particular by the international and economic exigencies of the 1980s. On the one hand, the government was under challenge from youth, workers and civil servants to sustain not only radical rhetoric but also its economic commitments to education and employment. On the other, it was increasingly constrained by the realities of a country reliant on declining oil revenues, importing most of its food, and highly indebted within a world in which its major socialist sponsors and protectors were less and less able or willing to offer support. The PCT leadership had to negotiate these contradictions while also brokering complex alliances which balanced the interests of different regions and language groups in the country. It is perhaps no wonder that the coming apart of these governing pragmatics – and the public discourse to which they corresponded – in the early 1990s would problematize existing tactics of interpretation and be expressed in the terms of 'liquefaction', 'decomposition' and 'metamorphosis' used by the editorial in *La Semaine Africaine* cited at the beginning of this article.

Certainly, though, many aspects of these problems of knowledge at this time – of partiality, uncertainty, concealment and at times deception – cannot be ascribed simply to Congo's condition of postsocialism, nor limited solely in their scope to comparable postsocialist national milieux. Mbembe and Roitman, for example, writing of the contemporaneous crisis in Cameroon, suggested that at this time the ability of society to imagine and constitute itself had been 'thrown into question', reporting that individuals described themselves as unable to understand what was happening in newly vast arenas of ambiguity in daily social practice (Mbembe and Roitman 1995: 339, 342). Such social circumstances

and imaginations can be understood to be provoked in transitions to liberalism in late capitalist environments worldwide, posing a particularly intense set of problems in independent states established in the wake of colonial rule (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999a). These states have been 'hewn out of difference', as John Comaroff put it recently, their originary heterogeneity in some ways compounded by recent neo-liberal conditions which have intensified migration, market hegemony and the consumption and mass-mediation of culture (Comaroff 2001).

Certain aspects of these problems of postcolonial public knowledge had been diagnosed incisively decades earlier by Chinua Achebe in his novel *A Man of the People* (Achebe 1966). In this book, written on the eve of the Biafran secession and the subsequent Nigerian civil war, Achebe explored the enormous difficulties of individual perception and interpretation in newly independent African national contexts, through the flaws evident in the first-person narration of a young European-educated teacher named Odili Samalu. Through his self-deceiving pursuit of liberal reform, Odili's actions unleash uncontrolled factional violence and the dissolution of stable if corrupt governance. Odili's ironic narration reveals his inability to grasp fully the pragmatic perceptions and motives of others, and the disastrous inadequacy of his moralizing politics based on Western ideals. 'Odili struggles for a language that might enable him to present the realities of the new state in totality', writes Simon Gikandi in his acute analysis of the novel, 'but he is eluded by both a totalized and a privileged ideological perspective ... It is only when he writes the story – in retrospect – that the contradictions of his country begin even to make sense' (Gikandi 1991: 106).

Nor are such conditions of knowledge – partial, uncertain, hidden, incompletely knowable – solely the product of recent modern political conjunctures. Such problems of understanding, and their relation to social configurations of human power, have long been widely theorized in equatorial African traditions. These conditions grow in important part from parsings of occult forces which are carried through voice, intention, ritual and specially composed objects, which are expressed in the human body in both illness and well-being, and which find their most significant source and referent in relations of close kinship.

FAMILY, CLAN AND NATION: 'IS OUR COUNTRY CURSED?'

In the Republic of Congo, as elsewhere of course, metaphors of family affiliation and alliance have long organized production and land tenure in local communities, anchored ethnic distinctions and guided patrimonial resource allocation in urban and national contexts. These family structures also provide a matrix for comprehending sources of social inequality, illness and death through discourses of sorcery and witchcraft which manage uncertainty and provide

powerful checks on abuse and exploitation within these systems.¹³ Their principles of allegiance and obligation have been incorporated in modern institutions ranging from judicial systems to private enterprises in Congo and elsewhere in the region.¹⁴ In the multi-party democratization of the 1990s, they inflected geopolitical pressures from foreign powers – Russian and US rivalries, continuing French efforts to retain access to regional oil reserves, World Bank initiatives to ‘liberate productive forces’ – into ethnic divisions in competition for power through government representation.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, during this time, metaphors of family affiliation were often deployed to make sense of the responsibilities of those in power and the legacies of colonial domination (see Schatzberg 2001). Congolese leaders were often cast as *chefs de famille*; if the children quarrelled, it was said, it was for the father to transcend these disagreements and guarantee peace. But many viewed those in power as lacking this commitment to their constituency. Indeed, why should they care? it was asked – ‘as their children are in Europe’.

Many people in the country blamed this older generation of *la famille politique* for the conflict, arguing that a good number of these politicians had been manoeuvring for decades for their own gain at the highest levels of the republic. Further, it was commonly believed that occult powers, obtained and exercised at the expense of others, were required for such successes. Indeed, any unusual achievement, whether in love, school or career, could be taken as evidence of such powers.¹⁵ It was understandably difficult, therefore, for many Congolese to imagine an innocent high-level public servant.

Further, idioms of diagnosis prevalent in equatorial Africa understand much illness as the result of malevolent intention. The nation itself could sometimes be understood, at least metaphorically, as vulnerable to such occult attacks. Many Congolese at this time were saying that the country was sick (*‘le pays est malade’*), while attributing its condition to the hatred they saw as lying beneath the surface of social relations and to the insatiability of its political leaders. Some asked, on television and in conversation: ‘Is our country cursed?’

At the national conference in 1991, Monsignor Nkombo, head of Congo’s Catholic Church, had led the nation in a ritual of reconciliation drawing on practices of both divinatory healing and Christian confession. The most powerful members of the national political family, including former President Sassou, washed their hands

¹³ See Desjeux (1987), for example, for a careful situation and explication of these phenomena among Sundi BaKongo south of Kinkala in the Republic of Congo. As Geschiere emphasizes (1997: 9–11), however, the ambiguity of discourses of sorcery and witchcraft means that levelling effects are balanced by accumulative ones in actual social practice.

¹⁴ See, among others, Devaughes (1977), Rowlands and Warnier (1988), Warnier (1993), Bayart (1993), Dzaka and Milandou (1994), Gruénais et al. (1995), Geschiere (1997) and Bernault (2000).

¹⁵ See, for example, Dumont (1982), Bockie (1993) and Bazenguissa-Ganga and MacGaffey (2002: 131).

together and shared in a symbolic burial of their differences and past offences. Nkombo's efforts were characterized in a Congolese journal as 'exorcising the demons of disunion *avec des mots qu'il faut*' – with the words required for the occasion (Figure 3). The Monsignor himself called the conference a clinic at which Congolese could heal themselves of their wounds, a forum for the truth which permitted pardon and mutual public forgiving, and a school of morality, from which issued three commandments for politicians: 'Thou shalt not kill, nor lie, nor steal'. Three years later, in 1994, after the violence and ethnic polarization which had taken place since the conference, it seemed that no similar clinic or therapy was available to the nation.

THE LIMITS OF TRANSPARENCY

Peter Geschiere has observed that representations of the workings of occult force in societies such as these in equatorial Africa may 'heavily

Mgr NKOMBO exorcise les démons de la désunion:

*LA CONFERENCE NATIONALE, UN CIMETIERE POUR NOS
MAUVAISES HABITUDES, MAIS NON UN TRIBUNAL...*

Le président, Mgr NKOMBO et les membres du présidium congratulés par M.BAKANGA, président du bureau de vote

FIGURE 3 'Monsignor NKOMBO exorcises the demons of disunion: the National Conference a cemetery for our bad habits, but not a tribunal ...' 'Monsignor Ernest Nkombo, president, and members of the presidium [of the National Conference], congratulated by M. Bakanga, president of the Electoral Bureau', September 1991. *Aujourd'hui*, no. 4, 19 March 1991.

emphasize human action, but at the same time hide the actors and their acts from view' (Geschiere 1997: 22). Where power is understood to depend, in large part, upon the management of esoteric and occult forces, it may therefore also depend on reputations and rumours of hidden capacities and actions. In equatorial Africa, political discourse must concern itself especially with the relation between what is apparent and what is concealed. Secrecy and restricted knowledge are understood to be concomitant with – indeed required for – the effective exercise of power.¹⁶ These premises of Congolese social relations thus conflict with oft-stated liberal ideals of political openness and transparency; actual social practice must negotiate these contradictions.¹⁷

Further, calls for *transparence* imply visual, literate and spatialized means through which coexisting plural populations and bureaucratic entities are imagined and represented in modern liberal polities. Such means of constituting objectified and aggregated accounts of social realities – through audits and press reports of financial transactions; through polls which describe alliances of opinion and interest in individuals as members of variously defined communities; through regional tables of election results themselves – were unevenly developed, sometimes absent and often contested in Congolese political life, as of course in much of the world.

Instead, a predominance of interpretation cast embodied persons of differing capacities as the primary loci of active power. Vehicles of these powers included mass media which metonymically conveyed aural and physical presence – through printed words, speech, images and music. A corresponding and often expressed awareness was that statements, including objectively true statements, were also the expression of personal and social interests; in short, that what is transparent is also opaque.¹⁸ Thus a Zaïrean television news special in 1991 posed

¹⁶ Ferme's analysis of Mende politics in Sierra Leone portrays the dichotomy between public consensus and secret competition as part of 'efforts to transform political institutions and practices inherited from the colonial state through their integration with local political idioms'. She writes:

While electoral politics enact the fiction of free and fair competition, many Sierra Leoneans are uncomfortable with the way in which this creates winners and losers; for them, it is a process, more akin to court cases, that inevitably causes resentment and potential violence ... Recourse to covert strategies, to the occult, and to the rumors that amplify their potency in public domains provide a powerful check to political excesses. (Ferme 1999: 184)

See Shaw (2000) and Nooter (1993); also MacGaffey (1994) and P. Clark (2000) on secrecy in Kongo religious and political life.

¹⁷ John Comaroff (2001) has approached aspects of these questions in a critique of liberalism in southern African 'Afro-modernity'. He characterizes South Africa as a postcolony struggling both to establish progressive democracy and to free itself from Euro-modern hegemonies. See also Comaroff and Comaroff (1999b).

¹⁸ As Beidelman writes in his remarkable extended discussion of moral imagination among Kaguru of east-central Tanzania: 'For Kaguru, as for others, social action requires a subjective interpretation of the experience and intentions of others (cf. Schutz 1967:8). It also requires imagining how to present a social self, a persona, to others, a self that will force or entice them to play one's game. Thus, it involves both demystification and mystification at once' (Beidelman 1986: 2).

the question as '*Démocratie: quel visage?*' – 'what face?', but also 'what mask?', 'what appearance?' for democracy – as hundreds of parties organized for proposed elections in the country.

Indeed, *transparence* as a political concept implies faith in an autonomy of representation as well as a species of realism which, arguably, are not widely found in Congolese life. Congolese writers through the past two decades have found spaces of creativity and irony in a public domain ostensibly dominated by the univocal realism of single-party socialism (Thomas 2002). Further, writing itself has been often understood in equatorial Africa as instrumental in magical ways in the struggle for the monopoly of the legitimate use of powers (Devésa 1994; Tonda 2001). Indeed, in milieux such as these, characterized by common belief in esoteric magic which can multiply and transmute things and selves – a world full of powers and spirits 'more or less marvellous', as has been said of pre-colonial forest societies of western equatorial Africa (Laburthe-Tolra 1981, quoted in Guyer 1993) – the visible is an inadequate guide to the materially possible, and actual potentials may be questions of concealed knowledge. The naïve and the simple are those who trust appearances (Hersak 2001: 631–2; Nyamnjoh 2002: 121). In my fieldwork, I heard the term *compliqué* ('complicated') used often to describe the opacity of a situation, to imply self-interest and potential deception and to signal the possible involvement of occult (and therefore secret and partly unknowable) powers.

This probing mistrust of human intention and social institutions was evidenced in many Congolese discourses at the time. It extended generally, I would argue, to include reflexive critiques of moral discourses of unalloyed solidarity, collective goodwill and mutual benevolence, and of the legitimacy of institutions which promulgated these. In my conversations with Congolese during this time, for example, church and state were often characterized as exclusionary bodies serving the interests of some and not others, sometimes as sustained through malign occult ritual, and as in any case only components of a landscape of powerful institutions.

Such scepticism meant that those in positions of institutional power, whatever these might be, inhabited inevitably complex and conflicted roles. When conjoined with the seemingly self-evident primacy of pragmatic self-interest, and of one's obligations to one's family, it is little wonder that it was common to observe that if one found oneself in such circumstances, '*il faut profiter des choses*' ('one must profit from things'). Otherwise one would '*mourir idiot*' ('die an idiot') (Tonda 1998: 65), having failed to appropriate and consume one's share when one had the opportunity. The ways in which some Congolese described the national political elite during this time show further evidence of these lines of interpretation, projecting them into representations of human embodiment infused with animal life and appetite.

LA FIN DES MYTHES

As has been discussed above, in equatorial African contexts, the uncertainties and structural conflicts of domains from family to nation – including problems between generations – may be managed in part through divination, witchcraft and sorcery.¹⁹ In the case of these latter institutions, a primary task for morally responsible persons is to manage the forces involved for the good of one's family and clan. The ambiguity and secrecy of power, however, means, as Geschiere has said, that 'no one is above suspicion'. In such interpretations of social reality, the power of words is recognized while the accuracy of their reference to real social relations is kept in question. In some circumstances in Congo and Zaïre during this time, indeed, it seemed that power was judged to be proportional to one's ability to propagate statements about social realities which bore no evident relation to truth.²⁰

With the advent of democratically elected government following the 1991 national conference, the increasingly vibrant and independent press in Brazzaville expressed these perspectives in ways unthinkable in the 1980s. One comic-book cover, for example, blazoned a caricature of an impeccably dressed, big-bellied then-President Lissouba descending from a helicopter in a clearing. Bug-eyed and grinning, he opens his arms wide to sceptical villagers in ragged clothes who stand watching him at the edge of the forest. The caption reads: '*Nous sommes venus pour vous servir*' – 'We have come to serve you'; the villagers themselves are in fact caricatures of three members of Lissouba's cabinet.

These cartoons in new journals commonly represented problems of social relations as physical characteristics of the bodies of powerful persons, underlying the deceptive clothing of words. Indeed, the human body was often explicitly represented by Congolese with whom I spoke as the locus of assimilation of political discourse, with a need asserted, for example, to '*prendre les habitudes de la démocratie*' ('to acquire the habits of democracy').²¹

These 'habitudes' of democracy, like those of other forms of social power, were often presented in physical metaphors which embodied voice, performance and incorporation in longer-term histories of political form. 'Today', said one editorial, '*la mode nous oblige à chanter, danser et manger démocratie* ... [fashion obliges us to sing, dance and eat democracy] – but one cannot exclude any possibility

¹⁹ See MacGaffey (1986: 6–7) for a concise structural parsing of these institutions among BaKongo.

²⁰ See Mwiswa (1996), '*L'officiel contredit par le réel*' ['The official contradicted by the real'], for the case of Zaïre under Mobutu.

²¹ Similarly, Tonda (1998) sees postcolonial class relations somatized in the ethos of consumption and destruction shared across all factions in the pillage carried out by militia during and after the 1997 war. Ossebi (1998) describes the way young men came to exercise and display unsuspected autonomy and power through their adoption of new 'thug' styles of self-performance. See also Mbembe (2000) for discussions of key bodily sites, the grotesque and the obscene in postcolonial discourse, and De Boeck (2002: 9) for the human body as a microcosmic site of the 'fruits of modernity' in occult discourse in Kinshasa.

in the future.' *Monopartisme* was dead, the author noted, a now-past moment in a society with five centuries of experience of assimilation and transformation of European religious and political forms. 'It bore its own seeds of contradiction and death within it,' the author continued, 'and this surely will be so with democracy as well ...' What Congolese were witnessing now, the author concluded, was democracy's '*maladie infantile*'.

In the cases of *les grands* – those men and women with influence and power – these modes of physical being were portrayed as taking on near-monstrous qualities. One journalist referred to 'the legendary demagoguery and spirit of insatiability' of the Congolese political class. Powerful leaders were said to possess powers of domination which would make one sway and applaud in their presence. The supposedly gargantuan appetites of these persons were also shown in political cartoons, in which the grossly distended bellies of those in power are attributes of *un vrai gouvernement de nzala* – 'a true government of hunger'.

More generally, animalistic dimensions of leadership were often emphasized in political caricature of the time.²² Former president Sassou, once known as a 'Cardin communist' for his sartorial elegance, was now said to 'play the wild beast' in his continued presence in circles of power. Politicians of the national elite were portrayed as hungrily eyeing a *gigot* of meat: the contested prize of victory in the approaching 1997 elections (Figure 4). In opposition cartoons, President Lissouba appeared as an owl – quintessential incorporation of the night-time witch – perched in the palm trees of his UPADS party logo.²³

Other Congolese observers described their *faune politique* – their political fauna – as continuing to disport themselves in accustomed luxury, despite the country's economic crisis which had brought an end to illusions of progress and hope for the majority of the people themselves. The gods had come down to earth, these observers argued. Congolese lived at a time marked by 'the end of myths', some said; the attributes of leaders who had appeared to embody the aspirations of their people had now been dispelled, while their powers remained.²⁴

²² See Bernault (1996: 206–10, 249–54, 362–3) for a discussion of the cultural politics of chosen totem animals (caiman, leopard and rooster) of Congolese political leaders and their parties in the 1950s, and the resurgence and elaboration of these in the early 1990s.

²³ Tonda has shown how Lissouba, like each previous Congolese head of state, was rendered extraordinary and alien in oppositional popular discourse which called into question his ancestry. In Lissouba's case, being alleged to be in fact 'pygmy' (rather than Nzabi and thereby a member of a Kongo group) made him an 'animal of powers' who did not share in the humanity of non-pygmy 'Bantu' peoples of the region (Tonda 1998: 55–6).

²⁴ Mbembe sees this disenchantment as in part a theophagy, in which 'the totem which must serve to double power is no longer protected by taboo'. In these circumstances, he proposes, common people 'dismember, sometimes without knowing it, the gods who are African autocrats – making the presidential anus no longer an "*anus solaire*", but an anus truly of the land, concrete, palpable, and which, like that of the ordinary person, defecates' (Mbembe 2000: 155; my translation).

FIGURE 4 '*Chiens de faïence!* ["Clay dogs", i.e. adversaries in a stand-off.] Instead of going hunting you are fixated on the *gigot* 1997 [share of power in 1997 elections]. Ah, things are going downhill [literally, "the village is going rotten"]! The three dogs caricature then President Pascal Lissouba, flanked by two members of his cabinet: Minister of the Interior Martin Mbéri and Prime Minister Jacques Joachim Yhombi-Opango. The street urchin to the left is *P'tit David*, who speaks for the journal's editorial position. *La Rue meurt*, no. 74, 30 March 1995.

The contrast could hardly be greater with the olive drab uniform, Maoist principles and 'immortal glory' of the martyr Marien Ngouabi, the military leader of the Congolese revolution assassinated in 1978. In this profane imagination of the mid-1990s, political animals indulged their earthly appetites as sensual mortals. Further, as noted above, the capacities of some leaders were often alleged to come not only from their representation of an ideal, or from their mediation of clan-based ancestral powers, but from their expropriation of life-force from others (Bernault 2000: 234–5).

The greatest danger was to the republic itself, which had seen 'enough blood and enough death'. '*Est-ce que le sang va couler?*' ('Will blood flow?') had been the headline in a Zaïrean paper in Kinshasa in the early 1990s, prefiguring later events of the decade in both capitals. As a Brazzaville journal would observe a few years later, the people always pay the costs in their own blood.

In June 1997, with a few months remaining before scheduled national elections, war broke out when militia loyal to former President Sassou – the so-called cobras – responded in force when attacked by troops allied with then President Lissouba. The five-month conflict which followed was internationalized in ways unprecedented in the history of the republic, with French and US interests deeply implicated

in the unfolding of events.²⁵ It was marked throughout by the participation not only of Chadian soldiers and of South African and Serbian mercenaries, but also of Rwandan Hutu *interahamwe* militia, former members of the Rwandan army and elements from Mobutu's Zaïrean armed forces. The Rwandans and Zaïreans had been driven westward in the wake of the Rwandan genocide, pursued by an ensemble of forces originating seven years earlier in western Uganda. In Congo, Lissouba's earlier support for UNITA now resulted in the commitment against him of Angolan troops with armour. Sassou's return to power was assured when these Angolan troops joined his cobras to win the decisive battle for Brazzaville against Lissouba and Kolélas's combined forces in October 1997.

CONCLUSION

The 1990s opened with high hopes for a new era of Congolese political life after the end of socialism, but events proved these bitterly disappointed. In 1993, the *Observateur Congolais* spoke for many when it warned of the evident dangers of Congolese populations becoming laboratories of experimentation in political ideas. In 1995, there were calls in the press for a consensual democracy, one which might draw on African traditions and work within the constraints of current institutions. After the devastation of the 1997 war and the conflict which has followed it, Congolese have been faced with deep challenges in building a tolerant, just and inclusive society.

For citizens of the republic, grievous damage was done to systems of belief and practice – socialist and liberal alike – which sustained their hopes of peaceful and prosperous participation in a modern international order. In looking for inspiration under such conditions, one is reminded of Euphrase Kezilahabi's twin fictions in Kiswahili, *Mzingile* and *Nagona*, published in Tanzania after that country's economic collapse in the 1980s. In these works, the narrator finds himself in a labyrinth of continually unexpected circumstances, a postcolonial landscape in which poverty and loss coexist with ancestral presence, millenarian presentiments and – in the present – existential uncertainty and ambiguous signs of potential redemption (Kezilahabi 1990; Kezilahabi 1991; see also Feyte et al. 1997).

Although such problems of knowledge, of narration and of the daily regeneration of society remain acute in Congo today, in recent years few but the largely realist accounts of government elites and agents of humanitarianism have emerged from the capital into the larger world. Partisan voices continue to claim the spaces available to them. The analytic literature which has appeared has mostly been

²⁵ For a situation of this war in Congo's geopolitical trajectory up to that time, see Galloy and Gruénais (1997). See J. F. Clark (1998) and Yengo et al. (1999), among others, for analyses of the war and its immediate aftermath.

published overseas (primarily in France), but like all such knowledge it is inescapably retrospective.

The Republic of Congo's recent history serves as an exemplar of the complexities of knowledge and action in a postcolonial state. In these circumstances, as in others, we do not easily attain a clairvoyant and purifying critical intelligence which can be spoken in the present. Rather, as so clearly shown in Achebe's *A Man of the People*, within a world much larger and less knowable than ourselves we create a flawed and partial account, constructed in retrospect, in which we begin again and again to see and transcend the limits of our perception and understanding. Meanwhile, Congolese face – as Kezilahabi's narrator finds himself exploring in the waking dreams of *Mzingile* and *Nagona* – the daily task of living beyond disillusion in a given world at once mundane, modern, anciently familiar and surreal.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful for the welcome offered to me by the Congolese Ministry of Health and Social Affairs for my dissertation research on AIDS awareness and prevention. That research was generously supported by the Social Science Research Council and the Wenner-Gren Foundation, as well as by Simpson fellowships and Rocca Memorial funds at the University of California, Berkeley. The difficult circumstances of those years in Congo have led to these reflections on events in the country, as they were represented in public discourse and as witnessed by myself and by those with whom I came into contact there. Any errors of fact or interpretation are entirely my own.

REFERENCES

- Achebe, C. 1966. *A Man of the People*. London: Heinemann.
- Andersson, E. 1968. *Churches at the Grass-Roots: a study in Congo-Brazzaville*. London: Lutterworth.
- Balandier, G. 1955. *Sociologie des Brazzavilles Noires*. Paris: Colin.
- 1976. 'Les mouvements d'innovation religieuse en Afrique noire', in H.-C. Puech (ed.), *Historie des religions*, vol. 3. Paris: Gallimard.
- Baniafouna, C. 1996. *Congo démocratie: les déboires de l'apprentissage*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Bayart, J.-F. 1993. *The State in Africa: the politics of the belly*. New York: Longman.
- Bazenguissa-Ganga, R. 1997a. *Les voies du politique au Congo*. Paris: Karthala.
- 1997b. 'Le rôle des médias dans la construction des identités de violence politique à Brazzaville', in P. Yengo (ed.), *Identités et démocratie*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Bazenguissa-Ganga, R. and J. MacGaffey. 2002. *Congo-Paris: transnational traders on the margins of the law*. London: James Currey.
- Bazenguissa-Ganga, R. and P. Yengo. 1999. 'La popularisation de la violence politique au Congo', *Politique Africaine* 73: 186–92.
- Beidelman, T. O. 1986. *Moral Imagination in Kaguru Modes of Thought*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Bernault, F. 1996. *Démocraties ambiguës en Afrique centrale: Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon: 1940–1965*. Paris: Karthala.

- . 2000. 'The political shaping of sacred locality in Brazzaville, 1959–1997', in D. Anderson and R. Rathbone (eds), *Africa's Urban Past*. Oxford: James Currey.
- Bockie, S. 1993. *Death and the Invisible Powers: the world of Kongo belief*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Cahen, R. 1996. 'Besoin de démocratie: brefs éléments de réponse à Patrice Yengo et quelques autres', *Politique Africaine* 62: 109–12.
- Clark, J. F. 1997a. 'Congo: transition and the struggle to consolidate', in Clark and Gardinier (eds), *Political Reform in Francophone Africa*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- . 1997b. 'Petro-politics in the Republic of Congo', *Journal of Democracy* 8 (3): 62–76.
- . 1998. 'Democracy dismantled in the Congo Republic', *Current History* 97 (619): 234–37.
- . 2002. 'The neo-colonial context of the democratic experiment of Congo-Brazzaville', *African Affairs* 101: 171–92.
- Clark, P. 2000. 'Passionate engagements: a reading of Sony Labou Tansi's private ancestral shrine', *Research in African Literatures* 31 (3): 39–68.
- Comaroff, John. 2001 'Criminal justice, cultural justice: the limits of liberalism and the pragmatics of difference in South Africa'. Talk given in the Department of Anthropology, University of California at Berkeley.
- Comaroff, Jean and John Comaroff. 1999a. 'Occult economies and the violence of abstraction: notes from the South African postcolony', *American Ethnologist* 26 (2): 279–303.
- . (eds). 1999b. *Civil Society and the Political Imagination in Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- de Boeck, F. 2002. 'Le "deuxieme monde" et les "enfants sorciers" en République démocratique du Congo', *Mots Pluriels* 22, September, www.arts.ua.edu.au/MotsPluriels.
- Desjeux, D. 1987. *Stratégies paysannes en Afrique noire: le Congo. Essai sur la gestion de l'incertitude*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Devauges, R. 1977. *L'oncle, le ndoki et l'entrepreneur: la petite entreprise congolaise à Brazzaville*. Paris: ORSTOM.
- Devès, J. M. (ed.). 1994. *Magie et écriture au Congo*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Devisch, R. 1996. '"Pillaging Jesus": healing churches and the villagisation of Kinshasa', *Africa* 66 (4): 555–85.
- Diamani, J.-P. 1995. 'L'humeur politique au Phare du Zaïre', *Politique Africaine* (58): 151–7.
- Dongala, E. 1973. *Un fusil dans la main, un poème dans la poche*. Paris: Albin Michel.
- Dorier-Apprill, E. 1996. 'Les enjeux sociopolitiques du foisonnement religieux à Brazzaville', *Politique Africaine* 64: 129–35.
- Dorier-Apprill, E. et al. 1998. *Vivre à Brazzaville: modernité et crise au quotidien*. Paris: Karthala.
- Dzaka, T. and M. Milandou. 1994. 'L'entrepreneuriat congolais à l'épreuve des pouvoirs magiques', *Politique Africaine* 56: 108–18.
- Eklholm-Friedman, K. and A. Sundberg. 1995. 'Ethnic war and ethnic cleansing in Brazzaville', in P. Kaarsholm (ed.), *From Post-Traditional to Post-Modern? Interpreting the meaning of modernity in third world urban societies*. Occasional Paper no. 14, International Development Studies, Roskilde: Roskilde University.
- Ferme, M. 1999. 'Staging *politisi*: the dialogics of publicity and secrecy in Sierra Leone', in J. L. Comaroff and J. Comaroff (eds), *Civil Society and the Political Imagination in Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Feyte, E. et al. 1997. 'Le romancier tanzanien Euphrase Kezilahabi', *Politique Africaine* 66: 126–33.
- Gakosso, J.-C. 1997. *La nouvelle presse congolaise: du goulag à l'agora*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Galloy, M.-R. and M.-E. Gruénais. 1997. 'Au Congo, le pouvoir par les armes', *Le Monde Diplomatique*, November. Paris.
- Gauvrit, É. 1997. 'Congo: l'épreuve des urnes', in *L'Afrique Politique: revendications populaires et recompositions politiques*. Paris: Karthala/CEAN.
- Geschiere, P. 1997. *The Modernity of Witchcraft: politics and the occult in postcolonial Africa*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.
- Gikandi, S. 1991. *Reading Chinua Achebe: language and ideology in fiction*. London: James Currey.
- Glaser, A. et al. 1998. 'Un rôle intermédiaire dans le conflit congolais', *Libération*, 4 February.
- Gruénais, M.-É. 1992. 'L'État congolais face à ses prophètes', in M. Haubert et al. (eds), *État et société dans le tiers-monde. De la modernisation à la démocratisation?* Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne.
- 1997. 'Congo: la fin d'une pseudo-démocratie', *Politique Africaine* 68: 125–33.
- 2001. 'From spirits to the Bible: Ayelesili, or the impossible church (Congo-Brazzaville)', in P.-J. Laurent and A. Mary (eds), *Prophets, Visionaries and Healers of Contemporary Subsaharan Africa. Social Compass* 48 (3): 387–402.
- Gruénais, M.-É. et al. 1995. 'Messies, fétiches et lutte de pouvoirs entre les "grands hommes" du Congo démocratique', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 137 (35-1): 163–93.
- Guyer, J. and E. Belinga. 1995. 'Wealth in people and wealth in knowledge: accumulation and composition in equatorial Africa', *Journal of African History* 36 (1): 91–120.
- Hersak, D. 2001. 'There are many Kongo worlds: particularities of magico-religious beliefs among the Vili and Yombe of Congo-Brazzaville', *Africa* 71 (4): 614–40.
- Janzen, J. 1982. *Lemba, 1650–1930: a drum of affliction in Africa and the New World*. New York: Garland.
- Kezilahabi, E. 1990. *Nagona*. Dar es Salaam: Dar es Salaam University Press.
- 1991. *Mzingile*. Dar es Salaam: Dar es Salaam University Press.
- Kouvouma, A. 1988. 'A chacun son prophète', *Politique Africaine* 31: 62–6.
- Laburthe-Tolra, P. 1981. *Les seigneurs de la forêt: essai sur le passé historique, l'organisation sociale et les normes éthiques des anciens Beti du Cameroun*. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne.
- MacGaffey, W. 1983. *Modern Kongo Prophets: religion in a plural society*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press.
- 1986. *Religion and Society in Central Africa: the BaKongo of Lower Zaire*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 1994. 'Kimbanguism and the question of syncretism in Zaïre', in T. Blakeley et al. (eds), *Religion in Africa*. London: James Currey.
- Mbembe, A. 2000. *De la postcolonie: essai sur l'imagination politique dans l'Afrique contemporaine*. Paris: Karthala.
- Mbembe, A. and J. Roitman. 1995. 'Figures of the subject in times of crisis', *Public Culture* 7 (2): 323–52.
- Menga, G. 1993. *Congo: la transition escamotée*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Moudileno-Massengo, M. 1975. *République Populaire du Congo: une escroquerie idéologique*. Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose.

- Mwissa, C. K. 1996. 'Zaire: l'officiel contredit par le réel', *Politique Africaine* 63: 13–23.
- Nlandu-Tsasa, C. 1997. *La rumeur au Zaïre de Mobutu*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Nsafou, G. 1996. *Congo: de la démocratie à la démocratie*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Nooter, M. (ed.). 1993. *Secrecy: African art that conceals and reveals*. New York: Museum for African Art.
- Nyamnjoh, F. 2002. "'A child is one person's only in the womb': domestication, agency, and subjectivity in the Cameroon grassfields", in R. Werbner (ed.), *Postcolonial Subjectivities in Africa*. London: Zed Books.
- Ossebi, H. 1998. 'De la galère à la guerre: jeunes et "Cobras" dans les quartiers Nord de Brazzaville', *Politique Africaine* 72: 17–33.
- Quantin, P. 1994. 'Congo: les origines politiques de la décomposition d'un processus de libéralisation (août 1992–décembre 1993)', *L'Afrique politique 1994: vue sur la démocratisation à marée basse*. Paris: Kathala/CEAN.
- Radu, M. S. and K. Somerville. 1989. *Benin, The Congo, and Burkina Faso: politics, economics, and society*. London: Pinter.
- Rowlands, M. and J.-P. Warnier. 1988. 'Sorcery, power and the modern state in Cameroon', *Man* 23 (1): 118–32.
- Schatzberg, M. 2001. *Political Legitimacy in Middle Africa: father, family, food*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Shaw, R. 2000. "'Tok af, lef af": a political economy of Temne techniques of secrecy and self', in I. Karp and D. A. Masolo (eds), *African Philosophy as Cultural Inquiry*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Sinda, M. 1972. *Le Messiasme congolaise*. Paris: Payot.
- Siroto, L. 1969. 'Masks and Social Organization among the Bakwele People of Western Equatorial Africa', Ph.D. thesis, Columbia University. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, Inc.
- Thomas, D. 2002. *Nation-building, Propaganda, and Literature in Francophone Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Tonda, J. 1988. 'Marx et l'ombre des fétiches: pouvoir local contre *njobi* dans le nord-Congo', *Politique Africaine* 31: 78–83.
- 1997. 'La démocratie aux risques du prophétisme et du corps-sexe féminin', *Politique Africaine* 67: 103–12.
- 1998. 'La guerre dans le "Camp Nord" au Congo-Brazzaville: ethnicité et ethos de la consommation/consumation', *Politique Africaine* 72: 50–67.
- 2001. 'Le syndrome du prophète: médecines africaines et précarités identitaires', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 161 (41-1): 139–62.
- Verschave, F. 1998. *La Françafrique: le plus long scandale de la République*. Paris: Stock.
- Warnier, J.-P. 1993. *L'Esprit d'entreprise au Cameroun*. Paris: Karthala.
- Watts, M. 1996. 'Islamic modernities? Citizenship, civil society and Islamism in a Nigerian city', *Public Culture* 8 (2): 251–96.
- Yengo, P. 1995. 'Ordre de la transgression et démocratie en Afrique centrale', in *La Lettre du Forum de Delphes* (11: 2–3). Paris/Athens (October/November).
- 1998. "'Chacun aura sa part": les fondements historiques de la (re)production de la guerre à Brazzaville', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 150–52: 297–329.
- Yengo, P. et al. (eds). 1999. *Congo-Brazzaville: dérives politiques, catastrophe humanitaire, désirs de paix*. Paris: Karthala.
- Yoka, L. M. 1984. 'Radio-trottoir: Le discours en camouflage', *Le Mois en Afrique* 225–26: 154–60.

- Young, C. 1999. 'Africa: an interim balance sheet', in L. Diamond and M. F. Plattner (eds), *Democratization in Africa*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- ... [unsigned] 1990. *La Semaine Africaine*. 1,868:1, 5 December.

ABSTRACT

In 1991 in the Republic of Congo, a sovereign national conference in Brazzaville inaugurated a peaceful transition from socialist one-party government to multi-party democracy. The pluralization of public voices in the newly liberalized country – in religious movements, political parties and independent presses – expressed new conditions of understanding about the nation and its affairs. At the same time, local networks and categories of perception inflected geopolitical pressures from foreign powers into quasi-ethnic divisions in competition for power through government representation. Subsequent conflict over contested elections sparked devastating civil war in 1997 and resulted in the return to power of the former socialist leadership.

Given the uncertainties – indeed, the crises of institutions and of knowledge – during these times, how did Congolese diagnose the troubles through which the country passed? This article examines how national and socialist ideals and practices were evoked and reinterpreted to this end in public discourse through idioms of family, affliction, spiritual power and the living body. These modes of speech and action give evidence of longer-term continuities in the region's political imaginations, as these incorporated changes brought by ongoing involvement in larger modern worlds.

RÉSUMÉ

En 1991, dans la République du Congo, une conférence nationale souveraine inaugurait à Brazzaville une transition pacifique du gouvernement socialiste à parti unique vers une démocratie pluripartite. La pluralisation de la parole publique dans le nouveau pays libéralisé, au sein des mouvements religieux, des partis politiques et de la presse indépendante, a exprimé de nouvelles conditions d'interprétation de la nation et de ses affaires. Dans le même temps, des réseaux locaux et catégories de perception ont altéré les pressions géopolitiques des puissances étrangères en divisions quasi-ethniques en concurrence pour le pouvoir à travers la représentation du gouvernement. Le conflit surgi au lendemain des élections contestées a déclenché la terrible guerre civile de 1997 et débouché sur le retour au pouvoir des anciens dirigeants socialistes.

Compte tenu des incertitudes (tout particulièrement les crises des institutions et de la connaissance) au cours de cette période, comment les Congolais ont-ils diagnostiqué les troubles que le pays a traversés? Cet article examine la manière dont les pratiques et idéaux nationaux et socialistes ont été évoqués et réinterprétés à ces fins dans le discours public à travers des idiomes de la famille, de l'affliction, du pouvoir spirituel et du corps vivant. Ces modes d'expression et d'action témoignent de continuités à long terme dans les imaginations politiques de la région, comme ces changements incorporés résultant d'une participation continue dans des mondes modernes plus vastes.