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# **Book Review: From Zaire to the Democratic Republic of the Congo and The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A People's History**

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Nzongola-Ntalaja, Georges. *From Zaire to the Democratic Republic of the Congo*. Uppsala, Sweden: Nordiska Africainstitutet, 1998. 18 pp. \$12.95 (paper).

Nzongola-Ntalaja, Georges. *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A People's History*. London and New York: Zed Books, 2002. 304 pp. \$25.00 (paper).

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the political and social history of "the Congo" can be puzzling to both Congolese and non-Congolese alike. Although it attained independence on 30 June 1960 as a large, strategically important, mineral-rich nation, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) faces all of the chronic woes of many of its neighbors: the healthcare calamities of AIDS and various endemic diseases, an education system in crisis, a decaying transport and communications infrastructure, a government designed for democracy but used to enrich the political leadership. In addition, Congo has had a poorly paid and demoralized military which has been unable to resist invasion and insurrection without international assistance. The contradiction between the widely acknowledged potential of Congo and the reality of its present economic and security crises presents only one of many difficult aspects of its history. For English-speaking peoples, the opacity of Congolese history is further exacerbated by the fact that much of the scholarly literature is in French or Dutch. Yet, events like the current war, in which close to 3,000,000 persons have died since 1998, require the interested observer to make an extra effort to dig beneath the surface and see order in what is all too easily (and inaccurately) dismissed as chaos. Two recent publications will greatly facilitate the effort to recognize critical patterns in the history of the DRC and to understand better both the complexity of that history and the potential for the future of Congo.

First, the publication of *From Zaire to the Democratic Republic of the Congo* by Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja offers a concise analysis of "the political and social situation in the DRC since May 1997" (5), i.e., during the first year of Laurent-Désiré Kabila's presidency. In addition to the text, two helpful aids include a map of the DRC with general

information about the country at the beginning and a brief bibliography.

Divided into three parts, this 18-page paper provides a succinct statement of "the historical context," "the current political situation," and "the need for a successful transition." In the first part concerning the historical context, the author argues that the transition from Mobutu Sese Seko to L-D Kabila needs to be understood in light of a "culture of resistance," including both the rise of the democracy movement, especially the *Conférence Nationale Souveraine* (CNS; 7 August 1991 to 6 December 1992), and the informalisation of the economy. These political and economic factors are understood in light of the 32-year reign of Mobutu (1965–97). The latter's authoritarian leadership produced widespread dissatisfaction and a popular desire to have an authentic, multiparty democracy, and Nzongola-Ntalaja provides a clear assessment of the CNS as an expression of that popular desire. On the economic side, Mobutu's Leopoldian sense of ownership of the country and its resources impoverished the nation and stimulated the growth of the informal sector as a survival strategy on the part of people who did not have access to the reigns of power and the benefits of that power.

The second part of this paper covers "the current political situation," i.e., the first year of L-D Kabila's rule, wherein the author describes two contrasting sources of legitimacy, "the *democratic legitimacy* of the National Conference and the *revolutionary legitimacy* of the AFDL" (12, emphasis added). The AFDL was the alliance of political groups that Kabila led in his successful march to power in early 1997. Here Nzongola-Ntalaja highlights an irony in the international response to the CNS and the AFDL. Although the CNS had overwhelmingly supported Etienne Tshisekedi as Prime Minister, the decisions of the CNS were largely ignored by Mobutu and the western powers. On the other hand, Kabila's AFDL was accepted as legitimate although its mode of accession to power was not democratic but revolutionary. Thus, the author notes "that America prefers those leaders who come to power by the barrel of the gun to those who want to submit themselves to the verdict of the ballot box" (14).

The third part of this paper tries to make the case for "the need for a successful transition," underlining the pro-

found social and economic problems faced by the people of the DRC (e.g., “the quality of life in rural areas is worse today than it was 40 years ago”), and highlighting the need for reconstruction in the areas of public health, education, political accountability, and economic development. Here he argues that debt relief is necessary, particularly since the debt incurred during the Mobutu years did not benefit the country as a whole, and that any further international economic assistance “should be channeled through NGOs.” In addition, the war in the eastern part of the country needs to be settled as a precondition for the construction of a stable and accountable democratic government.

In conclusion, this paper as a whole is a concise and nuanced analysis that provides the interested reader valuable insights into the continuing crisis and the prospects for reconstruction in the DRC. If this paper whets one’s appetite for a lengthier study with a deeper historical perspective and a slightly more current assessment of the situation in the DRC, one should also consider picking up the next work by Prof. Nzongola-Ntalaja.

Second, the publication of Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja’s most recent scholarly work, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A People’s History*, will serve a wide audience of specialists and non-specialists alike who are interested in a range of issues from the early colonial period of the Congo Free State (1885–1908), through the story of the Belgian Congo (1908–60), and especially during the period of independence since 1960. Organized in eight concisely written chapters, plus an introduction, the text is supplemented by helpful aids, including a map, chronology, bibliography, and index.

This work is an overview of Congolese history that brings clarity to a range of issues and periods, however it is not clarity devoid of passion or perspective. Nzongola-Ntalaja has personal and theoretical perspectives that both sharpen his analysis and caution the reader to read with his or her own critical faculties intact. For those not already familiar with his previous work, Nzongola-Ntalaja acknowledges his own point of view. He has a particular passion for the politics of the people from the popular resistance to the colonial state at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, through the struggles for independence and the “second independence” in the 1950s and 1960s to the democracy movement at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a Congolese with a passion for politics, he has his own memories of and perspective on the years leading up to and following independence, and this perspective informs his analysis. In the Preface, he provides an helpful overview of his involvement in Congolese politics from student activism at the time of independence in 1960 to the work of the national conference (CNS) in 1991–92 and beyond.

As a scholar interested in social and political history, his analysis is “based on the theoretical insights from the classics of African liberation by Frantz Fanon and Amílcar Cabral” (4). Thus, although the title includes the phrase “from Leopold to Kabila,” Nzongola-Ntalaja is less interested in the leaders of the state than he is in the voices and

actions of the people *en masse*. “This book is a study of the democracy movement in the Congo, from the standpoint of popular resistance to exploitation and repression, for a better social and political order” (3). The latter phrase, “a better social and political order,” refers to the twin themes of economic prosperity and political freedom. Contra “exploitation and repression,” economic well-being and freedom of political expression are understood to be the fundamental concerns of popular movements throughout Congolese history.

This analytic perspective is used to test a “working hypothesis...that the [democracy] movement has failed to fulfill the people’s aspirations for democracy and economic development because these aspirations were in marked discordance with the narrow class interests and political culture of the leaders of the movement” (3). Broadly speaking, the history of popular resistance to social and political oppression is presented in terms of “four specific moments of resistance”: “resistance to colonial rule (analyzed here in Chapters 1–2); resistance to neocolonialism (Chapters 3–4); resistance to Mobutu’s dictatorship and reign of terror (Chapters 5–6); and resistance to foreign aggression and new forms of dictatorship internally (Chapter 7)” (4). Chapter 8, “Conclusion,” includes his assessment of the current state of the democracy movement in Congo. The analysis of the resistance/independence/democracy movements in the context of the class structure of colonial and neo-colonial Congolese society produces an historical narrative, which highlights the role of the Congolese people and their political leaders in a story of struggle for democracy and economic development from 1885 to 2001.

Although the book as a whole analyzes Congolese history from 1885 to 2001, most of the colonial period is covered in Chapter One (“Imperialism, Belgian Colonialism and African Resistance”), including the introduction of European control, the formation of the Belgian colonial system, and various modes of African resistance colonial rule. Although the first two parts of this chapter summarize information widely available in other sources, they highlight some of the key themes of the text. For example, the author stresses that the period of the Belgian Congo (1908–60) was not as complete a departure from the human rights abuses (the “Congo holocaust”) fostered by the Congo Free State (1885–1908) as many have thought. In other words, despite the success of the Congo Reform Association in forcing the transition for royal to parliamentary control, “(t)he Leopoldian system was replaced by a colonial regime that was just as oppressive, albeit in a less brutal manner” (26), including continuity in the exploitation of natural and human resources and in the political repression of the Congolese people.

The third part of Chapter One introduces another important theme of the book: the various modes of resistance to social and political oppression. These modes include armed resistance to the introduction of colonial rule, resistance in a religious idiom (i.e., the Kimbanguist movement beginning in 1921), and peasants’ and worker’s revolts from

1900–45. Another key element of the continuity from the early colonial period to the Belgian Congo was the concerted effort of “the colonial trinity of the state, the Catholic Church and major private companies” (49) to manage these forms of resistance and maintain foreign control of the country, its people, and its natural resources.

In Chapter Two, “The Struggle for Independence,” an analysis of the structure of colonial society in the 1950s highlights the socio-economic bases for the conjunction of “the popular classes and the petty bourgeois elite in an alliance against colonial rule” (77). After Van Bilsen promulgated a thirty-year plan for decolonization, various responses began the process of defining the independence movement. Nzongola-Ntalaja dates the beginning of the independence movement to 23 August 1956 when the Kasa-Vubu read the Abako response to the Van Bilsen plan. In the discussion of the independence movement, Nzongola-Ntalaja’s own passion and particular perspective come to fore. His intimate knowledge and close reading of the events that follow, including opinions about the strengths and weaknesses of various leaders and strategies, make this and subsequent chapters fascinating reading.

Chapter Three, “The First Congo Crisis,” details the “crisis of decolonization, 1960–1965.” From the internal conflict in the new government and the military mutiny to the Katanga secession and the plot to assassinate the popularly elected Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, this chapter outlines the role of various Congolese and international factors, including the United Nations, Belgium, and the American CIA, in the failure to achieve true independence. Lumumba is seen as a brilliant nationalist leader who made some grave errors of judgment, however his downfall was not the result of those errors so much as a conspiracy among his enemies both foreign and domestic, a conspiracy that has already been well-documented. Although much of this material is widely known due to numerous publications in English, the events of the next chapter have been less clearly analyzed.

Chapter Four, “The Second Independence Movement,” continues the analysis of the crisis of decolonization by examining the popular reaction to Lumumba’s death and the accession to power of the Binza group, especially Katanga secessionist Moïse Tshombe and Lumumba’s military chief of staff Joseph-Désiré Mobutu. The events described in this chapter cover the period from 1963 to 1968. Despite his sympathies with the Lumumbists and the popular revolts against the central government, Nzongola-Ntalaja does not simplistically blame the Binza group and their foreign supporters for the course of events and the failure of the “second independence movement.” He provides a detailed analysis of the internal problems and political failings of the groups headed by Pierre Mulele, Antoine Gizenga, and others. In particular, his strongest criticism is directed towards the followers of Christophe Gbenye known as the *Simba*. Militarily the most successful group opposing Mobutu and his allies, the *Simba* were nonetheless a political failure because of their lack of discipline, producing a “reign of ter-

ror” within the territory they controlled. Readers who recall events in Congo during the mid-1960s will recognize and probably agree with Nzongola-Ntalaja’s characterization of the *Simba*, but the real value of the chapter is his nuanced presentation of a variety of persons and events that all too often have been reduced to the simplistic categories of Cold War rhetoric. Just as many people have re-evaluated their understanding of Patrice Lumumba’s role in Congolese history, this chapter will help many to come to a more accurate understanding of the social and political dynamics of the “second independence movement.”

Chapter Five, “The Mobutu Regime: Dictatorship and State Decay,” describes the accession of Joseph-Désiré Mobutu to the Presidency of Congo on 24 November 1965, introducing a stage of Congolese history that has been compared to Leopold II and the Congo Free State. Mobutu’s assumption of authority included assuming the right to change the name of the nation (to the Republic of Zaire), restricting political expression to the MPR, the one legal political party, and appropriating foreign aid and government property for his own personal benefit. His autocratic style of personal rule led to a decline in the economy of the nation, in addition to the repression of civil liberties. As the author puts it, “the major consequences of the Mobutist system of institutionalized theft and corruption has been the ruin of the country’s economy and social fabric” (152). Masked by the ideology of authenticity, the political and economic practices of the Mobutu regime left the nation in sufficient ruin that domestic and foreign supporters began to fall away until he was forced to open the one party system to political rivals in the early 1990s.

Chapter Six, “The Struggle for Multiparty Democracy,” considers an aspect of recent history dated from 1980 when a group of 13 members of parliament, including Etienne Tshisekedi wa Mulumba, produced a 52-page letter demanding political reforms. Despite the harsh repression of the signatories (and of other political opponents over the decades), the struggle for democracy continued to expand among all sectors of society, including many Congolese living abroad. The formation of the UDPS in 1982 gave institutional focus to the democratic aspirations of the nation eight years before Mobutu was forced to accept the formation of political parties other than his own MPR on 24 April 1990. The legalization of political competition soon led to the formation of the sovereign national conference (CNS) discussed above. This is another chapter of particular interest not only because it elucidates events in the 1990s that led to the end of the Mobutu regime but also because the author is able to speak out of his own observations of the CNS and his experience on the electoral commission during this period. The expansion of the democracy movement indexed by popular support of the UDPS and the CNS highlights what the author characterized as “democratic legitimacy” in his 1998 publication (see above), however it was not the democracy movement that actually produced the end of the Mobutu regime.

Chapter Seven is entitled “Conflict in the Great Lakes Region.” Decisions made in Rwanda, Uganda, and the eastern part of what was then Zaire produced a sequence of events that undermined the last vestiges of Mobutu’s hold on power and led to the rise of L-D Kabila. Specifically, genocide in Rwanda in 1994, when over 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed in about three months, began a process of destabilization not only in Rwanda but also in Congo. The role of other African and Western nations in these events has neither gone unnoticed nor been fully explored. Among other things, the emergence of the AFDL under the leadership of L-D Kabila and his foreign sponsors in 1996 led to Mobutu’s political demise and Kabila’s rise to power and the presidency in May 1997. Subsequently, these events also generated what the author describes as “the invention of a civil war” by Rwanda and Uganda and their Congolese allies on 2 August 1998. Nzongola-Ntalaja is only one of many Congolese who characterize this war as a “war of aggression” or, as he puts it in this book, a “war of partition and plunder” (227). The assassination of L-D Kabila on 16 January 2001 and the placement of his son, Joseph Kabila, in the presidency changed the dynamics of international relations and internal politics.

At the conclusion of Chapter Seven and in Chapter Eight, the “Conclusion” to the book, Nzongola-Ntalaja of-

fers advice to the new President and to others concerned about the future of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In particular, he argues that President Joseph Kabila should learn the lessons of the democracy movement from the eve of independence to the present, especially the need for political leadership to attend to the needs and aspirations of the country as a whole. Although the democracy movement represented by the CNS did not succeed in overthrowing Mobutu, its failure does not thereby diminish the aspirations of the Congolese people for both democracy and economic well-being. The country needs a stable and legitimate government whose primary loyalty is not to a particular fraction of the society or to external forces but to the entire citizenry of the nation.

Both of Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja’s recent publications about Congolese history, *From Zaire to the Democratic Republic of the Congo* and *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A People’s History*, are fascinating and well written, and they go a long way toward helping the English speaking world understand better the complex and often confusing social and political dynamics of Congolese history. Whatever one’s views of his theoretical foundations or one’s prior knowledge of the subject, Professor Nzongola-Ntalaja’s passion is both provocative and engaging, and his scholarship will inform even the best informed reader.