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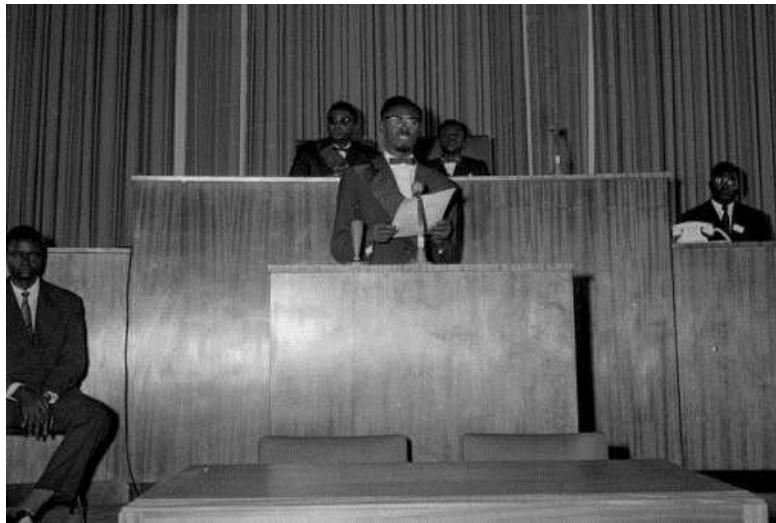
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A Revolutionary Speech: Patrice Lumumba and the Birth of the Republic of Congo

By Ludo de Witte
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Patrice Lumumba, the Congolese independence leader and first democratically elected Prime Minister, was executed 55 years ago on 17th January, 1961. He had been beaten and tortured in a culmination of two assassination plots by the Belgian government and the CIA,

ordered directly by President Dwight Eisenhower to 'eliminate' the charismatic leader, with the cooperation of British intelligence and Katangan authorities.

Just months before his deposition in a coup, Lumumba had delivered a powerful speech declaring the independence of the Republic of Congo and speaking eloquently about the struggle against racism and colonization, "an indispensable struggle to put an end to the humiliating slavery which was imposed on us by force."

He added:

"Our wounds are too fresh and too smarting for us to be able to have known ironies, insults, and blows which we had to undergo morning, noon and night because we were Negroes. We have seen our lands spoiled in the name of laws which only recognised the right of the strongest. We have known laws which differed according to whether it dealt with a black man or a white.

"We have known the atrocious sufferings of those who were imprisoned for their political opinions or religious beliefs and of those exiled in their own country. Their fate was worse than death itself. Who will forget the rifle-fire from which so many of our brothers perished, or the gaols in to which were brutally thrown those who did not want to submit to a regime of justice, oppression and exploitation which were the means the colonialists employed to dominate us?"

*The written text of this speech, delivered on 30th June 1960 in the presence of the Belgian King Baudouin, has been held in the archives of the Société Générale de Belgique. Ludo de Witte, author of *The Assassination of Lumumba*, returns to the events of the day in an article originally published in French in **Le Vif/L'Express**.*

Few speeches have marked our history as much as that given by the Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba on 30 June 1960, the day that Congo achieved its independence. This speech could be considered the birth certificate of modern Congo, a country that was then emerging from eighty years of colonialism and which looked with confidence to its future. In Africa this speech is considered one of the key moments in propelling the continent onto the international stage. In the West, many have seen it as a call to arms opening up Belgian-Congolese hostilities, plunging this former Belgian colony into chaos. A chaos marked by the fall of the Lumumba government in 1960 and, the following year, by the assassination of the man considered in Congo to be the country's first 'national hero'.

Today, fifty-five years after independence, the paper copy of the text read by Lumumba has resurfaced for the first time. This is the definitive version of his speech. These are the pages that the Congolese prime minister brought with him to the podium. This text was written and typed out the previous night, and corrected by hand just before and even during the ceremony. We can consider it the country's founding document. It was found in the archives of Finoutremer, the former Compagnie du Katanga, which was previously one of the jewels of the Société Générale de Belgique. So for more than half a century the Congolese were deprived of a document that is essential to their country's history.

Baudouin warns his government

Léopoldville (today's Kinshasa), 30 June 1960s. Distinguished guests crowd into the Palais de la Nation, where Congo's independence is due to be officially celebrated. The impressive building on the bank of the River Congo was built under the governor general Pétillon. It was first conceived as a residence for members of the royal family travelling to Africa and, in part, as a residence for the governor general. In the new Congo, the parliament would meet there. As if nothing should change after power was handed to the Congolese, the guests were welcomed by a bronze statue of Léopold II – founder of the independent Congolese state – on horseback. Among those in the auditorium: newly elected Congolese politicians, Belgian officials, the international diplomatic corps, and the national and foreign press.

The rather nervous Belgian élite was asking itself questions. Against all expectations the nationalist Patrice Lumumba had managed to form a government. Could Belgium hold onto its interests in its ex-colony? For months, under pressure from his father Léopold III's entourage, the young king Baudouin warned his government that Belgium's 'imperishable rights' in Congo had to be preserved.

Gaston Eysken's government placed all its hopes in the Congolese army. This 'new' army, led by Belgian officers, had to 'contain' the Lumumba government. This was a risky 'Congolese gamble'. Baudouin wanted to make the Congolese prime minister understand that Congolese sovereignty had its limits. For the Africans, the king's speech of 30 June bordered on provocation.

Léopold II, the 'liberator'

There had been intensive work on this speech at the Palais de Laeken. In one draft, Léopold II was described as the 'liberator' of Congo, a state 'formed by freely concluded treaties between its leaders and the king's envoys'. Prime minister Eyskens, who checked the text, considered that this passage went too far. He wanted completely to get rid of this reference to Léopold II. Ultimately he was contented by the term 'liberator' being replaced with the word 'civiliser'. The sentence according to which the Congolese leaders had offered the country to Léopold II of their own volition was removed. All in all, the draft text focused on its message of saying in veiled but unequivocal terms what path the Palace wanted Congo to take: a neo-colonial régime guaranteeing Brussels' interests, with black dignitaries as mere sub-contractors.

The speech by the Congolese president Kasa Vubu, which had previously been transmitted to Brussels, and which was meant to follow Baudouin's speech, was so 'flat' and 'academic' that in a certain sense it confirmed or even reinforced the King's arguments. The ceremony seemed to augur well for the Belgian élite.

The King's speech

It began in line with the wishes of the former colonial régime. King Baudouin invited those in attendance to celebrate colonisation more than he did independence. The sovereign gave the impression that he was speaking in the name of his great-uncle, founder of the Congo Free

State: ‘Congo’s independence marks the outcome of the work conceived by the genius of King Léopold II, which he undertook with tenacious courage and which Belgium has continued with perseverance. ... In this historic moment, our thoughts must turn to the pioneers of African emancipation and to those after them who made Congo what it is today. They deserve both our admiration and your recognition, because it was they who, devoting all their efforts and even their lives to a great ideal, brought you peace and enriched your moral and material inheritance’. In this story crowned with success, there was no place for the Congolese people. After this, he again invoked the memory of Léopold II, in the following terms: ‘He appeared before you not as a conqueror but as a civiliser’. After a summary of the advantages that colonisation had brought to Congo: infrastructure, medical care, teaching, industry – followed a series of paternalistic remarks. The king warned the Congolese over their lack of political experience, the danger of tribal conflicts and ‘the attraction that foreign powers could exercise over certain regions’. After an homage to the colonial army ‘which accomplished its burdensome mission with unflinching courage and devotion’, came a last piece of advice: ‘Do not compromise the future with hasty reforms and do not replace the structures that Belgium has left you until you are certain that you can do better ... Do not be afraid of turning to us for help. We are ready to stand by your side, offering you advice and working with you to train the technicians and functionaries that you will need’. After Baudouin, Kasa Vubu read out his speech, and his words were quickly forgotten.

Baudouin’s idyllic portrayal of the colonial period clashed with the memory of the colonised: the millions of dead, as a result of the privations, forced labour, disease and repression under Léopold II’s rule; the brutal crushing of the revolts of the 1920s and 1930s; the terrible ‘war effort’ during the Second World War; the corporal punishment with the chicotte whip; the apartheid... But what did that matter to Brussels? An unwritten law forbade any discussion of colonial abuses, and independence was not meant to change that. Such were the Belgian élite’s hopes.

Nonetheless, Lumumba had found out about Baudouin and Kasa Vubu’s speeches in advance. And although the protocol did not plan for any third speech, Congo made its voice heard ‘in the name of a century of silence’, to use a phrase from Jean Jaurès.

Belgian-Congolese tensions

There were also other reasons why the Congolese prime minister wanted to have his say. Just before independence Brussels and colonial milieus had held a knife to the Lumumba government’s throat. The Belgian government unilaterally changed the legal status of colonial companies to Belgian ones, thus depriving Congo of its shares in the mining businesses. An attempt at secession in Katanga was foiled, but the secessionist lobby went unpunished.

A further incident: Lumumba wanted an amnesty measure upon independence, but the governor general Cornelis was opposed to this. Cornelis proposed that King Baudouin take this measure upon the day of his arrival in Congo on 29 June. Lumumba gave his assent, but that evening the King flatly refused to make the amnesty. The following morning the Congolese prime minister handed over the typescript of his speech to his ministers, to be amended in the hours that followed. Lumumba confided to one of his entourage, Pierre Duvivier, that he was

weary 'of being treated like a little kid'. Tired and threatened, the prime minister was firm in his conviction: his speech would galvanise the Congolese masses.

Lumumba's unforeseen speech

After the speech by President Kasa Vubu, the President of the Chamber, Kasongo, gave the word to Lumumba. This sparked the consternation of Baudouin and Eyskens. Indeed, the information service had neglected to hand them a copy of the text, though this had been provided in advance. The content of the speech gave them an even greater surprise. In his introduction the prime minister addressed his remarks not to the country's former 'masters' but 'to the men and women of Congo, combatants who are now victorious in their fight for independence'. In the typewritten text this address was preceded by 'Sir, Excellences, Mesdames and Messieurs', but he did not pronounce these words, choosing to address himself directly to his people. Suddenly the eminent foreign guests became the spectators to a celebration of the nationalist movement and its first successes.

Was the colony Léopold II's masterpiece? Lumumba gave the word to History itself: colonialism was 'the humiliating slavery imposed on us by force ... Our wounds are still too fresh and too painful for us to be able to chase them out of our memory'. He bitingly recalled 'the mockery, the insults, the blows we suffered morning, noon and night, because we were negroes. Who will forget that blacks were called "tu" not out of friendship, but because the respectful "vous" was reserved to whites only? We have seen our lands spoiled in the name of supposedly legal texts that recognised only the law of the strongest. We have seen the law being different for whites and for blacks: accommodating for the former, cruel and inhuman for the latter'.

The system was based on repression: 'We have seen the atrocious suffering of those subjected to confinement on account of their political opinions or religious beliefs – exiled in their own country, theirs was a fate worse than death itself ... Who can forget the shootings in which so many of our brothers perished, or the dungeons that so many were brutally thrown into because they no longer wanted to submit to a regime where oppression and exploitation were called "justice"?'

Not a generous gift

The Congolese Prime Minister explained that independence was not a generous gift offered by the Belgian state, as the king had tried to present it: 'No Congolese worthy of the name will every be able to forget that [independence] was won in struggle ... we could not be more proud of this struggle in blood, fire and tears, since it was a just and noble one'. Brussels' role in the decolonisation process was reduced to its proper proportions, 'Belgium, finally understanding the direction of History, did not try and stand in the way of our independence'.

Lumumba then turned to the future 'We will begin a new struggle, a sublime struggle that will lead our country to peace, prosperity and greatness. ... We will show the world what the black man can do when he is working in freedom, and we will put Congo at the centre of the prestige that will shine forth from Africa as whole'. He then solemnly declared, 'We will make sure that our homeland's earth truly benefits its children. We will review all the laws established in other

times, and make new, just and noble ones'. These promises to the Congolese people, dispossessed of millions of hectares of land during the colonial period, showed his intention to liberate his homeland from the yoke of the colonial inheritance, and to fight any new attempt at a neo-colonial recuperation of his country. Congo and Belgium would deal as equals, and their cooperation would be 'profitable to both countries'. Foreigners' assets in Congo had to be respected. But Congo would remain vigilant. This also meant an end to trade monopolies: Congo would accept the help 'of numerous foreign countries' such that their cooperation would be 'loyal' and 'not seek to impose any sort of policy upon us'. Lumumba finished with a message for Africa: 'Congo has to become a springboard for the liberation of the whole African continent'. A warning addressed to other colonial powers and the South African apartheid regime.

Contradictory reactions

Lumumba's speech was interrupted eight times by the prolonged applause of the Congolese in attendance. His speech concluded with an ovation. He was heard on the radio by thousands of Congolese, many of whom had not imagined it possible to speak to whites in this manner. These minutes of truth were cherished and savoured after eighty years of colonialism. For the first time in the country's history, a Congolese man addressed the nation and the world. He had restored confidence to his people, taking his place among the legendary leaders of Africa. His violent death seven months later did nothing to damage this supernatural status – quite the contrary. Decades later researchers in the Sankuru region report continual evocations of Lumumba, patiently awaiting his reincarnation.

For his part, king Baudouin was stupefied. He wanted to leave the country immediately, but Prime Minister Eyskens convinced him to stay. Lumumba was prepared to give a 'reconciliatory' speech in a closed circle during the dinner that followed the ceremony. Eyskens himself wrote this speech, later declaring 'I was Lumumba's nigger!' The Western media lashed out at Lumumba. Time spoke of a 'venomous attack'. Monsignor Van Waeyenberg, rector of the University of Louvain, asked if Lumumba ought to be thrown in prison. Conversely, Belgian official circles tried to play down the significance of the incident, as *La Libre Belgique* noted.

The British ambassador to Congo aptly explained how this affair was received in political and diplomatic circles: 'Lumumba's brutal speech ... was perceived as a means of letting off steam and positioning himself as a candidate for an eminent position on the Pan-African stage'. Discontent was expressed at the 4 July cabinet council meeting in Brussels, but the atmosphere was mainly optimistic.

Colonel Frédéric Vandewalle, head of the colonial security forces, was among those in attendance at the Palais de la Nation. The officer who would in subsequent years play a major role in the liquidation of Congolese nationalism later revealed, 'For many Congolese this display of defiance, which was incongruous and offensive to the Belgians, provided retribution. It enjoyed great success among those attending the ceremony without having been invited. Their applause was echoed by the crowds outside'.

Making independence palpable

Vandewalle understood that the Congolese people wanted the authorities to make independence palpable by creating jobs, providing adult education and raising salaries. ‘The more attentive observer noted that during the military parade [after the ceremony at the Palais de la Nation] the African crowd gave most applause to the blacks carrying the adjutants’ silver star. This opened the first breach in Congo’s military’s traditional barrier to any Africanisation of the cadres, which most Congolese wanted but which made little sense according to Belgian criteria’. Before independence, the nationalist leaders had long insisted that the colonial power ought to embark upon the Africanisation of the army. The mass pressure for this only increased on the eve of independence.

The typescript of Lumumba’s speech bears witness to the importance of this question. Here we can read an appeal to the Congolese: ‘I ask all of you not to demand unreasonable wage rises from one day to the next, before I have had time to set in motion the overall plan by which I will assure the nation’s prosperity’. On the document itself we see that this sentence was crossed out, and the nationalist leader did not ultimately pronounce these words. Lumumba was still revising his text even during the king’s speech, which suggests that he waited until the last moment before getting rid of this line. The king’s speech required an unequivocal reply, wholly opposed to Baudouin’s paternalistic approach.

Meeting words with action

A few days after the ceremony the official guests left Congo. On a sign in the military encampment in the capital the Congolese army leader General Emile Janssens wrote ‘Before independence = after independence’.

Ignoring the Lumumba government, he told the soldiers that they should not expect promotions. A military revolt broke out. Lumumba rapidly re-imposed control, thanks to the Africanisation of the officer corps. Janssens was dismissed. The prime minister thus met the words of the 30 June speech with action. With the demise of the white officer corps, Brussels lost the instrument through which it intended to hold on to control of the Congolese government. We know what happened next: Belgian troops intervened under the pretext of wanting to protect the whites in the Congo – soldiers had raped white women during the military revolt, though this had now been stopped. The Belgian forces separated the wealthy Katanga from the central government. Diplomats and secret agents plotted against the Prime Minister. In January 1961, Lumumba was assassinated, but his partisans did not abandon the struggle. In November 1965, after the bloody repression of nationalist revolts General Mobutu seized power, with the help of the CIA and the encouragement of the Belgian government.