

REVIEW ESSAY

Patrice Lumumba: The Evolution of an *Évolué*

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Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja. 2014. *Patrice Lumumba*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press. 164 pp.

Leo Zeilig. 2015. *Patrice Lumumba: Africa's Lost Leader*. London: Hause Publishing. 182 pp.

Patrice Lumumba remains an inspirational figure to Congolese and peoples across the developing world for his powerful articulation of economic and political self-determination. But who was the real Lumumba? There are competing myths: for the left he was a messianic messenger of Pan-Africanism; for the right he was angry, unstable and a Communist. He did not leave behind an extensive body of writings to sift through, ponder or analyze. The official canon of his work is short and includes such items as his June 30, 1960 Independence Day speech and the last letter to his wife shortly before his execution. The Patrice Lumumba, the one celebrated in Raoul Peck's film *Lumumba, la mort d'un prophète* does not start to find his own voice until his attendance at the December 1958 First All Africans Peoples' Conference which leaves him only twenty-five months on the world stage before his death at the age of thirty-five. While there have been other biographies and works on his life, much of it is now out of print or not available in English, Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja's *Patrice Lumumba* and Leo Zeilig's *Lumumba: Africa's Lost Leader* have attempted to fill in this biographical vacuum with sympathetic, accessible, and highly readable introductory texts.

The contribution these two books make to the literature of Patrice Lumumba, and the Congo is ironically not concentrating on Lumumba's iconic Cold War death but instead placing his life and words into the proper cultural, economic, and historical context of Congolese history. You may think Lumumba was born to make his "Independence Day" speech before the Belgian King. But Zeilig and Nzongola-Ntalaja effectively show that Lumumba evolved from a man who once believed in the Belgian civilizing mission (and his place in it) to the person celebrated today.

To understand his evolution one must realize that Lumumba was part of a larger cohort called the *evolue*. They were the upper strata of the middle class; the highest-level indigenous Congolese could attain in the Belgian colony. Patrice Lumumba wanted to be an *evolue*, and he climbed his way from obscurity to a job at the Kisangani Post Office

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through his own “irrepressible dynamism” and sheer force of will (Zeilig, p. 93). His rise to the top of Congolese society was nothing short of “phenomenal” considering he had no formal education (Nzongola-Ntalaja, p. 39). He became an active member of that city’s social and political life. At one point he was President or leader of seven different *evolue* voluntary associations. His earliest political activities and writings were in defense of this class and implicitly pro-Belgian. But his rapid rise through the ranks of Kisangani society invoked jealousies from his peers and mid-level white bureaucrats.

In 1955 Lumumba was caught embezzling from the Post Office to support his western lifestyle, which even on a meager salary was expected of him as an *evolue* (Zeilig, p. 52; and Nzongola-Ntalaja, p. 54). For both authors this is the watershed moment in Lumumba’s life. To be sure he was not alone in stealing – many others did the same. As Nzongola-Ntalaja states, the usual punishment for such an offense was repayment of debt and a slap on the wrist. The difference here was the jealousy and resentment his strong personality created. Lumumba was sent to prison and while the King eventually pardoned him it left an important mark on his life that is often glossed over by other biographers (for example it is completely missing from Peck’s film).

It was his time in prison that he started making the intellectual transition. It was here he fully realized that Belgian assimilation was a sham. Zeilig argues that after prison Lumumba set about trying to square the contradictions of wanting to be an *evolue* with the racism of the Belgian state (p. 59). It was in Pan-Africanism and Congolese nationalism that he found his answers. What separates Lumumba from many of his contemporaries was the fact that he had invented himself. He was neither from Kisangani nor Kinshasa. So he had no ethnic ties like Joseph Kasa-Vubu with ABAKO; or to a regional power base that Moises Tshombe could enjoy in Katanga. His sophisticated articulation of independence built on dignity and true political and economic freedom was a powerful message. As Nzongola-Ntalaja writes: “his aim being to see all strata and ethnic groups of the Congo united to end colonial economic exploitation, political repression, and cultural oppression” (p. 71). It was an inclusive message of hope. Yet ironically, this strength was also his undoing. When he was deposed as Prime Minister he had no real base of power to protect him.

Zeilig and Nzongola-Ntalaja stress that for all his intelligence and energy Lumumba and his fellow Congolese did not think through the consequences of immediate independence. It became apparent at the 1960 Round Table negotiations that the Congolese soon to be elite, “had no clear understanding of the economic aspects of the transfer of power, which had a lot to do with the limits of national sovereignty...” (Nzongola-Ntalaja, p. 82) The Belgians gave them the independence they so desperately wanted knowing they already had entrenched their economic dominance across the country for years to come.

But it is here I want to point out that both texts focus on the role of the Congolese *evolue* to the decolonization process. Sadly for Lumumba, he misjudged the ferocity of his compatriots to maintaining their own status of privilege. Just as it was almost expected that colonial clerks could put their hands in the till many of the *evolue* were unwilling partners to a truly democratic Congo. Jean Paul Satre notes that Lumumba

“appointed without the least suspicion the most active elements of his class... men whose common interest predisposed them to betray him” (Zeilig, p. 142). According to son Françoise Lumumba “[his father] discovered in the course of 1960 that not all Congolese had the same interpretation of independence, our ‘brothers’ were fighting for something completely different” (Zeilig, p. 148). Nzongola-Ntalaja damningly states that members of the new ruling elite were “more concerned with enjoying the material benefits that colonialism denied them” (p. 89). Zeilig concurs with this assessment—the *evolue* struggle was insuring their “integration into the privileged world” (p. 43).

Patrice Lumumba wanted true national liberation and participatory democracy. The Congolese elite, jealous and fearful of what that meant, conspired with the western political and economic classes to have him removed. Contrary to American thinking he was never a Marxist. But Lumumba’s rhetoric of freedom was too dangerous a message for the west and its Congolese allies to remain unchallenged (Nzongola-Ntalaja, p. 137). As for his January 1960 assassination, there is no question about the role of foreign intervention. New evidence only paints a fuller picture in the role the Belgians, the Eisenhower Administration, and the Hammarskjöld-led United Nations played in his removal from office and brutal death. The western elites would work with (and discard if needed) any grouping of Congolese *evolue* needed to accomplish their goals of getting rid of Lumumba, whether it was Kasa-Vubu, Moïse Tshombé, the Binza group, or eventually and tragically Joseph Mobutu.

Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja and Leo Zeilig show that the real Lumumba was a complex man who loved his nation, who was passionate, articulate, and intelligent but at times naïve. He was not perfect. Unlike many of his peers, however, he evolved to see a wider struggle of freedom beyond the narrow material interests of his class. I would highly recommend both these texts for students in African or Congolese politics. They would make great course additions. While they are similar there are subtle and important differences as well. For example, Zeilig spends more time on Lumumba’s formative years and his wives and children. His book also comes with explanatory text boxes in the margins concerning Congolese history and other African leaders. If there is a drawback to the Zeilig text I would suggest he actually expand these textboxes and add other pedagogical tools to truly make it a student textbook. As for Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, he has written extensively and authoritatively on the Congo. He has few peers on the subject. This work is partly a labor of love. He notes at the end that he hopes this book will be a “modest contribution” to Lumumba’s legacy (p. 140). I would argue both books are such contributions. They challenge us not to dwell on his death but breathe life into his words, because the questions Patrice Lumumba raised about self-determination then are still relevant for all of us today.

