'Mundele, it is because of you'
*History, Identity and the Meaning of Democracy in the Congo**

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A B S T R A C T

Since the signing of the Sun City peace agreement in 2002, the Democratic Republic of Congo has strived to democratise with limited success. This paper explores some of the challenges of the process of democratisation in the Congo. It does so not by looking at democratisation policies and practices, but by focusing on identity construction and how these identities manifest themselves in Congolese engagements with the process of democratisation as a process that is pursued in partnership with Western donors. The paper traces the construction of an understanding of democracy as a means to make an end to perpetual victimisation of Congolese people due to foreign interference in the Congo. The paper argues that the concept of democracy has acquired over time a meaning that creates a highly ambivalent engagement with the current democratisation process, and in particular with Western donors of this process, which are simultaneously perceived as the main obstacles to its successful realisation.

INTRODUCTION[1]

On a morning in November 2009, I was talking with a group of young political activists in Kasavubu district in Kinshasa. We spoke about political developments in the Congo since the signing of the peace agreement in 2002, and the promises and disappointments of democracy.[2] A passer-by tapped me on the shoulder and said '*Mundele*, it is because of you'.[3] The people with whom I was speaking were slightly

embarrassed but did not contradict the man when he spoke about how the West has betrayed the Congo and its people. He said to me 'I don't like [President] Kabila', and walked away. The man used a narrative commonly used in the Congo through which people explain the disappointments of the present situation in their country. For him the West is the cause of perpetual Congolese misery. He is disappointed in President Kabila, but he believes that Kabila is in power because Western powers want him to be, like Mobutu had been in the past. For him democracy and all that it entails has been taken hostage by devious and deceitful Western powers. His statement that he does not like President Kabila means that he does not like what Western powers have done to the Congo, rather than what he thinks of Kabila himself. He holds the West responsible for the perpetuation of misery in the country.

Mbembe has asked how identities that produce social practices are imagined in contemporary Africa and argues that African forms of 'self-writing' can no longer be based on European fictions of the African as victim (2001: 14–15). This paper argues that, contrary to Mbembe's argument Congolese people continue to imagine a Congolese Self as a perpetual victim and a Western Other as a perpetual oppressor. These identities subsequently manifest themselves in ambivalent Congolese attitudes towards the process of democratisation and political reconfiguration in Congo since the Sun City peace agreement. This raises important questions about the prospect of successful peace building and democratisation in the Congo.

After a brief section on historical narratives and democracy in the Congo, I will discuss several historic moments in Congolese post-colonial history when a central plot about the struggle for freedom was followed by failure and victimhood due to foreign intervention was repeated. Firstly, the assassination of Lumumba in 1961. As will unfold in the following paragraphs, the assassination of Lumumba is the foundation on which the narrative plot is based. Secondly, the National Sovereign Conference of 1990–92, which also offers a reflection on the era of Mobutu's rule through Congolese eyes. Thirdly, the toppling of Mobutu by Laurent-Désiré Kabila in 1997, followed by his assassination in 2001. And finally, the Second Congolese War, the Sun City peace agreement of 2002 and the transitional process following, which would culminate in the long awaited elections of 2006. Through these events and the interpretations of these events the concept of democracy has become loaded. The meaning of democracy for Congolese people today has less to do with a specific system of governance than with a

project of emancipation for which democracy has become a key means to achieve this. In other words, the meaning of democracy for Congolese people is more concerned with what it represents in the historical trajectory of post-colonial Congo, than what it represents as a system of governance.

The initial research on which this paper draws focused on aspects of democratisation and the post-war political transition process (De Goede 2015). However, many of my respondents insisted that it was important for me to understand the present in terms of its proper historical context, and gave me elaborate accounts of historic events to contextualise the current political situation. The ideas on which this paper is based stem from this process of historical contextualisation by my informants. Evidently, there are multiple Congolese narratives, none of which is uncontested. What makes the narrative that will be discussed in this paper so important is that it is employed by various social groups – political elites, urban masses, rural poor, civil society activists, supporters of the opposition as well as those in support of the regime. Although people of course often disagree on many issues, they used the same repertoires to construct their (often opposing) arguments. Their repertoires on western powers are stable and shared. What is open for interpretation and argumentation is the role of Congolese actors in events, whether one acts as a liberator or redeemer, or as a pawn that serves foreign interests.

NARRATIVES AND THE MEANING OF DEMOCRACY

Congolese people of all walks of life commonly use versions of the narrative of the passer-by on that November morning. It is a narrative that offers a lens through which meaning is given to events of the past and the present. The understanding that foreign powers seek to control and dominate the Congo is deeply rooted in popular perception. A civil servant at the National Assembly once told me that 'you cannot understand the Congo without understanding its history of exploitation. Congo is and has always been a field for exploitation. This explains everything in our country' (Civil servant 2009, Int.). A widely shared belief holds that Congolese post-colonial history is explained in terms of a perpetual struggle between Western powers that seek to maintain control over the Congo to protect their financial interests, and Congolese patriots that fight for Congolese dignity, self-determination and true independence. Within this narrative, the struggle for freedom is constructed and presented as a struggle that began during

colonial occupation and that still remains to be won. Central to this line of thought is the on-going and self-perpetuating belief in the continuation of foreign interference in Congolese affairs, (attempted) foreign occupation and the breach of Congolese sovereignty, and specifically the denial of Congolese dignity.

This Congolese understanding of the current democratisation process as being rooted in (post-)colonial history stands in stark contrast to the understanding of this process by the international donor community. A peace agreement is often considered as a clean slate, a new beginning; as if post-war reconstruction processes can occur in isolation of historical experiences that go back much further than merely the experiences of the recent conflict. What these interventions fail to recognise sufficiently is the long-term historical experiences in which current democratisation is contextualised and that provide a lens through which current processes of war and peace building are being understood from a local and national perspective. Democracy and democratic practices such as elections can have hidden meanings that fundamentally change the functioning of democracy. Such hidden meanings remain invisible to outsiders (Schaffer 1998). The narrative central in this paper reveals hidden meanings of democracy in Congo. However, the international donor community pushes aside the narrative – and the messages that are hidden within it – as lies and nonsense and therefore as irrelevant. The narratives are indeed at times internally incoherent, sometimes more expressions of a (deluded) conspiracy theory than a rational understanding of events. The narrative is, however, far from irrelevant. Its relevance lies in what it reveals about the historical rootedness of meanings given to democratic transition by Congolese people. These are important truths for Congolese people.

Research on informal knowledge production and information sharing in Africa such as 'pavement radio' and street parliaments, has shown that there is often a wide gap between popular knowledge and knowledge produced by formal organs and published in formal reports and documents (Ellis 1989; Ellis and Ter Haar 2004: 29–30; Cutolo & Banégas 2012). These informal channels of information are important for the development of consciousness of ordinary people who may not have direct access to formal information channels. As with rumour and gossip, the truths that are constructed in this manner are true because many people know and share the story. These stories thus produce truth, while simultaneously enabling new episodes of the same repertoire (White 2000; Veyne 1988; see also Sartre 2005: 360). It thus constructs an image (as opposed to the invention of an image)

through historical processes (Banégas 2003: 316). This sets limits to the manipulation or invention of the narrative, while at the same time these historical processes and events have given the narrative historic underpinning (Hamilton 1998: 26–7). The plot in the Congolese narrative that is central in this paper is repeated in various historical events that follow the same process: the promise of redemption through the heroic victory of good over evil, followed by failure, loss and tragic victimhood due to foreign intervention. Because the plot is repeated throughout history it is imaginatively reified. The paper is thus less concerned with the factual validity of Congolese historical narratives, but instead with how people perceive their past and their present experiences and have used repertoires to construct meaning.

LUMUMBA'S CALVARY: 'THE DEATH OF OUR INDEPENDENCE'

The dramatic events following Congo's independence have made a deep and lasting impression on Congolese collective memory.[4] The murder of Patrice Lumumba is collectively remembered as a key event that has defined the course of Congolese history since. For Congolese people, the events following independence are understood as the establishment of a neo-colonial state. Mobutu was considered a puppet of the West, put in power by former colonial power Belgium and its Western allies, while Patrice Lumumba was assassinated because he defended Congolese dignity and self-determination (Wamba-dia-Wamba 1987: 35). Political events in the years following have since been interpreted as either a moment of reckoning of the murder of Lumumba, or as a repetition of the drama. The mythologisation of the death of Lumumba began almost directly afterwards, with Pierre Mulele launching a 'Lumumbist' rebellion in pursuit of a Second Independence (Wamba-dia-Wamba 1987; see also Martens 1985; Van Reybrouck 2014: 341–2). The rebellion failed and Mulele was brutally executed.

In Congolese collective memory, the murder of Lumumba was much more than the death of a man that believed in a cause. It was an act that represents the loss of everything he stood for. The murder has become the symbol of the deception of independence that the country has experienced and represents the loss of Congolese self-determination and Congolese dignity, for which the West is held responsible. Reflecting on the assassination of Lumumba thirty years later, the National Sovereign Conference[5] concluded that it was 'the original murder of our independent history', a sacrificial killing (Conférence Nationale Souveraine 1992: 14).[6] Although in the years following,

Mobutu tried in vain to silence the memory of Lumumba, his image has since developed as a martyr of messianic proportions: Lumumba was Congo's saviour (dia Mwembu 1999: 66). In popular Congolese artwork, Lumumba is represented as the Son of God who will liberate the Congolese from the chains of colonialism. The murder of Lumumba is often represented as Lumumba's passion, where Lumumba consents in his death as a true martyr for the cause of the Congolese people (Jewsiewicki 1996: 128–9).

The use of Christian symbolism builds on a Christian tradition that goes back some 500 years. Throughout history, there have been several prophets and spiritual leaders, such as Kimpa Vita and Simon Kimbangu (Martin 1976; MacGaffey 1983; Thornton 1998). In the co-lonial era, the Christian church was an important instrument of the co-lonial state, and as such had a profound influence on education and public consciousness. This strong and deep-rooted popular Christian tradition in the Congo has also been a powerful resource for political power. As Schatzberg observed, spirituality is one of the faces of power in Congo. Mobutu extensively framed his legitimating discourses in Christian terms, describing his access to power as a resurrection, the party as a church and himself as a pope (Schatzberg 2001: 51–2). Christian symbolism upon which the narrative draws to give meaning to the tragedy of Lumumba is thus part of a well-established discursive tradition in Congo (see for example MacGaffey 1986; Kaczynski 1990; Thornton 2013). In his painting on the assassination of Lumumba, Tshibumba makes explicit references to the crucifixion of Jesus. Three crosses stand on a hill on the background, and like Jesus, Lumumba is assassinated together with two other men. Lumumba is stabbed in the side, the stream of blood that pours from Lumumba's wound forms the word '*unité*' – Lumumba died for Congolese unity. The stars of the Congolese flag enlighten the dark sky. Lumumba's body has never been found, adding to the myth of Lumumba as messiah and the possibility of his resurrection (Fabian 1997: 121; Ceuppens 2003: 90). The symbolic significance of Lumumba's martyr-dom is therefore powerful and resonates strongly with popular consciousness.

The lessons from the failures of independence have become the es-sential constituent of Congolese historical narratives, which argue that the West did not, and does not, want the Congo to be truly independent and sovereign and thus beyond the control of the West and its financial interests. Lumumba paid for this with his life. The final report of the National Sovereign Conference states that:

Facing the infernal machinery of international imperialism almost alone, and while being faced with the agitation of aroused local thurifers, Patrice-Emery Lumumba incarnates the heroic battle for the dignity and the liberty of the black man. A battle against all forms of foreign domination. A battle against mental estrangement. A battle against the break-up of the state. (Kinkela vi Kans'y 1993: 138)

While Lumumba's tragedy represents the tragedy of the Congolese people, his heroism and his determination also represent the conviction of the Congolese population as a whole (Kinkela vi Kans'y 1993: 135). Lumumba is remembered as the redeemer (Jewsiewicki 1996: 113–42). His death represents an original sin ('the original murder of our independence') and has left a legacy of victimhood that the Congolese people carry collectively. Overcoming this legacy through the reclaiming of Congolese dignity and self-determination thus became a political project in pursuit of redemption. In the minds of many Congolese, they are still in a process of resolving the crisis of the 1960s and its outcomes (PALU representative 2010, Int.). The emancipatory quest to make an end to foreign domination and to reclaim what was lost has remained an important political cause for Congolese people since – 'winning back our self-determination is still our struggle' (Street Parliamentarian 2010, Int.; UDPS Activist 2010, Int). As will be discussed in the remainder of this article, political leaders, from Mobutu to Joseph Kabila, have persistently framed their legitimating narrative in these terms.

'THE HISTORIC MOMENT TO RECTIFY THE PAST AND TO PREPARE THE FUTURE' (KINKELA VI KANS'Y 1993: 143)

When Mobutu finally bent to domestic and international pressure for democratic change, the Congo opted for a National Sovereign Conference (NSC) as a transition mechanism, following the example of Benin and several other francophone African countries. The NSC lasted from 1990 to 1992, but failed to deliver a transition to democracy. The NSC was primarily intended as a participatory process of pacted transition from dictatorship to democratic governance. Founded on Rousseau's philosophy on popular sovereignty and people's right to renegotiate a social contract, the NSC was a round table at which government delegates, interest groups, opposition parties, civil society organisations and churches negotiated the future political organisation of the country and a roadmap to lead the country out of the economic, social and political crisis (Robinson 1994: 577; Nzongola-Ntalaja 2002: 190–2). It was an important national event when the nation collectively reflected on its past, present and future.

In its opening paragraph, the final report explicitly connects the National Sovereign Conference to the tragic death of Lumumba, by stating that the NSC represents the victory of the struggle of Lumumba and the Congolese people as a whole (Kinkela vi Kans'y 1993: 135). Because Lumumba's struggle and fate is used as a symbol for that of all Congolese people, and because the NSC is an inclusive process of all people, the NSC became the heroic momentum to reclaim what the nation lost when Lumumba was killed. It offered the promised redemption for which Lumumba had died.

A key decision of the NSC was the appointment of a committee of eminent Congolese historians, under the directorship of Congo's foremost historian Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem, to produce a *relecture de notre histoire*, a re-consideration of Congolese history in the context of current events. The aim was to reflect on the past in order to provide a historical context of the (then) current political and economic crisis, so that the NSC could learn from the past to facilitate the transitional process. As such, the *relecture* is a very interesting historic source.

The committee's report on historical events was profoundly political. It sought to simultaneously blame and reconcile in order to clear the ground for a new beginning that would not be haunted by the past. What makes the text significant, as an important piece of Congolese historiography as well as a historic document itself, is that the document is a self-narrative that has been influenced as little as possible by the discourses and interests of the international donor community, this in stark contrast to the post-war political transition process of 2003–6. The narrative that the report offers is thus a self-narrative that was written for a Congolese audience in an attempt to facilitate a domestically steered transition process – a narrative *by* Congolese *for* Congolese.[7] It is therefore a rare source that provides authentic insights in Congolese historical self-narratives and has much authority in Congo as a document that provides truths. Although the report itself never circulated widely, its conclusions are very much similar to the popular historical narratives that this paper analyses.

The *relecture* explicitly frames the events that resulted in the death of Lumumba and Mobutu's first coup in 1960 as being instigated by foreign manipulation; in particular the USA and Belgium, who were alleged to have operated via the United Nations mission in the Congo, in an attempt to recapture Congolese independence and confiscate its sovereignty (on Belgian, US and UN complicity, see De Witte 2001). Mobutu and others that worked alongside him are represented as being only the agents of these foreign interests (Conférence Nationale

Souveraine 1992: 13). Likewise, the committee strongly condemned Mobutu's second coup in 1965. Primarily because, as the committee claimed, it could not be argued that this second coup solved a political crisis. Instead, it made an end to Congolese efforts to end the crisis peacefully. It was therefore a direct breach of Congolese sovereignty. The committee concludes that Mobutu's 1965 coup was thus an act of High Treason, suggesting that he was in fact an agent of the CIA, because he acted against Congolese interests while serving foreign interests (Conférence Nationale Souveraine 1992: 14, 20). This conclusion reveals a paradox about the place of order in the historical narrative. According to the narrative the disorder of the early 1960s was created by Western powers. Mobutu made an end to the disorder and restored economic stability, which was at the time indeed felt as such. In hindsight, however, it became framed as another phase in a history of Western domination, a form of *Pax Romana*. The notion of peace and order, which can only be founded on dignity and self-determination, thus became an important overarching theme in the narrative.

Mobutu's access to power thus started a new period of foreign domination, continued colonial subordination. The Mulelist uprising and the brutal assassination of Pierre Mulele, the student uprisings of 1967, 1969 and 1971, the Shaba wars and the intervention of foreign troops, as well as the struggle for political change within Parliament that started in the late 1970s and the women's protests in Kinshasa of 1990 – these are all episodes of the country's "30 years' war" against foreign imposed dictatorship that was finally won with the NSC (Kinkela vi Kans'y 1993: 140). Similarly, Mobutu's attempts to obstruct the NSC are understood as foreign inspired attempts to prevent self-determination in the Congo (Conférence Nationale Souveraine 1992: 21), while it was by then clear that Western countries had ended their support to Mobutu's rule in favour of democracy.

It is interesting to observe that Mobutu's disastrous economic reform policies of the 1970s (*Zaïrianisation* and *Radicalisation*) are also considered to be based on the advice of foreigners who wanted to 'ruin the Congo's economic power' (Conférence Nationale Souveraine 1992: 19; see also Young & Turner 1985: 362). This is of course deeply ironic, considering that *Zaïrianisation* as an economic nationalisation policy could have only been against Western interests in the Congo. Such conclusions reflect an understanding of Western foreign policy as being informed *only* by efforts to harm Congo, irrespective of other interests.

Although the committee blames Mobutu for his wrongdoings, he is also considered merely a pawn in the Western conspiracy against

Congo. The real blame lies not with Mobutu, but with the evil forces behind Mobutu. The *relecture* thus simultaneously accused Mobutu, but also sought to reconcile. It is relevant to observe that during his reign Mobutu tapped from the same repertoire, emphasising Congolese dignity and self-determination to seek legitimacy for his rule. Mobutu argued that many of the problems the country was faced with were a consequence of the continuation of colonial relations in the form of neo-colonialism (Ngoma-Binda 2009: 89). In an interview, Mobutu stated that the Congo was still-born, 'assassinated by those who installed their protectors and that did not want to know about Congolese independence, nor wanted to lead the country to real independence' (Mobutu 1989: 50). In 1971, just six years after his second coup, Mobutu launched *Authenticité*, the psychological and cultural decolonisation of the country. It was presented as a counter-hegemonic discourse that promoted the restoration of Congolese national pride and national identity through a form of cultural nationalism. It emphasised Congolese culture, traditions and values as a framework for development and a rejection of the exploitation from the West:

To resolve African problems, one should return to Africans themselves. We should ourselves have adequate solutions for our problems of development. Solutions based on standard models without directly referring to our conditions vis-à-vis those of our exploiters that, after all, despise our sovereignty. Therefore, we have to, of course without renouncing external support, first of all count on our own strengths. (Mobutu 1975: 506)

What matters here is not so much whether this narrative succeeded in delivering legitimacy to Mobutu's reign. Much more relevant is the fact that irrespective of one's support for Mobutu, irrespective of one's involvement in historic events, and irrespective of one's relation with western powers, political legitimacy requires a positioning of oneself as a political leader in the narrative of the perpetual quest for redemption and reclaiming of self-determination and dignity. This was the narrative used by Lumumba, Mulele, Mobutu and the NSC, and would be repeated by political leaders and their opponents in the years to come.

Consequently, it is also a powerful narrative for the delegitimisation of political leaders. For the NSC, Mobutu was a pawn of Western powers that had led the country in a neo-colonial system of rule. Making an end to Mobutu's dictatorial rule thus became the means through which an end could be made to neo-colonial rule in the Congo and through which the long-promised redemption would be possible. In the context of the end of the Cold War, and the wave of democratic

transitions that occurred in Africa in the early 1990s, democracy was the most immediately available alternative for Mobutu's rule. From that moment on, democracy has been considered as the means through which Congolese self-determination and dignity could be reclaimed. The discourse of democracy thus not only aligned, but also merged with the narratives on the perpetual quest for emancipation, rooted in identities of perpetual victimhood. The significance and meaning of democracy in the Congo related since then thus primarily to the quest for redemption, much more than to democracy as a system of governance.

'BULLETS SHOT BY A BODY GUARD, REMOTE-CONTROLLED BY THE ENEMIES OF OUR NATION' (NZAZI-MABIDI 2011)

A second series of historic events that were framed and are still remembered as a (lost) opportunity to achieve redemption was the toppling of Mobutu's regime by Laurent Kabila in May 1997. The NSC had decided on a democratic transition process that would culminate in elections. But before these elections could take place, Kabila's access to power made an end to the transition process of the NSC. While both supporters and opponents of Kabila frame his rebellion and access to power as a foreign instigated process, they do so each in their own way.

For Kabila's supporters the West had manipulated the NSC. Kabila's access to power before the completion of the transition process thus prevented the installation of a new regime that would have been supported by the West. Similar to how the NSC framed Mobutu's regime and its own momentum as a break with this historical pattern, Kabila's rebellion is also framed as being not just about ending a dictatorship, but about making an end to the perpetuated historical injustices of the neo-colonial state:

Kabila has rebelled, being outraged by the imperialist enterprise in Congo launched by Leopold II. It was an enterprise of the confiscation, by all means including villainous ones, of the rights and powers of the people, and an enterprise that installs puppets of the dominating and imperialist powers at the leadership of the newly independent country. (Ngoma-Binda 2009: 161–2)

In his declaration of 17 May 1997 when he assumed control over the state, Kabila stated that his rebellion continued a war of liberation that had started on 14 September 1960 (the day of Mobutu's first coup d'état) (Kabila 1997a: 493). This is exactly the same argument that was used to mark the NSC in 1990–92 as the end of 30 years' war

since the ill-fated independence of 1960. Like Mulele and the NSC before him, Kabila thus explicitly suggests that his own rebellion was a continuation of Lumumba's struggle, a struggle that Lumumba could not complete, but that was continued and eventually won by Kabila. At his Presidential inauguration, Kabila argued that Congolese people have for long been humiliated because of foreign obstructions to its liberation. His access to power has finally made an end to this foreign exploitation (Kabila 1997b: 500). He therefore also refused to co-operate with the UN in the implementation of the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement (International Crisis Group 2000). His words closely resemble Lumumba's words in his speech on Independence Day in 1960, as well the language used by the NSC. Kabila's victory offered the redemption that was promised in 1960.

Interestingly, and like Mobutu did before him, Kabila constructed his legitimating discourse on the same repertoires of the quest for true independence that were used by his opponents to delegitimise his access to power. For the opponents of Laurent Kabila, the invasion by AFDL (*Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo-Zaire,* the allied forces of Kabila's rebellion) was a foreign instigated war aimed at preventing the NSC to succeed in bringing the long-awaited redemption. Particularly for UDPS (*Union pour la Démocratie et Progrès Social*) supporters the NSC was a victorious moment, which was lost again due to Kabila's rebellion and the conflicts that followed.[8] In the words of a UDPS political party activist:

The NSC has given power, self-determination and dignity back to the people. It has liberated us. The international community could no longer interfere. But they did not accept that, the international community mafia – you know who I am talking about, [Louis] Michel and his friends. So they instrumentalised the war and the Sun City process to win back their influence. (Street Parliamentarian 2010, Int.; UDPS political activist 2010, Int.)[9]

That Kabila had collaborated with Rwandan support in order to topple Mobutu's regime only confirmed this assumption. A civil society activist from Bukavu, who during the 2003–6 transition period took seat in the transitional National Assembly as a delegate representing Civil Society,[10] stated that 'AFDL came from abroad. From abroad comes no liberation, only aggression. The war was a war of occupation. The state had been occupied, supported by Rwanda' (Former Member of Transitional Parliament 2010, Int.).

Anti-Rwandese sentiments have existed in the Congo long before Kabila and Rwanda joined hands. The identity and citizenship question

of the Rwandophone population of eastern Congo has been a contested issue throughout most of Congo's post-colonial era (Vlassenroot 2002). However, the NSC and its failure, followed by the renewed promise of redemption by Kabila and his death, as well as the aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan genocide and the influx of Rwandan refugees and *génocidaires* in the Congo, gave anti-Rwandese sentiments new impetus in the Congo. From the mid-1990s a historical narrative emerged in which the Rwandophones were constructed as an existential threat to Congo. The narrative speaks of perpetual Rwandan expansionism towards the Congo. This perspective has since been informed and rein-forced by historic events – the influx of Rwandan refugees in the after-math of the 1994 genocide, the two Congo wars, and on-going conflict and instability in the border areas since (Huening 2013). Although tensions between the Congo and Rwanda may for others have little to do with western interference, they do in the minds of Congolese people. The narrative of the quest for redemption and the perpetual Western obstruction to achieve this have placed the problem-atic relations with Rwanda within this struggle of resistance against foreign domination. Rwanda is held responsible for bringing violence and conflict to the Congo (employee civil society organisation 2009, in conversation). In Bukavu, a town in Eastern Congo where people have suffered intensely from conflict and structural violence in the region, people speak about the 'Rwandification' of the Congolese armed forces through the integration with various rebel movements since 2003.[11] This Rwandification explains the Congolese Armed Forces' atrocious behaviour, a source of insecurity rather than security (Civil society representatives 2010a, Int.).

Rwanda is thus considered to have prevented the Congo from claim-ing its true independence. Many people see confirmation of this inter-pretation in the events that followed when Kabila ordered the Rwandan troops that had supported his rebellion to leave Congolese ter-ritory. A week later, a new rebellion was launched by the *Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie* (RCD) – a movement that was backed by Rwanda (International Crisis Group 1998). The narrative of the perpet-ual quest for redemption, however, makes that Rwanda is not considered to be acting purely on its own, but as a pawn for the West. In a discussion about perpetual conflict in eastern Congo, civil society actors from Bukavu argued that:

The US is a source of instability everywhere around the world, and also here. But so are the UK, and the EU and Belgium. … Rwanda was the driving

force behind the [rebellions of] AFDL and RCD. But behind Rwanda were the US and the UK. Rwanda is just an instrument of the US and the UK. (Civil society representative 2010b, Int.)

But similarly to how Kabila himself argued that his rebellion was in pursuit of true independence, so did his opponents in the Second Congolese War (1998–2002). Jean-Pierre Bemba, leader of the MLC (*Mouvement de la Libération du Congo*) that also fought against Kabila's regime, used repertoires of true independence to legitimate his rebellion. In his autobiography, aptly entitled *Choosing for Liberty* he stated that:

After more than forty years of independence, we should ask ourselves whether we have ever been free to make our own choices, free to pursue our own destiny, and free to assume our sovereignty. (Bemba 2001: 201)

Locating one's political actions within the struggle for redemption is a necessary foundation for political legitimacy. Like Kabila's rebellion, the Second Congolese War has thus been given meaning by the warring parties in terms of protecting the hard-won true independence (Kabila) or as a quest for achieving true independence (Kabila's opponents).

   However, both the opponents and supporters of Kabila's regime share an understanding of the assassination of Kabila in January 2001 as an act of the West and a repetition of the assassination of Lumumba. Kabila was assassinated on the eve of the 40th anniversary of Lumumba's assassination. What was also strikingly similar was the satisfaction of Western powers with the death of Kabila, similar to with the death of Lumumba (Bustin 2002: 539). The assassination of Kabila is narrated as an exact replica of Lumumba's murder. Like Lumumba, Kabila died 'for his love for the Congo, for Congolese sovereignty and for territorial integrity' (Nzazi Mabidi 2011). He was killed because he agitated against Western imperialism (Former Member of Parliament 2009, Int.). In doing so, he 'made the same mistake' as Lumumba had done 40 years earlier, namely to stand up against international interference and to demand sovereignty, self-determination and dignity for the Congolese people (*Le Potentiel* 17.1.2010). Both were assassinated, in the eyes of many Congolese, by an international conspiracy. And although Laurent Kabila was shot by one of his bodyguards, it is widely believed by the Congolese that behind this act were in fact international actors and their interests – 'bullets shot by a body guard, remote-controlled by the enemies of our nation' (Nzazi Mabidi 2011). Kabila's death was almost an exact repetition of Lumumba's death: both died a martyr for Congolese self-determination and Congolese dignity.

Both promised to deliver redemption, while both failed in achieving this because evil forces have prevented them from completing their mission.

LEGITIMATING PEACE AND POST-WAR POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

A final series of events that will be discussed in this paper are related to the political transition process following the Sun City Peace Agreement. I will focus on the meaning giving and legitimacy of the peace agreement and the process of the implementation of the peace agreement, and secondly on the legitimacy of the political leadership that has come into power after winning the 2006 elections.

Although in December 2002 an inclusive peace agreement was signed that formally ended the Second Congolese War, in large parts of the country violent conflict has been on-going, or has since even deteriorated, and a general situation of human insecurity persists (Autesserre 2006, 2010; Larmer *et al.* 2013; Stearns & Botiveau 2013). During the peace negotiations, all attention went to the national conflict and the installation of a new regime, while local conflicts were ignored or expected to end automatically in the context of the national peace process (Autesserre 2007). In my interviews and conversations, people therefore hardly ever used the word 'peace' when referring to the period since the peace agreement was signed. The peace, people feel, is a farce. It is an illegitimate peace, a peace for the elites in Kinshasa, not for the rest of the population. Again, the blame is put with the international community, for whom the current 'violent peace' seems to suffice. Political activists of UDPS argued that the peace agreement was not a 'peace on our terms', that it served foreign interests instead of Congolese interests, and that it ignored the democratisation process of the 1990s. The NSC did perhaps fail to deliver a democratic transition, for the supporters of UDPS it was the great momentum. Compared with the NSC transition, the post-war transition is not 'Congolese' but 'foreign'. The peace agreement and the political transition that followed are by them considered a betrayal of the Congolese people (Street Parliamentarians 2010, Int.). As an opposition party that has left the peace negotiations in discontent and that has boycotted the political process up until the 2011 elections, UDPS is perhaps most vocal in its rejection of the Sun City peace process and the political system it has installed. For them peace and democracy mean freedom, a freedom in everyday life; this freedom does not currently exist in the Congo (Street Parliamentarians 2010, Int.).

In view of these disappointments the initial euphoria about the peace agreement and democratisation process have turned into a general

complaint about the peace process being imposed on the Congo by the international community. Some see the war and the Sun City peace process as a strategy of the international community to install a new neo-colonial regime in the Congo. According to civil society representatives in Bukavu, the peace negotiations and the power-sharing agreement that was negotiated were imposed on the Congo by the international community. A great sense of injustice exists, and people feel betrayed by the international community which has imposed peace negotiations and a power-sharing agreement on the Congolese, while the regime in neighbouring Rwanda is not put under pressure to make peace with the FDLR. While Rwandan President Kagame refuses to talk to FDLR, eastern Congo suffers from the conflict which is being fought on Congolese soil.[12] The international community is therefore considered complicit in the continuation of instability and insecurity in the Congo (Civil society representatives 2010a and 2010b, Int.; Member of Parliament 2010, Int.). It should, however, be mentioned here that since 2013 MONUSCO has launched a new and more robust Intervention Brigade (FIB) to neutralise armed groups in Eastern DRC. It is composed of Tanzanian, South African and Malawian troops, and thus possibly less implicated directly in Congolese concerns about Western power. It has defeated M23 in November 2013, but has so far failed to respond effectively to FDLR. This is largely due to the ways in which the FIB has also been caught up in the complex security politics of the Eastern DRC (Vogel 2014). Popular responses to the FIB are beyond the scope of this paper, and it remains to be seen how in future these events will be given a place in the Congolese historical narrative.

At his inauguration, President Kabila spoke of an 'unjust war that was imposed upon us', a war that was brought to the Congo by the UN and certain Western countries, who now fail to adequately solve the conflict (Kabila Kabange 2008). Not only has the Congo become a victim of a crisis that wasn't its own, it is also not assisted adequately by those responsible, leaving the country victimised twice. Evidently, Kabila's argument enables him to pass on the responsibility for the continued conflict and instability to others. But he can only employ this narrative for his own political purpose, because the argument resonates so strongly with his people. At the same time, in order to gain legitimacy he must also present himself as a victim of Western interferences just like other Congolese to counter claims that he is a pawn of the West.

An important element of the peace agreement was that during the transitional period the warring factions would share power in the transitional institutions. The President was assisted by four Vice-Presidents,

coming from the Presidents' party, two coming from the two largest rebel movements, and one Vice-President representing the unarmed opposition. The idea behind the 1+4 formula was that the Presidency could function as a platform to forge consensus between the former belligerents, and where mutual trust and confidence could be built. However, in effect it functioned as a platform on which the war between the belligerent leaders continued, thereby paralysing governance and the transition process (De Goede & Van der Borgh 2008). Such a power-sharing formula may have been necessary to end hostilities; for many Congolese it was another example of how the international community, the West, finds arrangements to keep the country under its control – 'the West does not want a sovereign Congo, it does not want a democratic Congo, it does not want the rule of law in the Congo. It wants a weak Congo to exploit' (Street Parliament, 2010, in discussion). A civil society activist told me that 'since Sun City and the transition, Congo is under tutelage of the International Community. We have accepted the 1 + 4 in the name of peace. But the 1 + 4 was not legitimate, the whole transition process was not legitimate. All the problems we are faced with now are a consequence of the 1 + 4' (Civil society activist 2010, Int.).

The idea that the 1 + 4 was a neo-imperialist structure through which the West could regain control over Congolese affairs was strongly fed by the existence of the International Committee in support of the Transition (CIAT), a committee of international Ambassadors, headed by the UN Special Representative of the UN Secretary General (SRSG) Bill Swing, that worked closely with President, Vice-Presidents and Government on the implementation of the peace agreement.[13] From the donors' perspective it made sense that the funders wanted to oversee a process that they were sceptical about, and that they arranged for a mechanism that would form some form of guarantee on the process. SRSG Swing called it a moral authority that had only a supportive role (CIAT 2006). For many Congolese, however, it was an interference in Congolese sovereignty, that was on occasion considered threatening by political elites (Member of Parliament 2006, Int.; Minister 2007, Int.; Vice-President 2007, Int.). A civil society activist who was a Member of the Transitional Parliament said that 'we understood that Bill Swing was the real head of state, that he controlled everything. Joseph Kabila was only a farce' (Former Member of Transitional Parliament 2010, Int.). The international community was overtly present on the political stage and involved in political processes. For many Congolese this was too much, either because it was seen as

illegitimate interference in domestic affairs, or because it was interpreted as a conspiracy between the greedy political leaders and their foreign patrons. In either case, it was considered as a breach of Congolese self-determination that could only be intended to prevent Congolese emancipation.

This understanding that the peace agreement and the political transition was an agenda of the international community as opposed to an agenda of the Congolese people did for some discredit the 2006 elections. Concerns about electoral fraud and the manipulation of the elections were not so much concerned with fraud attempts of the candidates, but much more with strategies to manipulate the outcome by the international community. To the frustration of many diplomats, Congolese politicians often referred to 'your elections' instead of 'our elections' (Western diplomat 2006, Int.). It was widely believed that the international community wanted Kabila to win. Although this sentiment was initially particularly strong in those parts of the country where UDPS and Bemba had strong support bases, in the years following people in the eastern part of the country where Kabila had had his support base also realised that 'the hand that gives is also the hand that receives' (Civil society representatives 2010b, Int.; Member of Parliament 2010, Int.). This is what the passer-by on that morning in November 2009 referred to when he said 'it's your fault' and 'I don't like Kabila'. For them the elections of 2006 were a farce and the results have been manipulated because 'the West wanted Kabila'. Likewise, a year before the 2011 elections, it was argued that 'the international community already knows who will be the winner of 2011' (Street Parliament 2010, in discussion).

During a discussion at the Street Parliament of *Victoire* in Kinshasa, a street parliamentarian that had taken the stage asked the audience 'Kabila has declared 2010 as '*l'année social*', but who has eaten this morning?' The audience remained quiet, until somebody from the audience uttered 'Louis Michel'. The rest of the Parliamentarians present suppressed a bittersweet laugh. It was comical, but profoundly meaningful as well. A while later, another speaker argued that the West has assassinated Laurent Kabila, and placed Joseph Kabila in his place. 'But where does he come from?' 'Louis Michel', was the response. It was a reference to the popular discussion at the time when Joseph Kabila's nationality was a highly contested issue. People questioned whether he was the legitimate son of Laurent Kabila, and more importantly, whether he was actually Congolese, claiming that he was Rwandese, and therefore part of the international conspiracy against Congo. The

suggestion that Kabila is the son of Louis Michel implies that Joseph Kabila as President is the son of the international community and thus a puppet of the West.

Kabila's opponents thus see a parallel between Kabila and Mobutu: both accessed power with the help of the West, but against the will of many people. A popular saying is that there is 'Mobutism without Mobutu' in the country nowadays (Taxi driver 2009, in conversation). This parallel goes further than the perceived similarity between Mobutu's and Kabila's access to power, their relations with Western powers and the rule they practice. Mobutu was on the one hand accused by the NSC while on the other hand the blame was in fact passed on to Western powers. The same now counts for Kabila. As a puppet of the West, his hands are tied and he cannot properly defend the interests of his people even if he would have wanted to. Even his opponents understand this. The West is often held responsible for the policy failures of the new regime, arguing that Kabila is controlled by the West. According to a civil servant in Kinshasa, who had made it clear that he was not a Kabila supporter, Kabila has no choice then to do as the international community wants, '[o]r else he will be murdered, just like Lumumba, just like Father Kabila, and just like how Mobutu has also been put aside when he was no longer useful'. A Congolese employee of a European NGO who was present at the conversation confirmed the story, 'indeed, he has no choice', she added (Civil servant 2009, Int.). What is fixed in this repertoire is the role of the International Community; what is open for debate and dependent on which political camp one associates with is the involvement of specific Congolese actors in this conspiracy against the Congo.

Paradoxically, the elections could also be framed as an opportunity for redemption, a new beginning and a symbolic end to the neo-colonial past. From this perspective, people were proud of the elections of 2006. A civil society activist argued that people have not voted for the person Kabila, but for peace, for self-determination, for sovereignty, for unification and against balkanisation of the country. For the people in Eastern Congo, 'voting for Kabila meant voting for that'. For them, at least at the time, Kabila was not the representation of Western interests, but the redeemer. Contrary to their countrymen in the western part of the country, they did – at least at the time – not see the hand of the West in the electoral results. People saw elections as a means to make an end to all sorts of misery, war, poverty, lack of well-being, foreign interference (Former Member of Transitional Parliament 2010, Int.). For those that were successful in the 2006

elections, such as Antoine Gizenga and his PALU who won the Premiership and Kabila and his PPRD who won the Presidency, it was a victory over dictatorship, foreign interference, foreign-instigated conflict, and the reclaiming of self-determination. PALU members argued that 'we have found our dignity again with the elections' (PALU representatives and members 2010, Int.).[14] Kabila tells the Congolese that the future is 'founded on the strength of emancipatory and democratic ambition which is discernible through the patriotic engagement of all our compatriots' (Kabila Kabange 2008).

The elections and the launch of the new democratic state thus became understood as the emancipatory moment when Congolese re-claimed the self-determination and sovereignty that was lost in 1960. In the words of a former MP:

> How can the international community continue to impose its will on a government that has been elected by its people? … That is why the international community always wants to manipulate elections, to make sure that the leaders that come out of the elections do not have the legitimacy of the people, and so that they will be accountable to those powers that have supported them. The Congolese people will no longer accept this. … Do not forget that in this country, we have fought a battle since centuries to construct this country. And when we use the ballot box to reclaim the legitimacy of the country, it is because we want equality, stability and order in this country. (*Le Potentiel* 15.1.2010)

For those in power, the long awaited redemption was (or may have been) finally there, while the threat of foreign meddling remained ever present. For those who have lost power, the West has again stifled redemption and the struggle continues. The elections and the launch of the Third Republic in 2006 were therefore simultaneously a moment of change when dignity and self-determination were reclaimed, as well as a continuation of the historical sequence of foreign interference in Congolese affairs.

CONCLUSIONS

The relation between Congolese actors and its international donors in post-war Congo has been and still remains tense. This paper has argued that the distrust that Congolese people feel towards peace-building interventions is the result of deep-rooted sentiments about how Western powers have throughout modern history continuously prevented Congolese people from claiming self-determination while denying their dignity. The events leading to Lumumba's death were

used to construct a narrative plot of a tragedy in which the imminent re-
demption was taken away by evil Western forces. Congolese historical
narratives tell a perpetual repetition of this plot – the National
Sovereign Conference, Laurent Kabila's toppling of Mobutu's regime,
the Second Congolese War, and the post-war transition and democratisa-
tion process. The meaning of individual events thus echoes the remem-
brance of events past, and in doing so, it reifies the truths the narrative
tells.

After the war, international donors perceived the Congo to be a *tabula
rasa* that was disconnected from historical experiences from before the
recent conflict. For Congolese actors the historic moment of the end of
the war and the democratic transition was an event in a much longer,
and much more complex history. Understanding these historical narra-
tives enables us to understand Congolese ambivalent attitudes towards
the democratisation process and the Western partners of this process,
as a manifestation of imagined identities that have emerged through
historical experiences. It also enables us to understand popular senti-
ments towards the current regime.

The narrative analysed in this paper contains several contradictions
and paradoxes. The most significant of these for an understanding of
contemporary democratisation efforts is that the Congolese discourse
of democracy explains simultaneously the perpetual victimisation as
well as the promise of emancipation from this state of victimhood.
Democracy is thus understood as a technology of resistance against
the foreign partners that are simultaneously the obstacles to democracy,
and the main donors of the democratisation process. International
actors fail to recognise how they are caught up in this complexity, how
loaded democratisation is, and in what way it is loaded. Congolese histor-
ical narratives construct western democracy assistance not as contribut-
ing to their well-being, but as an essentially imperialistic project. While
for international actors democracy is primarily a political system, for
Congolese actors it is primarily a way through which the Congo could
find the long-awaited redemption.

This highlights the paradoxical and ambivalent sentiments towards
the project of post-war democratisation and their international partners
in this process. It enables us to understand why dissatisfied ordinary
people blame the West and not the Congolese political leadership, as
did the man on that morning in November 2009. But it also suggests
that the proposed peace building practices that are better grounded
in local needs and aspirations (Richmond 2009, 2012; Richmond &
Franks 2009) will not be able to adequately respond to this deep-

rooted suspicion of peace-building actors and the donor community as a whole. This concern goes far beyond demands for partnership, local ownership, or peace building formulas that seek to develop hybrid institutions that merge local and liberal ideals and that are grounded in the local context (MacGinty 2010). It concerns the consequences of the denial of the historically rooted meaning of democracy as a political project,[15] an understanding that appears to be non-negotiable for Congolese people.

The West and democracy are necessarily intertwined. Western donor assistance to support peace building, governance, development and the protection of human rights is framed in terms of democratisation. In the process of democratisation, one would expect that Congolese actors would see the West as a constructive partner. However, as this paper shows, the meaning of democracy has locally developed into something very different than how it is defined by democracy promoters from the West. Democracy is then also given an alternative emancipatory meaning. While for Western democracy promoters democratisation will emancipate people from oppressive and dictatorial rule, for Congolese people, democratisation should emancipate them from foreign tutelage. The emancipative power of democracy is to escape the yoke of Western interference and achieve self-determination. Because the pursued redemption means emancipation from Western powers, international donors find themselves in a paradoxical situation: while the main external funders and promoters of the democratisation process, they are simultaneously the object from which a democratising Congo wants to emancipate and the obstacle that prevents the Congo from achieving this.

This raises important concerns about the possibility of constructive partnership in a context in which the partners have such a fundamentally different perception of the objectives of democratisation, as well as of each other. Participatory approaches, equal partnership and local ownership of programmes cannot overcome this fundamental problem with the assumed imperialist agenda that is hidden within these Western funded programmes.

Another important conclusion that can be drawn is that the historical narrative denies Congolese agency and emphasises Congolese perpetual victimisation. Contrary to Mbembe's argument that victimisation can no longer be a source for identification (Mbembe 2001), the paper has suggested Congolese identities continue to be constructed on notions of perpetual victimhood. As a form of 'history-for-us-from-us', the historical narratives are part of a nationalist process of identity construction, in

which the Congolese perceive the self as a perpetual, and necessary, victim (Rubbers 2009). The narrative displays Congolese inability to determine their own fate and turns them into passive victims of foreign determination. The Congolese thus maintain a strong external locus of control, or the conviction that reinforcements are not an outcome of their own acts, but are under control of powerful others (Rotter 1966, 1990). The collective sense of uncertainty and powerlessness that according to Trefon (2013) captures the general mood of Congolese elites and masses may well be explained by these imagined identities. This is significant because peace-building critique has argued that the peace-building failures are largely due to a lack of inclusion of local agencies that often remain silenced and ignored, while policy-makers seek to improve practices of partnership and local ownership. But what can these local agencies contribute to peace building, if they fundamentally deny their own agency?

NOTES

1. This paper derives from PhD research conducted in Kinshasa (2009–2010), South Kivu (2010) and Bas Congo (2009) (De Goede 2015). In addition, the author has worked in the DRC as a practitioner in the domain of democratisation, elections and civil society in 2006–07 and 2011–12, and has in that capacity travelled extensively throughout the country, including North and South Kivu, Orientale, Equateur, Bas Congo and Katanga. Although often not explicitly referred to, personal observations and experiences during this time have informed the ideas that are developed in this paper.

2. Although the country has changed its name several times (Republic of Congo 1960–1971; Zaire 1971–1997; Democratic Republic of Congo, 1997–present) I will consistently use the term 'Congo' in this paper.

3. *Mundele* is Lingala for white person or foreigner, although the term is also used for people that have adopted 'white people's behaviour' (Ceuppens 2003: 41).

4. For a good account of events, see De Witte (2001).

5. The National Sovereign Conference was a political transition process that lasted from 1990 to 1992. It will be discussed in more detail in the following paragraph.

6. 'Le meurtre original de notre histoire indépendante'.

7. On the emancipative power of 'history for-us-from-us', see Reyes (2008). Reyes argues that in the work of the PP historiography group, the exploration of the Filipino self in history writing takes precedence.

8. UDPS is opposition party that grew out of the 13 discontented MPs that sent an open letter of critique to Mobutu in 1981. It has been a popular political party particularly in Kinshasa and other urban centres, and was at the height of its popularity at the NSC. It has not taken up arms during the wars, and left the Sun City peace negotiating table in discontent, as well as boycotted the 2006 elections. It participated in the 2011 elections, but failed to win a significant share of the parliamentary seats, nor did Tshisekedi win the presidential elections.

9. Louis Michel was Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1999 to 2004 and European Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Development from 2004 to 2009, and became a member of the European Parliament in 2009. He has been closely involved in Congolese peace and transition process, and was one of the main figureheads of the international community in Congo. He is seen by many Congolese as having been too close to President Kabila and therefore partisan, and as a figurehead of the treacherous International Community. His name is in Congo often used to refer to the EU or the international community as a whole.

10. In the peace agreement it was decided that political power would be shared during the transitional period up until the elections. The various belligerents, as well as the non-belligerent 'political opposition' and civil society were all allocated a share in the transitional institutions according to a power-sharing formula. (*Accord Global et Inclusif*, Chapter V, 2002).

11. CNDP is widely believed to be either a division of the Rwandan army, or a rebel force defending Rwandan interests on Congolese soil. The CNDP was composed on Rwandophones, and claimed to defend the interests of the Congolese Rwandophone minority in Congo. In 2009, as part of the peace agreement between the Congolese Government and CNDP, its troops were integrated in FARDC.

12. The *Forces Démocratique pour la Libération du Rwanda* (FDLR) has its origin in the Congo as a group of Rwandese ex-génocidaires and family who fled from the invading RPF in 1994. They have remained in the Congo ever since, and are by Kigali considered to be a threat. Kigali therefore on occasion threatens to invade the Congo to make an end to this threat. However, FDLR has never actually undertaken any action against the Rwandan regime, but has been a serious cause of instability and insecurity in the Congo.

13. It is relevant to observe that in discussions about CIAT, respondents ignored the fact that CIAT was not only composed of western actors, but also included China, Angola, South Africa and the African Union as members.

14. For PALU the elections were a second chance. Like many others, the party sees itself as the political heir of Lumumba. The elections and the power-sharing agreement it has signed with the PPRD is a repetition of the political arrangement in 1960, when Lumumba was premier and Kasavubu president. This perspective explains why PALU has entered this strange power-sharing agreement, in which it in fact submerged to Kabila's rule. Party representatives argued that they should learn from the past, and not make the same mistake again, referring to the conflict between Lumumba and Kasavubu. PALU therefore accepts being silenced while occupying the premiership, in order to avoid a repetition of the events of 1960.

15. Chandler has argued that state building interventions are inherently political, but that the political nature of these interventions is denied by intervening actors and agencies. However, I refer here primarily to the political meaning of the process for recipient communities (Chandler 2006).

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