

ASR FOCUS

Mourning and the Imagination of Political Time in Contemporary Central Africa

Introduction

Bogumil Jewsiewicki and Bob W. White

In many societies, especially those where individual and collective memory are marked by the trauma that can accompany authoritarian rule, people attempt to come to terms with the past by finding ways of making it relevant to the present. One way to understand this complex relationship with history is through a careful examination of the practice of mourning. Mourning constitutes, above all, a framework from which the deceased's relationship with the living is collectively inventoried, evaluated, and debated so that the social work of memory may graft the experiences of yesterday onto a horizon of expectations. Defining the status of the deceased means making important decisions about how to "move on," since the moment of mourning is not only a moment for weighing the acts and

African Studies Review, Volume 48, Number 2 (September 2005), pp. 1–9

Bogumil Jewsiewicki, holder of the Canada Research Chair in Comparative History of Memory, teaches African history at Université Laval, Québec. His main area of interest is contemporary Central African history, urban popular culture, urban art, and the work of memory in post-authoritarian societies in Africa and in Eastern and Central Europe. He recently edited a double issue of *Cahiers d'études africaines* (Paris), "Réparations, restitutions, réconciliations entre Afriques, Europe et Amériques" (2004). His most recent book is *Mami wata. La peinture urbaine au Congo* (Gallimard, 2003).

Bob W. White is an assistant professor in the Department of Anthropology at the Université de Montréal, in Canada. He has conducted extensive fieldwork in Kinshasa, DRC, and he is currently completing a monograph that examines the relationship between popular music and political culture in Mobutu's Zaire (forthcoming from Duke University Press). He has published articles on the history and performance of Congolese popular dance music, the political culture of the Mobutu regime, the political economy of world music, and the various uses of culture and performance in the public sphere. His most current research uses ethnographic methods to look at the relationship between mass media and audiences in the contemporary urban setting of the Congo.

deeds of the deceased, but also a way of testing more generally the criteria for becoming recognized as an ancestor. As death seems increasingly present in the lives of people in many parts of Africa, emerging forms of social mourning echo the need for new political futures, and mourning shows itself as an important terrain for the social production of meaning. The primary objective of this collection of articles is to look at how the process of mourning mediates between the past and the future, and how the practices and perceptions of mourning are linked to real and imagined divisions in political time. Mourning, in other words, is a way of rethinking time.

The opportunity to publish a series of articles on this topic in English is very timely—especially given the recent completion of a special issue in the Paris-based journal *Cahiers d'études africaines* (Jewsiewicki 2004)—and we appreciate that the editors of the *African Studies Review* have agreed to open the journal's pages to the larger problematic of mourning as a way of imagining political time.¹ While the articles in this ASR Focus are informed by the complexity of local culture and cultural variation, we have not made a systematic attempt to survey the voluminous ethnographic literature on death, funerals, and mourning (for one recent attempt to do so, see Parkes et al. 1997). Primarily because of our interest in the question of how mourning is related to ways that people imagine regional or national politics, the articles assembled in this issue are focused on various types of “nontraditional” settings: mass media, museums, city streets, the state, the Internet, and so on. Our hope is that the very public nature of these moments of mourning will shed some light on what is happening in the realm of politics and in changes in politics over time. More specifically, the struggle over the deceased is a struggle over what is relevant about the past, but also who will control representations of the present (see Cohen & Odhiambo 1992, 2004).²

Whether the subject is the colonial past or a more recent postcolonial past, the phenomenon of mourning has taken on new importance in many parts of Central Africa, in part because the necessary conditions for its occurrence are not always met. In order for mourning to occur, the body of the deceased must be physically present (Nsanze 2004; Omasombo 2004). In order to achieve a sense of closure with the past, the body of the deceased must be present so that all those who had something at stake in the deceased's life and death can witness the ritual transformation from adult to ancestor (Kopytoff 1971). Without these conditions, in the words of the historian Henry Rousso (1998), “the past cannot pass,” and the ghost of the deceased remains obsessively in the present. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the fact that Lumumba's body was never recovered only adds to his status as a mythic hero (Jewsiewicki 1996), and this status continues despite public pronouncements about what really happened (De Witte 2001). The absence of Mobutu's body has a similar but opposite effect: Contemporary political discourse relies heavily on the image of Mobutu as a foil to responsible leadership and civic duty (White, this issue).

In both cases, absence of the corpse only reinforces the impression that political crises from the past are still unresolved. Much in the same way, if the experience of violence in the Great Lakes region is still part of the present, it is in part because so many bodies remain unidentified or missing.

Another interesting example is the case of Freedom Park, a public works reconciliation initiative of South African President Thabo Mbeki. An important aspect of this initiative is Remembrance Garden, where people from all over the country are invited to symbolically bury and mourn for freedom fighters whose bodies were never recovered. This officially sanctioned space of mourning makes it possible for the deceased to be named and for freedom fighters to in effect become ancestral figures of the New South Africa. For Thabo Mbeki (the ANC leader from outside of the country who succeeded Mandela, the symbol of the struggle from within South Africa), Remembrance Garden can be seen as a means of using mourning to create a new political body, one that will no longer be torn apart by racial segregation and other injustices of the past. This initiative lays the foundation for Mbeki's personal and political legitimacy, not as Mandela's successor, but as a freedom fighter in exile, a representative of all those whose bodies are dispersed and whose spirits can now be laid to rest with a sense of *pride and honor*.

The series of panels on which this *ASR Focus* is based (originally organized for the ASA conference held in Washington, D.C., in 2002) examined the question of political mourning in Central Africa from two different perspectives. Some papers emphasized the Congolese Belgian approach to the practice of mourning for a colonial past, a process that consists of an elaborate series of cultural activities, including exhibits, films, and especially theater, and another series of activities that may be described as public "hearings," many of which have benefited from some degree of coverage in the media.³ Indeed, this media coverage (which was central to success in the case of South Africa) would seem to be the principal characteristic of the Belgian process of mourning, and it is interesting to note that the audiences targeted by this coverage are primarily members of a younger generation who have no personal memory of the colonial period. The highly mediated nature of mourning for the past raises questions about how traditional cultural practices are made public through new media-based technologies (cellular phones, Internet, e-mail, digital photos, and video) and how this public status becomes relevant to politics. These processes, however, occur in ways that are new and different from those described in the now canonical writing of Benedict Anderson (see De Boeck's discussion of the imaginary in this issue). In an attempt to understand the historical specificity of mourning in Central Africa, the texts in this issue look not only at the imagination of communities, but also at the imagination of time.

Other presentations during the conference discussed various moments in public activities that took place within Africa. "Memories of Lubum-

bashi” (an interactive research exhibit co-sponsored by the Université de Lubumbashi, the Canada Research Chair in Comparative History of Memory, and the Musée National de Lubumbashi) works to understand the mechanisms that encourage or inhibit local efforts to mourn for the past, both the colonial and the more recent postcolonial past. The weakening of the region’s industrial base in the 1990s was enough to almost completely rid the mineral-rich province of Katanga of its base of labor, the center of social and economic life in an urban setting. How do people come to terms with this new reality in which the experience of the patriarchal world of the past is irrelevant? How do they make sense of the futility that has come to characterize the experience of husbands and fathers who until recently based their authority on the benefits earned from salaried labor (regular income, medical care, housing)? In a society that is almost completely dependant on the informal economic activity of women and youth, young adult men find themselves socially marginalized and unable to marry in socially accepted forms, and many come to be perceived as parasites. What, then, is the work of social memory? How is it possible to rethink the relationship to the colonial past given that many young people believe that their uncles and fathers failed to follow through on the promise of independence?

From the point of view of many young people, those who came before them left nothing of value for the generations to come. Recent expressions of interest in the colonial past are not based in nostalgia (as sometimes presented in former colonial contexts), but in an effort to do something about the precariousness of the present, which as far as today’s youth are concerned is a result of the fact that their fathers “ate” independence (meaning they wasted or squandered it for their personal gain) and now have nothing to show for it. As the time of the fathers (1960s to 1980s) is dead but not buried, a ghost rather than an ancestor, there is a desire to bring back the founding event of the last generational break: Independence Day. Significantly enough, this desire is expressed on both sides of the colonial divide, in Belgium and in Africa. It is telling, for example, that a new exhibit that opened in February 2005 at the Tervuren Afrika Museum (“Memories of the Congo: Colonial Times”) stops at the moment of independence, especially given that the exhibit was conceived by scholars from the generation of the fathers.

It is from this generational perspective that we must set out to understand how death is related to the political imaginary in Central Africa, especially given the extreme fragility of individual life in the region. It would be wrong to believe that only the AIDS epidemic, violence caused by civil war, and everyday thuggery explain the ominous presence of death in the political imaginary of Central Africa (see De Boeck, this issue). Sudden unexpected death is clearly a source of debate among those close to the deceased (for example when accusations of witchcraft rear their ugly head; see White 2004), but death and its various diagnoses have increasingly

become an issue between generations and across gender (see Geschiere, this issue). As funeral processions and mourning parties are increasingly taken over by youth—often against the wishes of the family of the deceased—these public displays become the arena for confrontation over responsibility with regard to the past, especially the recent colonial past. In Kinshasa, the now common practice of angry youths' hijacking funerals is impossible to ignore, since in many cases this practice involves stopping traffic and harassing passersby for a financial contribution to the procession (literally a “gesture of solidarity”). Today's youth, excluded from the financial benefits of the heady 1970s and 1980s (but also elderly women, as in the case of the Maka funeral ritual discussed by Geschiere in this issue), assert control over this important moment of meaning by forcing mourning into the streets and by making claims against those whose only connection to the deceased is their relative position of wealth and power.

The articles in this special issue represent four different approaches to the question of mourning. Peter Geschiere, with his usual flair for spatial and temporal complexity, presents three different ways that people in southern Cameroon negotiate the tension of funerals as the “ultimate test of belonging.” Debates about where bodies are buried become fraught with tension as the “management of death” becomes increasingly unpredictable and increasingly tied to the imperatives of a market mentality. Danielle de Lame explores the various types of institutional and cultural constraints (both within and outside of Belgium) to the conditions that will allow mourning, and by extension, reconciliation in contemporary Rwanda. In this careful account of what happened (and what did not happen) during the Rwanda genocide, media representations, but also feelings of guilt and shame, act as obstacles to dialogue between individuals and between communities. Filip De Boeck describes a complex postcolonial moment in which urban Congolese use popular culture to think out loud about how death and dying are impinging upon an already complex life-world in the city, creating what he refers to as an “apocalyptic interlude.” Bob White, primarily concerned with the unfinished business of a dead dictator's remains, attempts to show the twisted irony of how the Congo's political culture is held hostage by the fact that Mobutu has not truly been put to rest.

There are some important commonalities in the texts brought together in this *ASR* Focus. First, the question of time is a thread running throughout the papers—for example, De Boeck's analysis of how popular discourse in Kinshasa is increasingly concerned with the historical inevitability of apocalypse, or Geschiere's reading of changes in funeral practices in Cameroon over three decades following independence. In several papers there is the distinct feeling that time has stopped because of unfinished business in the realm of politics (for example, De Lame and White), and yet debates about what to do with dead bodies are also debates about the periodicity of politics. Second, the meaning of mourning, not surprisingly,

has everything to do with how people in various parts of Central Africa deal with the question of legacy. In Geschiere's paper, the question of legacy is played out through the urgent question of "origins" and how the social management of death enables certain people to lay claim to particular types of symbolic and material capital. De Lame's analysis of Rwanda discusses legacy not only in terms of the impact that individuals' decisions will have on generations to come, but also in terms of how to understand the troubled history of colonial rule. According to De Boeck, people in Kinshasa are struggling with the existential questions of divine judgment—in some sense the ultimate legacy test—and the situation described by White (in which Congolese argue about the repatriation of Mobutu's corpse) shows how even the suggestion of a funeral provokes heated debate about political and social responsibility.

In this series of texts, we have examples of funerals that happen (Geschiere), those that many fear will never happen (De Lame, White) and those that are always about to happen (De Boeck). Funerals, as Peter Geschiere shows, are not only moments of closure, they are also moments of social drama in which new relationships are tested and reconfirmed, alliances are exposed and solidified, inclusion and exclusion are brought into public, and this is why they constitute moments of danger. Funerals can be used to bridge the gap between city and country (Geschiere), but when coupled with new regimes of belonging during the dark age of "structural adjustment," the effects can be catastrophic. There is a vague sense of uneasiness caused by something that seems to have changed in the relationship between living and dead (De Boeck), and this slippage is manifested through popular culture and the various vectors of the urban popular imagination: storefronts, dance steps, list serves, church microphones, popular ways of speaking. Despite their loud and spectacular nature, it is not clear that these manifestations do anything more than reestablish the uncertainty of the current social order in which access to politics is one of the only remaining forms of social mobility. Mobutu's elaborate propaganda machine is considered by many Congolese to have been a motor for consolidating national identity and sentiment. As White argues, this was a "project that proposed a way out of the colonial dilemma through a particular way of imagining politics," but where has this project led? The answer is that this project has led to a country with a strong sense of national identity, but virtually no food on the table, and of late, increasing political instability. Clearly this sense of national belonging occurred at the expense of the forefathers, whose labor permitted advances in terms of the economy and national infrastructure, and to the detriment of the sons, who are left without resources and without role models for the future.

It is in this sense that political futures in Central Africa are inseparable from the process of mourning. As de Lame argues in this issue, mourning should become a way of "facing life and death without illusion," meaning

without relying on narratives of self-deception. The charm of the politically motivated rhetoric of postcolonial progress (such as Mobutu's "Objectif 1980" or his earlier political slogan, "Retrouvons les manches" ["Let's get to work"]) eventually became meaningless. With civil unrest following failed democratic reforms in Kinshasa in the early 1990s, the true face of politics was unmasked, and at this moment the idea of "Zaire" died. The problem, of course, is that more than ten years later, Congo's political future is still up for grabs. Mourning in this context involves the negotiation of a new relationship to time, where people choose a set of meanings that are mobilized because of the degree to which they are relevant to the present. This involves recognition of the fact that time is not singular or linear, but rather a series of ruptures to be reconciled with recent memory and horizons of expectations for the future.

If people in Central Africa believe that they live in the time of the Apocalypse, it is primarily because they have been left to fend for themselves (De Boeck 2004). Because the elders were selfish and unable to manage the past with future generations' interests in mind, they are not considered capable of managing the mourning for that past. The urgency of a properly performed mourning, a mourning that includes a careful examination of responsibility with regard to the past, explains in part the intensity of the debates and conflicts that are discussed in this collection of texts (see Geschiere, De Lame, White). On the one hand, if the past is useless, then the desire to place blame for the current state of crisis can become pathological, as in the case of the recent phenomenon of child witches that has attracted considerable attention in the international media (see De Boeck 2004). At the same time, the distance between us and the end of the world being so brief, burial and mourning cannot be delayed any further, and emerging forms of social mourning suggest that people are trying to work out regimes of accountability outside of the sphere of formal politics. While urban existence in many parts of Central Africa is faced with the ephemeral nature of life, death makes it possible to construct and sustain a new way of relating to time, a new regime of historicity (Hartog 2004).

References

- Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflexions on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso.
- Cohen, David William, and E. S. Atieno Odhiambo. 1992. *Burying SM: The Politics of Knowledge and the Sociology of Power in Africa*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.
- _____. 2004. *The Risks of Knowledge: Investigations into the Death of the Hon. Minister John Robert Ouko in Kenya, 1990*. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- De Boeck, Filip, and Marie-Françoise Plissart. 2004. *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City*. Ghent-Amsterdam: Ludion.
- De Boeck, Filip. 2004. "On Being 'Shege' in Kinshasa: Children, the Occult and the Street." In Theodore Trefon, ed., *Reinventing Order in the Congo*. New York: Zed Books.

- de Villers, Gauthier. 2004. "Histoire, justice et politique: à propos de la commission d'enquête sur l'assassinat de Patrice Lumumba, instituée par la Chambre belge des représentants." *Cahiers d'études africaines* 173–174: 193–220.
- De Witte, Ludo. 2001. *The Assassination of Lumumba*. New York: Verso.
- Fabian, Johannes. 1978. "Popular Culture in Africa: Findings and Conjectures." *Africa* 48: 315–44.
- _____. 1990. *Power and Performance: Ethnographic Explorations Through Proverbial Wisdom and Theater in Shaba, Zaire*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- _____. 1996. *Remembering the Present: Painting and Popular History in Zaire*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hartog, François. 2004. *Régimes d'historicité: Présentisme et expérience du temps*. Paris: Seuil.
- Jewsiewicki, Bogumil, ed. 2004. "Réparations, restitutions, réconciliations entre Afrique, Europe et Amériques." Special issue of *Cahiers d'études africaines* 173–174.
- Jewsiewicki, Bogumil. 1996. "Corps interdits: la représentation christique de Lumumba comme redempteur du peuple zairois." *Cahiers d'études africaines* 141–142: 113–42.
- _____. 1999. *A Congo Chronicle. Patrice Lumumba in Urban Art*. New York: Museum for African Art.
- _____. 2002. "De la vérité de la mémoire à la réconciliation. Comment travaille le souvenir?" *Le Débat* 122: 63–77.
- _____. 2003. "Vers une impossible représentation de soi." *Les temps modernes* 620–621: 101–14.
- Kopytoff, Igor. 1971. *Ancestors as Elders in Africa*. New York: Bobbs-Merill.
- Omasombo Tshonda, Jean. 2004. "Lumumba: drame sans fin et deuil inachevé de la colonisation." *Cahiers d'études africaines*. 173–174: 221–62.
- Nsanze, Augustin. 2004. "Le deuil du passé est-il possible?" *Cahiers d'études africaines* 173–174: 420–25.
- Parkes, Colin Murray, Pittu Laungani, and Bill Young, eds. 1997. *Death and Bereavement Across Cultures*. New York: Routledge.
- Rouso, Henry. 1998. *Vichy, An Ever-Present Past*. Translated by Nathan Bracher. Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England.
- White, Bob W. 2004. "The Elusive Lupemba: Rumors About Fame and (Mis) Fortune in Mobutu's Zaire." In Theodore Trefon, ed., *Reinventing Order in the Congo*. New York: Zed Books.

Notes

1. That issue of *Cahiers d'études africaines* includes a number of articles previously presented at the same annual conference of the African Studies Association (Washington, D.C., November 2002) where the papers introduced here were presented, including a debate on the possibility of mourning for the past in contemporary Burundi.
2. The important work of Johannes Fabian, while not primarily concerned with the question of mourning, sheds light on the particular social dynamic with which we are concerned, particularly the question of perceptions of time (Fabian 1996). See also Fabian's earlier work on popular culture (1978) and political imagination through performance (1990).
3. The publication of Ludo de Witte's *De Moord op Lumumba* in 1999 caused a

shock wave in Belgium because the author affirms that Lumumba was killed by Belgian hands. The book was quickly translated into French (Karthala 2000), English (Verso 2001) and Spanish (Critica 2002) and was debated not only in academic journals but also in the influential *New York Review of Books* (August 3, 2001). The accusation of De Witte against the Belgian government of the period but also against the king received a great deal of attention in the Belgian (especially Flemish) press. The Chamber of Representatives created a commission of inquiry in 2000 and the commission's report was filed in November 2001, followed by a parliamentary debate in early 2002. The minister of foreign relations, Louis Michel, presented a formal apology in the name of the Belgian government and announced the creation of the Patrice Lumumba Foundation, which was to involve the participation of the Lumumba family (see de Villers 2004).