

Decolonizing African history: *Authenticité*, cosmopolitanism and knowledge production in Zaire, 1971–1975

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the social and intellectual dynamisms of the Lubumbashi campus of the *Université Nationale du Zaïre* in the 1970s. It first highlights how Lubumbashi scholars participated in an early post-colonial attempt to radically transform the university's teaching, research and operations, at the crossroads of intellectual decolonization and cosmopolitanism. These efforts both overlapped and clashed with the official Zairian policy of *Authenticité*, a politically tinged reappraisal of the country's precolonial past. The article contributes to our limited knowledge of everyday life under Mobutu and of vernacular experiences of *Authenticité*, while highlighting Lubumbashi as an important node in the post-independence intellectual networks.

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All over Africa, independence opened a remarkable time of innovation in higher education. It gave way to new modes of thinking and teaching, which were particularly visible in human sciences and African studies. As Jean Allman suggested, decolonization opened a time 'where no course seemed charted; when it was at least possible to imagine forms of knowledge production about Africa that challenged colonial categories [...] that was Africa-centred, Africa-based and globally engaged'.¹

However, these experiments often proved to be short-lived. Within two decades, political turmoil and economic hardships put an end to the radical refashioning of post-independence higher education. A central cause of this was the perennially difficult interaction between government and universities, which were both training grounds for politicians and civil servants, and potential hotbeds of contestation against incumbent rulers. They were crucial for post-colonial regimes eager to shape the future by fostering a competent, obedient and patriotic body of graduates. However, this elite in the making was, more often than not, restive and difficult to control. In the wake of economic hardships and the authoritarian turns taken by many post-colonial regimes, students protested against both the deterioration of their living conditions and the curbing of individual freedoms, sometimes making use of the decolonizing discourse advanced by nationalist leaders themselves.²

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Scholars found themselves involved in complex power relationships with post-independence nationalist regimes. On the one hand, many supported these early attempts to decolonize universities hitherto dominated by Western and/or colonial policies, practices and curriculums. On the other hand, nationalist state-imposed ideologies provided a problematic basis for the Africanisation of knowledge production and teaching in a decolonized university. Although their attempts to produce radical new knowledge in and on Africa sometimes coincided with state-sponsored ideologies, they often found themselves at odds with officially promoted national(ist) narratives of history and cultural unity.³ Although the decolonization of the university in the immediate aftermath of independence provided an unprecedented opportunity for experimentation and free thinking, the uncertainty surrounding what ‘decolonisation’ would involve equally made it a challenging and potentially conflictual process.

Such tensions between university administrators, academics, students, and state officials in early postcolonial Africa might even constitute the essential dynamics of knowledge production in social and human sciences in the two first decades of independence. Jean Allman for instance underlines how the relationship between intellectuals and politicians was already ‘fraught’ in the wake of Ghana’s decolonization. Under Kwame Nkrumah’s presidency (1960–1966), Accra’s recently founded African Studies Institute was seen by the country’s leader as the ‘spearhead’ of his pan-African ideology. Its members were expected to produce ‘useable pasts’ which could be mobilized to further and justify the government’s agenda.⁴ Mahmood Mamdani also stresses out how the academic life in late 1960s and early 1970s Tanzania was traversed by debates on the social role of the university, that nationalists expected to be ‘socially relevant’, which effectively meant being ideologically compatible with their political agenda.⁵

This article offers an insight into these dynamics through the lens of the Lubumbashi campus of the *Université Nationale du Zaïre* (UNAZA), between 1971 and 1975, when it hosted the country’s only departments of human and social sciences. It charts its evolution from an early moment of relatively optimistic decolonization pushed forward by a cosmopolitan team of scholars to the closing down of opportunities to challenge Eurocentric models of intellectual activity in an increasingly straitened and authoritarian context.

In 1971, the three previously existing Zairian universities were merged into one single entity divided in three campuses: one in the capital Kinshasa, one in Kisangani (a major trade hub on the Zaïre River), and the third in Lubumbashi, the country’s economic centre in the Southern copper mining region of Shaba (previously Katanga). It was in Lubumbashi that Zaïre’s sole department of human and social sciences was located. The city and the surrounding mining communities provided a fertile ground for UNAZA’s dynamic team of researchers to investigate urbanization, class issues, collective memories and intimate experiences of post-colonial transitions. In doing so they had to negotiate with president Mobutu’s authoritarian regime and its attempts to monitor academic life. James Smoot Coleman has previously written that a ‘progressive erosion of academic freedom’ occurred at UNAZA. The *Mouvement Populaire de la Révolution* (MPR) – Zaïre’s all-encompassing party-state structure – led, he argues, to a ‘quiet self-censorship’ of the professoriate, expected to refrain from any overt criticism of the regime.⁶ To a certain extent, regime officials indeed endeavoured to align UNAZA scholars’ work with ‘*Authenticité*’, a protean nationalist policy partially based on a politically tinged reading of Zaïre’s precolonial past. Furthermore, the university was institutionally integrated into the MPR, which further constrained academic freedom.

This article follows two distinct yet intertwined paths to shed light on this decade of academic ebullience and political authoritarianism. First, it considers the overall political and cultural context in which the inception of UNAZA took place, and retraces how Lubumbashi's historians managed to find their footing in Zaire's authoritarian climate. Second, it looks at the historical knowledge production happening on campus as an overlooked episode in the history of intellectual decolonization, where the nativist turn pushed forward by *Authenticité* clashed with the intellectual cosmopolitanism promoted by the university's historians.

I chose to consider those tensions from the standpoint of UNAZA's history department, for it mirrors the epistemic priorities of early post-colonial African universities. In the 1960s and 1970s, it was indeed crucial for scholars and politicians alike to support the emergence of both scientific research and popular narratives regarding the past of these newly independent countries. Colonial discourses had long denied the existence of autonomous historicity to most African societies, making their 'entry into History' coincide with European 'penetration'.⁷ Furthermore, if African history was essentially a neglected field prior to 1960, disciplines such as anthropology or sociology had been heavily mobilized by colonial stakeholders in their social engineering endeavours.⁸ After independence, these two sciences accordingly suffered from their imperial heritage and were relatively marginalized in African curricula.⁹ At the same time, writing the long-denied history of the communities populating post-colonial polities became an important act of self-affirmation. On the one hand, it underlined the legitimacy of independent nation-states who inherited the boundaries set by colonial powers. On the other, it asserted the role of Africans as rightful actors of their own history.

These dynamics turned history departments into a prime battlefield where two uses of the past clashed. One would tend to emphasize the 'unique' cultural and historical features of a given (national) community, at the risk of echoing essentialist, colonial beliefs in the existence of clear-cut 'ethnic' identities. Another would, to the contrary, underline the 'universal' nature of African historical experiences, as much subject to the ebb and flow of social struggles than any other ones. These two options opened antagonistic visions of what intellectual decolonization could mean.

Drawing on previously unexplored archives of the University of Lubumbashi, oral histories of its staff and alumni and on the works of its scholars and students, this article intertwines the social, political and intellectual history of knowledge production at UNAZA. In doing so it provides insights into everyday life under Mobutu, a topic that historians have only recently started to study. Pedro Monaville has for instance shed light on the conflicted relationship between student activism and the early regime of Mobutu. In the late 1960s, the government co-opted some of the students' demands for the decolonization of the university, while brutally curtailing their autonomy.¹⁰ Yolanda Covington-Ward has pursued a bottom-up study of the MPR's 'civic religion' by investigating the intimate experiences of people coerced to participate in '*animations politiques*', the public displays of allegiance to the party-state.¹¹ Sarah van Beurden has explored the mobilization of Zaire's artistic heritage for the politic of *Authenticité*.¹² This article both engages with and builds on these previous approaches; it focuses on UNAZA/Lubumbashi as a case study to explore the entanglements of Zairian memory politics and knowledge production during a decade of exceptional intellectual dynamism.

This paper opens with a discussion of the concepts of decolonization and cosmopolitanism, followed by an historical contextualization of higher education in Katanga/Shaba. I then shed light on the complex relations between Lubumbashi's historians and the party-state MPR, before delving further into historical knowledge production at UNAZA. In conclusion, I outline how the intellectual history of 1970s Katanga/Shaba both deepens our understanding of power dynamics in Zaire and can be better grasped in the longer history of intellectual decolonization.

Intellectual decolonization and cosmopolitanism

In 1960, 17 African countries, including the former Belgian Congo, became independent. If this so-called 'Year of Africa' marks a turning point in political decolonization, it did not however sever the intellectual and cultural ties which bound former colonies to their metropolises. Decolonization was, from the onset, understood by its proponents as a long-term process, reaching far beyond the issue of formal independence. For them, a truly post-colonial world would also have to be rid of the long-lasting psychological traumas, inferiority complexes and structural inequalities inherited from colonial power structures.¹³ The protracted and multifaceted nature of decolonization – as well as its inherently intellectual dimension – was already addressed in seminal essays and manifestos penned by Black francophone thinkers such as Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon. These texts – which were instrumental in shaping debates on the meanings and scope of decolonization for the decades to come – outlined the challenges of deploying a decolonized episteme. On the one hand, they addressed the need to reappraise vernacular knowledge of African peoples, which had been marginalized by colonial power holders. On the other, both Césaire and Fanon believed in the relevance of critical readings of Marxism to make sense of African historical experiences, making of class struggle and historical materialism universally relevant frameworks to understand the past and future of all human communities.

Césaire for instance understood *négritude* as the proud reappraisal of Black consciousness, history and culture, which was deemed crucial for the intellectual emancipation of African and diasporic societies.¹⁴ However, Césaire simultaneously encouraged intercultural dialogues, shunning the idea that decolonized culture and knowledge could be based on African heritage alone. 'A civilization that withdraws into itself atrophies', he wrote in his 1950 *Discourse on Colonialism*.¹⁵ In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Fanon also defended the resort to a critical and systematic study of precolonial history to make usable pasts emerge, which could be mobilized to collectively break free from the cultural and intellectual shackles of colonialism.¹⁶ He was nevertheless critical of nationalism as a tool of emancipation, fearing that the nativist agenda pursued by early postcolonial regimes could lead to internecine, identity-based conflict.¹⁷ Furthermore, Fanon's positioning as a critical Marxist was also manifest in his aversion for the post-colonial bourgeoisie. He believed that elites could not be trusted with dismantling the heritage of colonialism, a system from which they profited. For him, decolonization could only be anti-bourgeois, no matter the origins or culture of the ruling classes.¹⁸

To sum up, these founding texts of (intellectual) decolonization in the Francophone world rested on three pillars. First, on the critical reappraisal of the long-denied

historicity of African societies, on the lookout for ‘useable’ values, identities and stories. Second, a caution against cultural insularity and essentialist nationalism, which could only further identity-based conflicts. Third, a rejection of the post-colonial elites anointed by the receding imperial powers, deemed as only able to further the oppressive status-quo of colonial power dynamics.

Interestingly, early postcolonial knowledge production in Zaire followed a different path than the one set out by Fanon and Césaire, and would be more akin to a form of cosmopolitanism. Intellectually speaking, cosmopolitanism rests on the belief in the existence of a shared, universal citizenship, a ‘transcendence of the particularistic and blindly given ties of kinship and country’, to quote Pheng Cheah.¹⁹ On paper, cosmopolitanism’s universality supposes a detachment from the racist hierarchies of knowledge inherent to the colonial episteme, and can supposedly embrace *anyone* into a community of minds. If both those postulates overlap with the agendas of intellectual decolonization put forward by the likes of Césaire and Fanon, other aspects of cosmopolitanism do clash with their visions of what postcolonial knowledge production should look like. First, cosmopolitanism has always been an elite project, carried on by an inherently privileged body of individuals able to cross both physical and intellectual borders, in order to engage with the social and scholarly endeavours inherent to the cosmopolitan ethos.²⁰ Second, cosmopolitanism supposes the existence of a ‘universal’, or at least a common set of values, beliefs and/or episteme shared by a borderless community. For if cosmopolitanism is historically rooted in Enlightenment thinking, the supposedly ‘universal’ foundation of cosmopolitan knowledge production is inherently Eurocentric.²¹

If cosmopolitanism and intellectual decolonization could intersect, the former nevertheless leaves behind the masses whose liberation Fanon saw as an indispensable achievement of an effective decolonization process. Furthermore, it can only superficially engage with the critical reappraisal of vernacular knowledge that both Césaire and Fanon saw as a stepping stone for collective emancipation. Finally, the cosmopolitan ideal of a ‘citizen of the world’ is inherently bourgeois, which made well-to-do, educated elites imperfect messengers for the radical intellectual decolonization called for by both figures.

In the 1970s, UNAZA’s Faculty of Philosophy and Letters can best be described as *cosmopolitan*, both in its social makeup and in the way that scholars engaged with their research and teaching. Professors originated not only from Belgium, Zaire and Rwanda – formerly also under Belgian rule – but as well from countries such as Poland and Benin which were not bound to Congo by an imperial heritage. As such, the intellectual experience of Lubumbashi mirrors that of other newly independent countries, whose social sciences and humanities department attracted bright and young expatriate scholars willing to take an active part in the development of post-colonial intellectual endeavours.²² Furthermore, these scholars were little concerned with unearthing long-neglected ‘authentic’ knowledge. They were rather bent on studying the universal nature of human thought, creativity and experiences.

Beninese philosopher Paulin Hountondji, who taught at Kinshasa and UNAZA-Lubumbashi between 1970 and 1972,²³ was for instance a staunch opponent of what he called ‘ethno-philosophy’, the uncritical reappraisal of often-fantasized ‘ancestral wisdoms’. For Hountondji, this played into European racist fantasies, which shunned

the ability of Africans to think abstractly. He called instead for the emergence of Africa-based philosophies which would respond to universally accepted criteria of scientificity.²⁴ Valentin Mudimbe, who was dean of the faculty between 1972 his departure for the United States in 1979,²⁵ also defended the existence of universal philosophic principles. Indeed, Mudimbe's masterly deconstruction of colonial racist episteme did not prevent him to defend the intellectual legacy of the Classics. He viewed the Mediterranean world as a space of long-existing cultural exchanges between Asia, African and Europe. These dialogues fed the emergence of ancient Greek philosophy, which remained to his eyes of universal value, for it offered the first onset of discourses on human freedom.²⁶ Evidently, not everyone at UNAZA followed the same intellectual course. Some students for instance openly expressed their frustration at the professoriate's distancing from Afrocentrism (see below).

Such epistemic assertions opened a fracture line with the ideological postulates of Mobutu's *Authenticité*. To better understand this discrepancy, one has to address the early history of higher education in Katanga, and how it espoused the region's changing political fortunes before the fusion of the three national universities in 1971.

Research and higher education in Lubumbashi, 1945–1971

After WWII, an economic and demographic boom dramatically increased the Belgian Congo's urban and industrial population, particularly in industrialized Haut-Katanga.²⁷ The region's urban boom led in 1953 to the foundation of the *Université Officielle du Congo belge et du Ruanda-Urundi* (UOCBRU), Congo's only public university in the provincial capital of Elisabethville, initially meant to welcome a mostly white student body. UOCBRU's prestige and reputation however paled in comparison to Lovanium, an extension of the Belgian Catholic University of Leuven, built on the outskirts of the capital Léopoldville (renamed Kinshasa in 1966). Congo's independence in June 1960 was almost immediately followed by the short-lived secession of the Katanga province (July 1960–January 1963). UOCBRU would come to play a prominent role in the would-be state's process of legitimation. Renamed *Université d'Etat à Elisabethville*, it acted as a 'technical school' to rapidly train the young state's administrative officers.²⁸ It was also used in the independent government's performances of national legitimacy, hosting important official events.²⁹

In spite of regime changes, coups and overall political instability, academic life in early postcolonial Congo was remarkably stable. Financially, socially and geographically, Congolese universities remained mostly isolated from their environment, which facilitated the sustained existence of colonial power dynamics throughout the 1960s. First, the vast majority of professors and researchers were still Belgian. Second, Congolese authorities hardly participated in the funding of universities, which continued to be financed by Belgian sources.³⁰ Third, universities were physically secluded from city life. This conscious choice of colonial urban planners was further enhanced in Katanga by the decision to separate the administrative building from the campus. The physical containment of students materialized the authorities' anxiety towards indigenous elites and their alleged power of nuisance.³¹ However, the separation of campuses from urban life were not only rooted in colonial nervousness but was also pursued by some post-colonial governments. In Tanzania for instance, a lavish campus was built

in 1964 on the outskirts of Dar-es-Salaam.³² This decision might suggest that, beyond the (post)-colonial divide, authorities wanted to emulate an age-old academic model rooted in monastic life, where the forming of young minds necessitated a certain seclusion from worldly affairs.

The powerful continuities between pre-and post-independence higher education in Congo is crucial to understand how the UNAZA project came to fruition. Institutional and epistemic changes in the early 1970s emerged at the crossroads of longings for social, political and intellectual transformations, on both national and global scales. These aspirations were rooted in the global student protests of the late 1960s, and materialized in Congo while president Mobutu endeavoured to consolidate and legitimize his rule.

A former journalist and officer propelled to the head of the Congolese army in July 1960, Joseph-Désiré Mobutu set up a military coup in November 1965, and subsequently suspended all political parties and activities. He generated substantial internal popularity by pledging to put an end to the political infighting which plagued the country's first years of independence. Yet in the following months, Mobutu sought to secure his personal power through a political vehicle which would sustain his new regime. He first created the *Corps des Volontaires de la Révolution* (CVR) in January 1966, a supposedly 'apolitical' body set up to gather and organize the 'vanguard' of his supporters. In May 1967, the CVR was replaced by the MPR, a mass movement destined to encompass the country's entire body politic and to foster a national narrative which would bring citizens together.³³ As the training ground for the new regime's elite and a potential support base, academia had therefore to be made ideologically and institutionally compatible with MPR's goals and visions.

The origins of UNAZA can be traced back to 4 June 1969, when a large demonstration was organized in Lovanium, mobilizing almost all of the university's student body. Protesters challenged their meagre allowances and sought to hold the regime accountable for what they characterized as its failed promise to democratize the university and Africanize its curriculum and teaching staff.³⁴ Soldiers halted the procession and attempted to disperse it by firing directly into the crowd. Some protestors died while others were arrested and trialled in front of military courts.³⁵ Two years later, in both Kinshasa and Lubumbashi, students organized a commemoration for their fallen comrades. Once more, the movement was dispersed, but this time the state responded more radically. Both campuses were closed and all of Lovanium's students and 200 of their counterparts in Lubumbashi were forcibly enrolled in the army as temporary *miliciens* in order to break their 'rebellious spirit'.³⁶ At the same time, Zairian academics were gathered in an extraordinary symposium, where the future of the country's higher education system would be drastically reimagined.

In August 1971, all three Congolese universities were merged into UNAZA, itself now made a section of the Mobutuist party-state MPR. As faculties were divided between UNAZA's three sites, Lubumbashi came to host the departments of history, language, literature, sociology, anthropology and philosophy. Moving human and social sciences outside of the capital was manifestly aimed at relegating potentially restive and politicized students away from the centre of power.³⁷ The choice of Lubumbashi as the *de facto* centre for the formation of the country's intellectuals was also linked to the post-secession context. Less than a decade since Katanga – renamed Shaba in 1971 – was

reintegrated in the national body politic, Zaire's ruling body embarked on an ambitious programme to promote and somehow 'invent' the country's national identity. Choosing Katanga/Shaba, where the central authority's legitimacy had been most strongly challenged, as the epicentre of history-writing in Zaire, symbolically asserted the incorporation of Shaba in the national narrative.

For Pedro Monaville, the creation of UNAZA was 'a pyrrhic victory' for the student movement.³⁸ Born out of the brutal repression of campus protests, the reconstituted Zairian university nevertheless incorporated some of the students' demands for Africanization of both the curriculum and the teaching staff. The establishment of UNAZA therefore marked a turning point in the academic history of Congo-Zaire, an institutional and intellectual departure from the legacy of the colonial university. It nevertheless sowed the seeds of further frictions between authorities and scholars. State-sanctioned historical postulates indeed clashed with the cosmopolitan standpoint of the new university's professoriate.

UNAZA and *Authenticité*

The founding of UNAZA was a central element of the progressive deployment of Mobutist *Authenticité*. For Sarah Van Beurden, *Authenticité* both 'intended to end the cultural alienation of the colonial experience', and aimed to 'create a sense of nationhood and citizenship for Zairians', therefore overcoming the failure of late-colonial nation-building and the manifold fractures of the post-colonial era.³⁹ On paper, *Authenticité* shared characteristics with the decolonization theories then in increasing circulation in African(ist) intellectual circles. *Authenticité* was for instance hailed by Léopold Sedar Senghor as the 'twin sister' of his own version of *Négritude*, for both had to fight 'the same foes: imperialism and assimilation'.⁴⁰ These ideas called for a rupture with ways of thinking inherited from colonization and for a re-evaluation of precolonial cultures. Mobutu for instance characterized *Authenticité* as 'being oneself and not how other would like one to be, thinking by oneself and not by others, and feeling at home in one's culture and country'.⁴¹ *Authenticité* thus had particular consequences for understanding and writing African history: Mobutu argued that in most countries, people were 'unconsciously authentic' because their collective consciousness was built on an uninterrupted historical heritage. However, colonized societies had experienced a rupture of their historical consciousness. *Authenticité* would relink them to their cultural roots, and help them grow and 'develop' in ways truer to their identity than the paths imposed by colonial powers or the new superpowers.

In terms of history writing, *Authenticité* was therefore a call to write narratives of the past firmly anchored in a situated genealogy, on the lookout for a common heritage, which would contribute to delineate an authentic and 'legitimate' body politic to be ruled by MPR. It therefore veered away from the calls for intercultural dialogues and universal values present in both the founding essays of Césaire and Fanon, and in the cosmopolitan postulates of Hountondji and Mudimbe.

Authenticité's most spectacular embodiment constituted in swapping the name of the country and of most cities and towns in October 1971, for more 'authentic' ones. In February 1972, Zairian citizens were forced to exchange their Christian patronyms for 'authentic' ones as well.⁴² *Authenticité* was, however, a multifaceted initiative that envisioned

and sought to create a new form of political consciousness. While the first phase of Zaire's independent history was characterized by the fragmentation of the citizenry along 'ethnic' lines,⁴³ *Authenticité* and Zairian nationalism sought to reshape the country by imposing a hegemonic unifying narrative: Zaire was a single nation, gathered in a single movement – MPR – under a single leader – Mobutu. Legitimizing this political vision required, however, the considerable (re)invention of precolonial political and cultural 'traditions'. There were, Vansina's research showed, no clearly identifiable roots in the history of pre-colonial Central Africa to support the 'authenticity' that Mobutu advanced.⁴⁴

Authenticité and nationalism were channelled through the powerful vehicle of MPR, in which participation became mandatory. 'Whether you like it or not, you are MPR', stated an official slogan of the 1970s.⁴⁵ The statutes of the movement equated MPR with the 'national community organised as one body politic', and it was asserted that unborn children were already MPR members.⁴⁶ On a practical level, the *Mouvement* was organized in a vast network of branches, committees, sections and sub-sections, that enabled its ubiquitous presence in the daily lives of Zairians. Its youth branch, the *Jeunesses du MPR* (JMPR) had local wings in schools, at university, and in public and private companies.

UNAZA and its three campuses were no exception; they were officially both institutions of higher education and sections of MPR. Political functions overlapped and superseded academic positions. Vice-chancellors, in charge of managing each campus, were also heads of their university section of MPR, were chosen on the grounds of their militancy rather than for their academic credentials.⁴⁷ They had to prove themselves as 'convinced and convincing MPR activists', according to one of the party-state's slogans.⁴⁸ Vice-chancellors were officially responsible for 'ensuring party discipline' in their institutions, and had to deliver weekly speeches to the academic community on 'how to behave as MPR activists'.⁴⁹

Members of UNAZA/Lubumbashi's academic body grudgingly recalled the politicization of the university. 'We were not really convinced, we had to play a part linked to our social status', acknowledged professor of political sciences Balthazar Ngoy Fiamu.⁵⁰ Paradoxically, the expected adherence to MPR which cemented scholars' privileged position within Zairian society could also take the form of 'embarrassing' public displays. 'It was somehow denigrating, humiliating for professors to dance and sing to praise Mobutu', recognizes Georges Mpiana, who was then employed in the university's administration. Displaying ideological zeal could also help advance one's academic career.⁵¹ Professor Ngasha Mulumbati recalled: 'we were constantly watching each other, on the lookout for deeds or remarks which did not fall into the party line. Especially those who were looking for better jobs or other perks'.⁵²

The institutional and intellectual ruptures which characterized UNAZA had contrasted, if not paradoxical consequences. The university's integration into MPR, the enrolment of all students into its youth wing, mandatory displays of allegiance in weekly 'political mornings' highlight the totalitarian control that the regime hoped to exert on academia. At the same time, this authoritarianism coexisted with a resounding intellectual dynamism, which denotes the existence of a certain a degree of academic freedom within this oppressive structure.

Writing and teaching history in Lubumbashi

This section sheds light on the intellectual dynamism characterizing UNAZA's departments of history, as well as its complex relation to *Authenticité*. The new university's cosmopolitan professoriate had to contend with the political climate of early Mobutism, no more so than in the politically sensitive discipline of history. *Authenticité*, as a unifying nationalist narrative destined to bring a coherent Zairian identity to the fore, required the documentation and writing of an officially sanctioned common past.⁵³ UNAZA Lubumbashi's role as the national home of historical research put its faculty in a prominent, but uncomfortable position in regards to the regime's aims. On the one hand, their will to break free of Eurocentric narratives ostensibly coincided with Mobutuist calls for 'mental emancipation'.⁵⁴ On the other, they faced demands by MPR officials to deepen their engagement with party ideology, by providing a scientific authority and historical justification for *Authenticité*. Such demands had to be partially answered; in spite of a relative academic freedom, UNAZA effectively remained a branch of the party-state, whose members could be subjected to the MPR's repressive apparatus. Decolonizing research and fostering a new episteme therefore emerged in a narrowing interstice between political allegiance and scientific critique.

One can find two overarching characteristics in UNAZA historians' approach to the past. First, they were unsurprisingly critical of established historiographies. Second, they often endeavoured to underline the universal nature of African and Zairian historical trajectories, by encompassing them into a Marxist analytical framework. Taken together, these two approaches built a bridge between their cosmopolitanism and intellectual decolonization, which were nevertheless difficult to articulate to *Authenticité*.

For instance, UNAZA's 1974 handbook for Zairian history students distanced itself from colonial narratives which depicted Africa as 'a world of undifferentiated savagery' and provided Europeans with a 'sense of superiority'. The handbook's author was Jean-Luc Vellut, a Belgian-born scholar and specialist on the social and economic history of colonial Congo, who taught at Lovanium before joining the ranks of UNAZA.⁵⁵ Furthermore, Lubumbashi's historians wanted to veer away from the first initial wave of post-Independence research conducted in the 1960s. They perceived this early post-colonial historiography as having been too focused on the study of 'ethnic' differences. The older generation of historians, they argued, went too far in affirming the existence of almost mythical African particularisms rooted in 'ethnic groups' as social building blocks.⁵⁶ For this reason, the course on 'ethnohistory' was removed from the UNAZA curriculum in 1974, as it was considered to be 'an ambiguous concept discredited by the entire Africanist historiography', according to Isidore Ndaywel E Nziem, a UNAZA historian who would come to write an authoritative monograph on Congo's *longue durée* history.⁵⁷

On the contrary, they viewed social history as being a 'universal'. Its specific iterations in sub-Saharan Africa were seen as an answer to misconceptions of an alleged 'African particularism' in the general sweep of human history.⁵⁸ Lubumbashi's history curriculum therefore endeavoured to consider Zaire's past in the broader, global historical dynamics, at odds with *Authenticité*'s main postulates. Furthermore, Zaire's strong economic position in the early 1970s, underwritten by profitable mineral production in the Shaba region, also sustained a vibrant urban culture in Lubumbashi, which in return provided

UNAZA scholars with many opportunities to work on the everyday. Anthropologist Johannes Fabian for instance studied the plays of local theatre groups to highlight how city dwellers collectively made sense of the issues they encountered in their everyday life. By identifying innovative new sources and improving methodologies in oral history, students and academics alike investigated 'bottom-up' experiences of colonialism and questioned social stratifications in both historical and contemporary societies.⁵⁹

The University of Lubumbashi's archives also help us document the kind of research that students in history were expected to pursue. There, I could consult 22 undergraduate and graduate theses completed between 1973 and 1981. Nine analysed either the socio-economic or administrative and political history of a *territoire*, the smallest colonial administrative unit. Two others were investigations into the colonial past of a region or a locality, while three focused on labour or industrial history. Only 3 out of 22 were related to Shaba. Six of these used a blend of archival and oral research methods. This limited sample of student work demonstrates how the post-colonial refocusing of history research and teaching in Lubumbashi translated into learning experiences. Given that students came to Lubumbashi from all over Zaire, it is probable that professors encouraged them to conduct micro-historical research in their region of origin. These local initiatives using similar methodologies could then serve as building blocks in the writing of a national history, following a socio-economic narrative dear to the research interests of Lubumbashi's historians.

However, in spite of their convergences of view, Lubumbashi's historians still held diverging views on their craft. Ndaywel and Vellut would for instance later disagree on the place that ethnicity played in Congolese historical dynamics. In a review of the former's *Histoire Générale du Congo*, Vellut criticized Ndaywel's reified understanding of ethnic identities as clearly identifiable and separable entities on both linguistic and geographic planes. This perspective espoused 'the rules of Western political cartography' according to Vellut, still indebted to an anthropologic vision 'largely diffused by colonial education in Belgian Congo'.⁶⁰ Asserting the existence of tangible, long-existing ethnic communities allowed Ndaywel to suggest that an embryonic Congolese identity predated colonialism. This produces a sort of nationalist 'usable past' which was not entirely at odds with *Authenticité*.

UNAZA scholars also had a strong interest in investigating how class distinctions were relevant to the study of Shaba's urban and mining areas, such as in the research of Bogumil Jewsiewicki, a Polish-born Africanist who taught in both Lovanium and UNAZA/Lubumbashi between 1968 and 1976. His early works on popular painters testified to his Marxist approach, for they focused on how a sustained demand for visual art by 'European patronage' and a Zairian 'petite bourgeoisie' of 'specialized workers, lower level office or trade employees, primary school teachers and domestic help' communicated a collective memory which however left little trace in administrative archives.⁶¹ Sociologist Augustin Mwabila Malela endeavoured in 1970 to investigate 'class consciousness among Lubumbashi's urban proletariat'. Malela subsequently called for a nuanced understanding of 'class' in Shaba. He identified an 'incomplete proletarianization' and an 'almost complete absence of class consciousness' among his informants. He also criticized how the post-colonial government's neglect of agriculture and manufacturing at the benefit of mining, failed to generate 'a self-centred economic development'.⁶²

The intellectual networks of this cosmopolitan body of scholars remained however essentially rooted in the francophone world. If language barriers, or the limited access to publications in English via the university's library could have prevented them from fully engaging with the works of their Anglophone counterparts, there were however manifold intellectual exchanges with scholars with whom they shared a common tongue. Key figures of pan-Africanism came to the Lubumbashi campus in the 1970s to deliver lectures, such as the Senegalese historian and anthropologist Cheikh Anta Diop, the Congolese linguist Théophile Obenga and the Rwandese philosopher Alexis Kagame.⁶³

These events fuelled the critical reflection of Lubumbashi's students and sometimes sparked fierce criticism of the current curriculum, which testifies to the liveliness of debates on intellectual decolonization on campus. Diop's 1972 lecture on 'The Evolution of the Black World and its Contribution to Modern Civilization' was for instance used by a student to tackle what he perceived as a biased understanding of African history in the courses he followed. His lengthy essay published in *Elimu* – UNAZA's short-lived journal of students in human sciences – opened with a comparison between Diop to Galileo. For its author, Lokadi Longandjo, Diop's theory of the 'negro origins of the Egyptian civilization' had 'struck a fatal blow to the white man's prestige' and 'has given back to the Negro his historical truth', just as Galileo's heliocentrism had dismantled the fundamental dogmas of his own time. Unfortunately, the UNAZA course 'Problematics of the written sources of African history' did not fully embrace Diop's theories and indeed warned students against the unfoundedness of his archaeological assertions. The author accused his professors of 'resorting to ideological assumptions rather than to pure facts' to criticize Diop.⁶⁴ He also lamented that history teaching in Zaire suggested 'that the contribution of Blacks to the modern civilization limits itself to the arts and religion' and that 'the Western civilisation is of Greek-Roman origin', something which 'should not be tolerated in Africa', given that 'the West's greatest exploit was to convince us that we were inferior to the Whites'.⁶⁵

One can observe here how students actively engaged with ideas circulating well beyond the limited scope of Zairian academia. As was the case for other African universities of the same time span, Lubumbashi was a node in cosmopolitan intellectual networks.⁶⁶ Access to critical discourse deemed sufficiently compatible with *Authenticité* to be the object of a prestige lecture offered students with the opportunity to openly defy the professoriate, in writing and under their own name. In spite of the fierce repression of students' political autonomy, a space of contestation nevertheless remained open within the UNAZA's tightly knitted power structure.

Notwithstanding such criticisms, the history curriculum had in fact dramatically changed since the inception of UNAZA, becoming more focused on local and continental pasts rather than on European heritage. Students were taught Zairian history from their very first semester. In the wider curriculum, they could deepen their knowledge of Zairian and sub-Saharan societies, following courses such as 'arts and technology of Africa', 'human geography of Africa', or 'history of modern Africa'. Graduate students chose courses from a portfolio were only one – 'history of non-African societies and institutions' – was not centred on the continent.⁶⁷

Furthermore, the history of Zaire as taught at UNAZA critically addressed the epistemologies inherited from colonization. Vellut's 1974 handbook for history students

critically discussed previous historiographic approaches. First, it highlighted how colonial history writing and anthropological research ‘privileged the study of “static” societies’, on the lookout for a “native” purity which never factually existed’.⁶⁸ Second, the handbook placed Zairian history in a *longue durée* framework, by offering an outlook on the existing research on iron and bronze age Central Africa.⁶⁹ Third, it also encouraged students to pay attention to continental and diasporic emancipation dynamics, ranging from the ‘centuries long struggle’ of slaves to ‘maintain their originality’ in the Atlantic world to twentieth century’s nationalist movements’ ‘rebuttal of the image of a barbaric Africa as a rejection of Africans’ subjection in a world dominated by the Whites’.⁷⁰

Taken together, the reorganizing of the history curriculum around national and continental approaches and its critical assessment of the Africanist historiography show how the scholars of Lubumbashi build upon the era’s intellectual decolonization. However, UNAZA also required Zairian historians to participate in the making and diffusion of *Authenticité*, a task with which they cautiously engaged.

Scholarly engagements with *Authenticité*

In publications and public events, UNAZA historians rhetorically demonstrated support of the emancipatory aspects of *Authenticité* without fully abiding with governmental demands. Jean-Luc Vellut highlighted in his 1974 handbook the importance of ‘historical research in nationalist movements’, and how nation-based historical narratives ‘establish the existence of a community rooted in the past [and] looking towards the future’.⁷¹ Other academics advanced similar views at the ‘First symposium of Zairian Historians’, held in Lubumbashi in the same year. ‘It is impossible to imagine an historian who would not be engaged [...] It is our duty to take seriously the demands of a community asking for its history to be written’,⁷² wrote the two editors of *Likundoli*, UNAZA’s history journal. Displays of activism could also serve as leverage for historians to channel demands towards state officials. For instance, in his speech during the symposium, historian Kagabo Pilipili asked MPR representatives in the audience to centralize official archives, train archivists and create a department of archaeology in Lubumbashi.⁷³

In spite of UNAZA scholars’ relative alignment with *Authenticité*, MPR officials called for their fuller engagement with party ideology. During the same 1974 symposium, UNAZA/Lubumbashi’s vice-chancellor gave a revealing speech on the perceived role of academic history in Zairian society:

Mobutu Sese Seko relentlessly encourages young Zairian historians to consider writing without delay a history of Zaire authentically Zairian, freed of any alienation. [...] Tell our children that long before the colonial interlude, our fathers found a way to peacefully coexist between Bantus, Sudano-Nilotics and Batwa, that each social group was integrated in society by its specific occupations [...] How can you properly assess the level of obscurantism in which our people were immersed [...] if you do not carefully examine the benefits of the radical cultural revolution that we are currently experiencing?⁷⁴

In 1977, such calls were reiterated by MPR officials in a markedly tenser political context. On 8 March, 1500 soldiers penetrated Shaba from across the Angolan border,

rapidly seizing small towns as they advanced. Under the banner of the *Front National pour la Libération du Congo* (FNLC), this small army of former independent Katanga soldiers was informally supported by the Angolan Marxist regime, by different anti-Mobutu exile groups and – to a lesser extent – Cuba and the Soviet Union. They retreated after a month, when a Moroccan contingent joined the Zairian Armed Forces’ until then unsuccessful counter-attack. This sort-lived conflict, known as the First Shaba War, was depicted by Mobutu as a combined attack by Communist and separatist forces on Zaire’s integrity.⁷⁵ Official rhetoric in Lubumbashi sought to stir up nationalist feelings among the academic community. During the conflict, a symposium of the *Comité Révolutionnaire Universitaire* (CRU) took place on campus. There, MPR mouthpieces expressed the official claim that a common historical experience shaped the Zairian nation. The vice-chancellor reminded the audience that Zaire ‘constitutes an observable cultural entity composed of clearly identifiable regional sub-cultures, within the negro-African totality. [...] This reminder is necessary to [...] appeal to the patriotic sentiments of the student community [...] to consolidate our national unity.’⁷⁶

Revealingly, this rhetoric of ‘authentic’ Zairian nationalism rested on the legacy of imperial epistemologies. As in colonial historiography, socio-linguistic categories such as ‘Bantu’ were reified as segregated ethno-racial units, to which were attributed alleged ‘talents’ and activities. ‘Authentic’ historical narratives did not challenge the social stratifications inherited from colonization, but rather attempted to show how imperialism supposedly brought dissent in ethnically based societies where harmony otherwise used to prevail. Social historians, focused on urban subjects and seeking to break free of both ‘colonial’ and ‘ethnic’ historiographies, were thus deeply compromised by and opposed to such an agenda.

In the early 1970s, these urgent calls from MPR officials to hammer out an essentialist narrative of Zairian’s ‘authentic’ precolonial unity nevertheless left sufficient space for UNAZA scholars to pursue their own line of research with relative autonomy. A Lubumbashi professor of political sciences first appointed in 1976, told me that his work at UNAZA was pursued ‘in absolute freedom’, ‘with no constraint’ by MPR officials.⁷⁷ A foreign scholar who occupied a prominent position in the Department of Social Sciences in the early 1970s equally recalled that there was no pressure to introduce *Authenticité* in teaching content, because ‘ideological indoctrination’ happened outside of the university. It was only in 1980 that university professors were required to follow an ‘ideological training’ at the MPR’s institute, in charge of defining its official political line.⁷⁸ Occasional public displays of allegiance to Zairian nationalist ideals were usually sufficient to secure a narrow space of academic autonomy.

After 1975, the precarious autonomy of UNAZA scholars and students became increasingly limited. Economic downturns due to the fall of mineral prices on global markets and the dramatic economic outcomes of the large-scale *zairianisation* programme led to drastic reductions in public spending. As their position became more precarious, many prominent Zairian and foreign academics left Lubumbashi for universities in the West. By 1981 and the dismantling of UNAZA, most of the remaining scholars in human and social sciences had moved back to Kinshasa. As elsewhere on the continent, this brief window of opportunity for innovative forms of knowledge production was closing.

Conclusion

In spite of its brevity, the history of UNAZA-Lubumbashi offers insights into knowledge production and into academic power dynamics in the early years of the Zairian state. This essay highlights how the optimistic, energetic post-colonial assertion of intellectual decolonization was as much a part of Zairian intellectual life as elsewhere on the continent. As we have seen, UNAZA's renewed history curriculum echoed some the intellectual postulates defended by the likes of Césaire and Fanon. Evidently, Lubumbashi's cosmopolitan and relatively privileged professoriate fell short of embodying a radical break with the bourgeois elites decried by Fanon. However, they produced Africa-centred knowledge which asserted the rightful place of Africans in the concert of human history, culture and thought. These scholars made use of Marxist approaches of the past to 'decolonize' teaching and research, previously characterized by more of a Eurocentric gaze and the 'essentializing' of 'ethnic differences'. Paradoxically, this 'essentializing' of pre-colonial ethnic identities was crucial in making an 'authentic', 'useable past' by postcolonial state authorities, keen on building a narrative of historical Zairian unity.

The coexistence of two disjointed historical narratives in Zaire – one 'academic', centred on social and economic approaches, and one more 'authentic', aiming at cultivating an essentialist nationalism within the Zairian population – provide valuable evidence for the relative autonomy enjoyed by Congo/Zaire's universities in the first years of Mobutu's rule. In spite of occasional public calls for more direct involvement of historians in giving flesh to *Authenticité*, scholars appear to have been relatively free to independently pursue their own research. As long as they did not openly challenge Mobutu's regime, they could still circumvent *Authenticité* as an epistemic framework. This suggests that UNAZA-Lubumbashi's academic community enjoyed a certain independence from the MPR's superstructure.

This story invites us therefore to revise two assumptions regarding Zairian academia. First, although scholars could not freely express themselves at UNAZA, this article argues that they used their relative autonomy to challenge established academic norms, also by strategically using the limited emancipatory opportunities provided by *Authenticité*. Second, the engagement of members of the academic community with intellectual decolonization and pan-Africanism questions shows that Lubumbashi was an important node in the continent's intellectual networks, which managed to attract for a while a cosmopolitan body of scholars, both as staff and as invited speakers.

Although this research was essentially concerned with a limited and better-off segment of the Zairian society, it helps us understand better the experience of MPR rule in the 1970s. The all-encompassing party-state and the ideological steamroll of *Authenticité* appear to still allow for spaces of free-thinking to survive, even within the potentially subversive world of a campus of human and social sciences, and even when the said campus was institutionally incorporated into MPR. For Crawford Young, Zaire endeavoured to become an 'integral state', able to exert a hegemonic control on the whole population, including in public and private spheres previously out of the authorities' reach.⁷⁹ It nevertheless appears that these ambitions were effectively limited in the early 1970s, given that sensitive spaces, prone to be highly monitored, still contained opportunities for intellectual autonomy. This calls for further research to be performed on other

sections of the Zairian society, to evaluate the extent of the state's encroachment on private and public life.

To conclude, one can argue that Lubumbashi was a crucial laboratory for Africanist knowledge production at large in the last quarter of the twentieth century and beyond. In a short time-span of half a decade, it was a meeting place where young scholars trained, exchanged, and experienced together MPR's authoritarianism. The flicker of cosmopolitan knowledge production at UNAZA was instrumental in shaping the rest of their career, which often brought them to Anglophone academia. The 'quiet self-censorship' of the Zairian academic community observed by Coleman did not prevent UNAZA from acting as the cradle of further waves of groundbreaking Africanist knowledge.

Notes

1. Allman, "Kwame Nkrumah," 183.
2. Livsey, *Nigeria's University*, 89–119; and Mwenda Kithinji, "An Imperial Enterprise," 201.
3. Mwenda Kithinju, "An Imperial Enterprise," 211; and Allman, "Kwame Nkrumah," 192.
4. Allman, "Kwame Nkrumah," 200.
5. Mamdani, "Decolonising Universities," 25–6.
6. Coleman, *Nationalism and Development*, 317–18.
7. Parker and Reid, *Oxford Handbook*, 7–8.
8. Tilley, *Africa as a Living*, 261–311. For Katanga/Shaba and the neighbouring Zambian Copperbelt, see: Rubbers and Poncelet, "Sociologie Coloniale"; and Schumaker, *Africanizing Anthropology*.
9. Nkwi, "Anthropology in a Postcolonial," 161–2.
10. Monaville, "The Destruction," 159–70; and Monaville, "Making a Second," 106–15.
11. Covington-Ward, *Gesture and Power*, 137–87.
12. Van Beurden, *Authentically African*.
13. Österhamel, *Decolonization*, IX, 158; and Maldonado-Torres, "Fanon and Decolonial," 802–3.
14. Rabaka, *Forms of Fanonism*, 102.
15. Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 33.
16. Rabaka, *Forms of Fanonism*, 112.
17. Maldonado-Torres, "Fanon and Decolonial," 802–3.
18. Rabaka, *Forms of Fanonism*, 125.
19. Cheah, "Cosmopolitanism," 487.
20. Jeffers, "Appiah's Cosmopolitanism," 496.
21. Bhambra, "Cosmopolitanism and Postcolonial Critique," 314.
22. Ivaska, *Cultured States*, 149.
23. Dübgen and Skupien, *Paulin Hountondji*, 90.
24. Lamola, "Paulin Hountondji," 275–6.
25. Boizette, "Décolonisation des subjectivités," 371.
26. Fraiture, *VY Mudimbe*, 39, 46.
27. Ndaywel e Nziem, *Nouvelle Histoire*, 413–14.
28. Dibwe, "UNAZA Campus," 155.
29. Kennes and Larmer, *Katangeses Gendarmes*, 52.
30. Verhaegen, *L'enseignement universitaire au Zaïre*, 40.
31. Coleman, *Nationalism and Development*, 309.
32. Ivaska, *Cultured States*, 128.
33. Ndaywel e Nziem, *Nouvelle Histoire*, 504–5, 531–2.
34. Young, *The Rise*, 187.
35. Ndaywel e Nziem, *Nouvelle Histoire*, 528.
36. Monaville, "Decolonizing the University," 470.
37. Coleman, *Nationalism and Development*, 311.

38. Monaville, "The Destruction," 95.
39. Van Beurden, *Authentically African*, 108–9.
40. Quoted in White, "L'incroyable machine," 51.
41. Quoted in Adelman, "The Recourse," 134.
42. Ndaywel E Nziem, "De l'Authenticité," 99–100.
43. Gobbers, "Ethnic Associations," 211–12.
44. See: Vansina, *Paths*.
45. This slogan appears to have been one of the most remembered. When asked to recall life under Mobutu, several interviewees resorted to it to express the coercive nature of engagement with the party-state. Interviews with Balthazar Ngoy, 19.01.2018, Edmond Kasasa, 24.01.2018, Ida Kabongo, 27.01.2018.
46. Interview Prof. Balthazar Ngoy Fiam, 6.02.2018.
47. Interview Georges Mpiana, 19.01.2018; Ilunga Kabeya, 18.01.2018; Prof. Balthazar Ngoy Fiam, 19.01.2018.
48. Interview Georges Mpiana, 19.01.2018; Jean-Marie Bashizi, 20.01.2018.
49. Interview Georges Mpiana, 19.01.2018.
50. Interview Prof Ngasha Mulumbati, 26.01.2018.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid.
53. Van Beurden, *Authentically African*, 108.
54. Tumba, "Réflexion sur l'Evolution," 58.
55. Vellut, *Guide de l'Etudiant*, 12.
56. Ibid., 64.
57. Ndaywel E Nziem, "Programme de Formation," 23.
58. Vellut, *Guide de l'Etudiant*, 1.
59. Fabian, *History from Below*, 166; and Vellut, *Guide de l'Etudiant*, II.
60. Vellut, "Prestige et pauvreté," 483.
61. Jewsiewicki, "Collective Memory."
62. Mwabila Malela, *Travail et Travailleurs*, 9, 96.
63. Jewsiewicki, "Pluralisme et Médiation," 11.
64. Longandjo, "Cheikh Anta," 15.
65. Ibid., 18.
66. Ivaska, *Cultured States*, 126.
67. Ndaywel E Nziem, "Programme de Formation," 25.
68. Vellut, *Guide de l'Etudiant*, 41.
69. Ibid., 54.
70. Ibid., 48.
71. Ibid., 47.
72. Ndaywel e Nziem and Pilipili, "Histoire et Engagement," 3.
73. Pilipili, "Le Premier Séminaire," 99.
74. Motukoa, "Discours d'Ouverture," 104.
75. Kennes and Larmer, *Katanges Gendarmes*, 119–45.
76. *Hebdo-Information Campus de Lubumbashi*, Vol. 1/28–30, March 24–April 14, 1977, 14.
77. Interview, 26.01.2018.
78. Ndaywel E Nziem, "Formation Idéologique," 238.
79. Young, "Zaire: The Shattered," 248–50.

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