

The Passing of Patrice Lumumba

By John Henrik Clarke (1961)

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The life of Patrice Lumumba proved that he was a product of the best and worst of Belgian colonial rule. In more favorable circumstances, he might have become one of the most astute national leaders of the twentieth century. He was cut down long before he had time to develop into the more stable leader that he was obviously capable of being. When the Congo emerged clearly in the light of modern history he was its bright star.

His hero was Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, and the model for his state was Ghana. "In a young state," he had said, paraphrasing a similar statement made by Dr. Nkrumah, "you must have strong and visible powers."

At the beginning of his political career he was pro-Western in his outlook. "Mistakes have been made in Africa in the past, but we are ready to work with the powers which have been in Africa to create a powerful new bloc," he said at the beginning of 1960. "If this effort fails, it will be through the fault of the West."

As a reformer he was somewhat of a republican in his approach. "Our need is to democratize all our institutions," he had said on another occasion. "We must separate the Church from the State. We must take away all power from the traditional chiefs and remove all privileges. We must adapt socialism to African realities. Amelioration of the conditions of life is the only true meaning independence can have."

His resentment of Belgian authority was unyielding in most cases. Mostly because he believed that paternalism was at the base of this authority. This by-product of colonialism never failed to stir a rage within him. On the other hand, his reaction to the Belgian Missionary attempt to enforce Christianity on the Congo was one of indifference. He had been subjected to both Catholic and Protestant mission influence, without showing any particular affection for either. His parents were devout Catholics. Being neither an atheist nor anti-Christian, he yet considered submission to a religion to be a curb to his ambitions. Rebellion was more rewarding and less wounding to his pride. During his long and lonely rise from obscurity to the Congo's first Prime Minister, he taught himself never to completely trust power in the hands of others. This attitude is reflected in the suspicion that developed between him and the UN Forces in the Congo.

His conflicts with the other Congo politicians was due mainly to his unyielding belief in the unitary state, and partly to his lack of experience in explaining, organizing and administering such a state. Nevertheless, he was the only Congolese leader with anything like a national following; a point too often overlooked. His greatest achievement in the early difficult months of Congo independence was in maintaining, with only a few defections, the solidarity of his widely disparate coalition government.

Lumumba belonged to the company of Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere in Tanganyika, Tom Mboya in Kenya, and Sékou Touré. These leaders believe that the only way to build an effective modern state free from the shackles of narrow tribal loyalties is to create a single, strong central government. This firm stand joined the issues in the Congo and created both the supporters and the opposition to Lumumba.

He argued his case at the Round Table Conference that gave the Congo its independence in 1960. He laid it before the electorate in June 1960, and won an indecisive victory. Finally he tried to force it on his Federalist opponents when he took control of the first independent government. Most of Lumumba's critics considered this to be his greatest error. He tried to cast the Congo into the tight mould of Ghana, rather than into the larger, more accommodating mould of Nigeria. The argument is interesting though useless now.

Patrice Lumumba's body now lies a-mouldering in some unmarked and inglorious Congo grave—both his truth and spirit go marching on, much to the discomfort of his murderers.

No other personality in African history has leaped so suddenly from death to martyrdom. In death he might have already made a greater contribution to the liberation and understanding of Africa than he could have made had he lived. In his short lifetime the stamp of his personality was pressed firmly into the African continent. He was purely an African of the mid-twentieth century. No other place and no other set of circumstances could have charged his life and caused his death in the same unique and tragic way. In death, he cast forth a spirit that will roam the African land for many years to come.

For a long time the Congo appeared to be a peaceful island untouched by African anticolonialism. In the twelve brief years between 1946 and 1958, the Belgians began to lose what had appeared to be an impregnable position. Some important events occurred in Africa and the rest of the world, and broke up the trinity in Belgium's alleged "perfect colony." A change of political direction in Brussels and mounting nationalist pressure coming from within Africa helped to end the illusion that all was well and would stay well in the Congo. At last the Belgians began to have some second thoughts about their policy in the Congo. The missionary-trained evolved, the supposedly emancipated, Westernized middle class had found their voices.

Certain fundamental problems formed the core of the colonial dilemma in Africa; although Belgian colonists chose to ignore this fact. The same problems existed in the Congo as elsewhere in Africa. Freedom, self-determination, hatred of racial discrimination, and white settlement without assimilation made the Congo people feel unwanted in their own country, except as servants for white people.

It was within this order of ideas that the Belgian Socialist Party attempted to change the trend of Belgium's colonial policy and devise a more humane approach to the problems of the Congo people. The accelerated economic development in the Congo during the war and after the war had changed the structure of the Congolese community. The black population of Leopoldville rose from 46,900 to 191,000 between 1940 and 1950. By 1955, the black population of Leopoldville had reached some 300,000. The mass exodus of Congolese from rural areas and their concentration in urban centers created new problems. The detribalized workers did not return to their respective villages when the city no longer afforded them employment.

It was incumbent upon the Belgium Socialist Party to define its position in relation to the Congo. As far as basic premises were concerned, the party did recognize "the primacy of native interests; and the aim of its activity will be to prepare the indigenous population gradually to take charge of its own political, economic, and social affairs, within the framework of a democratic society." Further, the Party expressed its "uncompromising opposition to any kind of racial discrimination" and advised a raise in the standard of living of the people of the Congo. Only those whites who are prepared to work for the realization of these aims and who constitute the administrative personnel of the indigenous population are to enjoy the support of the government. This preparation for self-government presupposes the political organization of the Congo, i.e., the initiation of the native into citizenship. With this proposal the Belgian Socialist Party admitted that the Congolese were not accepted as citizens in their own country. This fact had been the cause of a broadening dissatisfaction among the Congolese since the early part of the twentieth century. With the relaxing of political restrictions this dissatisfaction began to manifest itself in a form of embryo nationalism. The future Congolese leaders had already begun to gather their first followers. All of the early political parties in the Congo were the outgrowth of regional and tribal associations. Patrice Lumumba was the only Congolese leader who, from the very beginning of his career, attempted to build a Congo-wide political organization.

During his short-lived career Patrice Lumumba was the first popularly elected Congolese Government Prime Minister. Like a few men before him, he became a near-legend in his own lifetime. The influence of this legend extended to the young militant nationalists far beyond the borders of the Congo, and it is still spreading.

Of all the leaders who suffered imprisonment at the hands of the Belgians before 1960, Lumumba had the largest number of followers among the Congolese masses, mainly because he had more of the qualities of character with which they liked to identify. As a speaker he was equally effective in French, Ki-Swahili or Lingola. The devotion of the rank and file of his party, *Movement National Congolais* (MNC) to Patrice Lumumba was not a unique phenomenon. What is more significant is the fact that he was able to attract

the strongly expressed loyalties of a tribally-heterogeneous body of the Congolese. This made him the only national political leader. While other politicians tended to take advantage of their respective associations as the path to power, Lumumba took the broader and more nationalistic approach and involved himself in other movements only indirectly related to politics.

In 1951, he joined the *Association des Evolves de Stanleyville*, one of the most active and numerically important of all the clubs in Orientale Province. He was in the same year appointed Secretary-General of the *Association des Postiers de la Province Orientale*—a professional organization consisting mostly of postal workers. Two years later he became Vice-Chairman of an Alumni Association consisting of former mission students. In 1956 he founded the *Amicle Liberale de Stanleyville*.

Patrice Lumumba is a member of the Beteteta tribe, a Mongo subgroup. He was born on July 2, 1925, in Katako-Kombe in the Sunkuru district of the Kasai Province. In growing up he only received a primary education. Very early in life he learned to push himself beyond the formal limits of his education. He made frequent contributions to local newspapers such as *Stanleyvillois* and the more widely read publications, *Vois du Conlais* and *Croix du Congo*. Unlike the vast majority of Congolese writers of the period who placed major emphasis on the cultural heritage of their own tribes, Lumumba's early writings emphasized—within the limits of Belgian official restrictions—problems of racial, social, and economic discrimination.

On July 1, 1956, the career of Patrice Lumumba was temporarily interrupted when he was arrested on the charge of embezzling 126,000 franc (\$2,200) from the post office funds. He was sentenced to serve a two-year prison term. On June 13, 1957, the sentence was commuted on appeal to eighteen months, and finally to 12 months after the Wolves of Stanleyville reimbursed the sum in question. Subsequently, Lumumba left Stanleyville and found employment in Leopoldville as the sale director of the Bracongo (polar beer) Brewery.

Leopoldville became a good vantage point for Lumumba's Congo-wide activities. He had now entered into the crucial phase of his political career. In 1958, while combining the functions of vice-chairman of a liberal friendship society, the *Circle Liberal d'Etudes et d'Agreement*, with those of the president of the *Association des Bateleurs*, of Leopoldville, he joined a Christian Democratic Study Group, the *Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Sociales*, created in 1955 by the Secretary General of the *Jeunesses Ouvrieres Chretiennes*, Jacques Meert. Among the more prominent members of this organization were Joseph Ileo (now [early sixties] Prime Minister in the Kasavubu government) and Joseph Ngalula.

Joseph Ileo was editor-in-chief of the bi-monthly *Conscience Africaine*. He had already acquired a wide reputation among Congolese when he decided, in July of 1956, to publish a nationalist inspired manifesto which contained a daring 30-year plan of emancipation for the Congo.

Both Ileo and Ngalula were anxious to broaden the basis of the Movement National Congolais, a moderate nationalist organization created in 1956. Patrice Lumumba, then regarded as one of the eminent spokesmen of liberal ideas, joined the MNC.

Once affiliated with this and other groups, Lumumba readily asserted himself and became the dominant figure. Shortly after proclaiming himself chairman of MNC's Central Committee, he formally announced on October 10, 1958, the foundation of a "national movement" dedicated to the goal of "national liberation." His action at this moment was prompted by two important developments affecting the Congo. One was the forthcoming visit of a parliamentary committee appointed by the former Minister of the Congo, Mr. Patillon, for the purpose of "conducting an inquiry concerning the administrative and political evolution of the country." Another was the creation of a *Movement Pour le Progres National Congolais* in late November, 1958, by the Congolese delegates to the Brussels Exposition. Lumumba moved in and around these groups and quickly projected himself into the role of a dynamic and radical nationalist leader.

A high point in his political development came in 1958, when he was permitted to attend the Pan African Conference in Accra, Ghana. Here he became a member of the Permanent Directing Committee. Patrice Lumumba had now projected himself upon a political stage of international importance. In addition to whatever personal counsel he might have received from Ghana's Prime Minister, Nkrumah, there is little doubt that the Accra Conference was an important factor in shaping Lumumba's long-range objectives and

further sensitizing him to the philosophy of Pan-Africanism.

When he returned home, the emancipation of the Congo from Belgium's tutelage assumed first priority among his activities. In March, 1959, when Belgium had already announced its intention to lead the Congo "without fatal procrastination and without undue haste" toward self-government, Lumumba went to Brussels where he delivered several lectures under the auspices of *Présence Congolaise*, a Belgian organization dedicated to the promotion of African culture. On this occasion, Lumumba indiscreetly turned on his host and sponsors and deplored the "bastardization and destruction of Negro-African art," and "the depersonalization of Africa." He reaffirmed his Party's determination to put an end to the "camouflaged slavery of Belgian colonization" and elect an independent government in 1961. With this act of boldness, Patrice Lumumba had set the stage for most of his future troubles and probably his future death.

After the target-date for independence had been approved by the *Movement National Congolais*, new troubles began for Lumumba and his supporters. Now that the contestants for power were close to their goal the competition between them became fiercer. Delegates to the Luluabourg Congress, in April 1959, ran against the demands of other nationalist groups anxious to put themselves forward as the standard-bearers of independence. Several of Lumumba's earlier supporters withdrew from the MNC and formed their own parties. With the date for Congo independence practically rushing upon him, Lumumba set out to rebuild the *Movement National Congolais*. He involved himself in every phase of his party's activists, organizing local sections of the MNC and recruiting new supporters.

On November 1, 1959, a few days after his wing of the MNC held its congress in Stanleyville, Lumumba was arrested for the second time and charged with having made seditious statements. He was sentenced to six months in jail. After serving nearly three months of his sentence he was released when a delegation of officials from the MNC notified the Belgian government that they would not participate in the Brussels Roundtable Conference unless Lumumba was set free. Soon after his release, Lumumba's party was victorious in the December elections. As expected, Stanleyville proved to be the main Lumumba stronghold in the Congo. In Stanleyville his party won ninety per cent of the votes.

Lumumba's status and influence continued to rise. As a representative of Orientale Province, he was appointed to the General Executive College, an interim executive body established after the Brussels Roundtable Conference. Trouble continued to brew within the ranks of his party. Victor Nendaka, vice-chairman of the MNC, broke with Lumumba for what he termed the "extreme left wing tendencies" of the party leader. In 1960, he organized his own party. Once more Lumumba reshuffled the party personnel and strengthened his position. The MNC emerged from the next electoral struggle as the strongest in the House of Representatives, with 34 out of 137 seats. In the Provincial Assembly of Orientale, Lumumba's party held 58 out of 70 seats. In the assemblies of Kivu and Kasai Provinces, 17 out of 25 seats were secured.

Lumumba employed several techniques to mobilize his support and activate the rural masses. First there was the careful selection of party officials and propagandists at the Lodja Congress, held March 9-12, 1960. These delegates of the Bakutshu and Batetela tribes agreed that they would entrust the defense of their interests to the political party which held a dominant position in the region. Namely, that was Lumumba's party, the MNC. The party's success among the Bakutshu and Batetela tribal associations was mainly due to Lumumba's tribal origin and the anti-Belgian orientation acquired by these tribes in resisting the penetration of Western rule.

Lumumba and the MNC improved their techniques of building up functional organizations, in order to unify the political actions of the MNC. These organizational networks embraced a variety of interest groups and cut across tribal lines. Through a tactical alliance with minor parties, Lumumba tried to transform the MNC into an integrating structure where both sectional and national interests would be represented. This program received its formal sanction at the extraordinary congress of the MNC, held in Luluabourg, April 3-4, 1960. This was a major landmark in the history of Lumumba's party. Once more he had proven to be the most able of all Congolese leaders.

As the Congo crossed the threshold of independence, new troubles developed within the ranks of the MNC.

Communication between Lumumba and some of the leaders of the party broke down. The Congo's most vital instrument of stability, the *Force Publique*, collapsed. The number and complexities of the issues now confronting Lumumba absorbed most of the time he formerly devoted to party activities. Now that the pomp and ceremony of the Belgian's handing over power to elected Congolese leaders was over, one struggle for Lumumba was over, but a new and bitter one was beginning.

His devotion to the idea of a united Congo was now more firm. He was one of the few Congolese politicians who had any conception of the Congo as a strong centralized state. Tshombe thought first of carving himself out a state in Katanga where he could be the boss, with Belgian help. Kasavubu cherished the dream of restoring the ancient empire of Bakongo. Other Congolese politicians were still involved in their tribal ideals and hostilities.

Lumumba was neither kind nor cautious toward the Belgians during the independence ceremony. This might have been one of his greatest mistakes. He announced too many of his future plans; which included not only the uniting of the Congo by giving assistance to the nations around him (especially Angola) who were still under European rule. Whoever made the decision to kill Lumumba probably made it this very day. He had crossed the path of the unseen power manipulators who wanted to control the Congo economically even if they were willing to let Lumumba control it politically. Instead of saying, "Thanks very much for our independence. We appreciate [what] all you Belgians have done for our country," Lumumba said in effect, "It's about time, too! And it's a pity that in a half-century you didn't see fit to build more hospitals and schools. You could have made much better use of your time."

Lastly, when the *Force Publique* revolted in the first days of July, Lumumba tried earnestly to be equal to this and other emergencies exploding around him. He faced the risks of his high position with real courage. Frantically, he moved over his large country trying to restore order. Several times he escaped death by inches. Once he was saved by a Ghanaian officer. Once his car was stoned by a mob. This did not keep him from trying to restore order to his troubled country. In the middle of July when the structure of order in his country was deteriorating into chaos, Lumumba flew off for a grandiose tour of the United States, Canada, North, and West Africa. This was another one of his unfortunate mistakes. In his absence confusion became worse.

In his dealings with the United Nations he never knew exactly what he wanted; showing no steady policy toward the UN, he confused both his friends and enemies who grew impatient with his erratic behavior. When the disintegration within his country reached dangerous proportions he asked for military from the United Nations. Within about three days the UN troops were on the spot. When Lumumba found that the UN troops could not be used as a private army to put down his political opponents he became disenchanted with their presence in his country.

By now Lumumba had quarreled with nearly every leading politician in the Congo. His continued erratic action shook the confidence of the outside world and of many of the African leaders who had wished him well and hoped that he could restore order rapidly. A power struggle had erupted in the Congo. Concurrent with this struggle Belgians were working behind the scenes to reconquer the Congo economically; their Congolese puppets, bought and paid for in advance, were deeply engrossed in their self-seeking venture.

In the last weeks of his life, when he was being dragged around with a rope around his neck, while his captors yanked up his head for the benefit of newsreel cameras, he still carried himself with great dignity as well as courage. When he was beaten up on the plane which carried him to be handed over to his arch enemy, Tshombe, he did not cry out nor plead for mercy. When Tshombe's troops beat him again, in the Elizabethville airport, he asked no one for help or pity. He was carried off by Tshombe's troops and their Belgian officers on a journey from which he was certain never to return alive. Lumumba's conduct in the midst of these scenes will always stand to his credit in history. These traits of independence and courage in his personality went into the making of his martyrdom—a strange and dangerous martyrdom that makes Lumumba a more effective Africa nationalist in death than he was in life.

Some of the people who are now most vocal in their praise of the dead Lumumba include many who in the past criticized some of his actions and speeches most savagely while he was still alive. Patrice Lumumba was pulled from power mostly by his own people, who were being manipulated by forces of change and

power alien to their understanding.

In the killing of Lumumba, white neo-colonialists and their black African puppets frustrated the southward spread of independence movements. Lumumba had pledged to give assistance to the African nations to the east and the south of the Congo who are still struggling to attain independence, particularly Angola. Lumumba was a true son of Africa, and in his short unhappy lifetime he was accepted as belonging to all of Africa, not just the Congo.

The important point in the Lumumba story, briefly related, is this: He proved that legitimacy of a postcolonial regime in Africa, relates mainly to its legal mandate; but even more, legitimacy relates to the regime's credentials as a representative of a genuine nationalism fighting against the intrigues of neo-colonialism. This is why Lumumba was and is still being extolled this "best son of Africa," this "Lincoln of the Congo," this "Black Messiah," whose struggle was made noble by his unswerving demand for centralism against all forms of Balkanization and rendered heroic by his unyielding resistance to the forces of neo-colonialism which finally killed his body, but not his spirit. This man who now emerges as a strange combination of statesman, sage, and martyr, wrote his name on the scroll of African history during his short and unhappy lifetime.

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