

# Across the Malebo Pool: Imperial Borders, African Mobility, and Urban Life between Léopoldville and Brazzaville

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## Introduction

THE Congolese capitals of Kinshasa (formerly Léopoldville) and Brazzaville face each other less than ten kilometers apart on either side of the Congo River. Separated by a narrow stretch of the river that flows from the relatively navigable lake-like expanse called the Malebo Pool, these cities are the closest non-contiguous national capitals in the world. While today they are centers of two discrete nation-states—the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire) and the Republic of the Congo—they have also long been intimately connected by networks of people, goods, and cultures flowing along the river and across the Malebo Pool. Introduced first by Belgian and French colonialism in the late 19th century, the imperial and later national border has attempted to divide these centuries-old hubs of exchange and connections. In the face of these attempts, however, and especially in the late colonial and postcolonial periods, Africans in Léopoldville/Kinshasa and Brazzaville challenged, subverted, and refused successive state attempts to control their mobility, economic activity, and dynamic cultural lives across the Congo River at the Malebo Pool.

## Note on Place Names

As a result of the succession of colonial and postcolonial regimes, the two Congos and their present-day capital cities have had several official names which can be difficult to keep track of over time. In 1882, the French Congo was established with Brazzaville as its capital. The colony was confirmed three years later at the 1885 Berlin Conference. Also in 1885, King Leopold II of Belgium established his genocidal Congo Free State with the capital in Vivi, though this was quickly changed to Boma, a port town on the Congo River. In 1903, French Congo was renamed to Middle Congo (*Moyen Congo*), and in 1908 Brazzaville became the federal capital of French Equatorial Africa (AEF), which also included Gabon, Chad, and Ubangi-Shari (now the Central African Republic). That year, the Congo Free State transitioned from a private colony of Leopold's to a Belgian colony and was renamed to Belgian Congo.<sup>1</sup> Léopoldville became the capital of Belgian Congo in 1923 and grew rapidly after this point. In 1958, French constitutional reforms dissolved the AEF and renamed French/Moyen Congo to the Republic of Congo, the name the country has held since independence in 1960.

1960 also was the year of independence for the former Belgian Congo, which was then, rather confusingly, also renamed the Republic of the Congo. To distinguish between the two countries, they were frequently referred to as Congo-Léopoldville and Congo-Brazzaville. The former was briefly

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<sup>1</sup>The international and local movement that contributed to the unseating of Léopold's private rule in Congo has been widely documented by historians, perhaps most famously by Adam Hochschild in his *King Leopold's Ghost*. Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

renamed to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (its contemporary name) in 1965. However, Joseph-Desiré Mobutu (who changed his own name to Mobutu Sese Seko in 1972) took over in a coup in 1966 and, in an exercise of *Authenticité*, renamed Léopoldville to Kinshasa. In 1971, he renamed the country to the Republic of Zaire.<sup>2</sup> The Congo River was accordingly called the Zaire River in this period. When Mobutu was overthrown by Laurent-Desiré Kabila in 1997, Zaire was finally renamed to Democratic Republic of the Congo, the name it holds today, though it is often referred to as Congo-Kinshasa, DR Congo, or the DRC. The Republic of the Congo is frequently called Congo-Brazzaville, and both are often, again confusingly, simply called “Congo.”

The Malebo Pool itself has also gone through several significant name changes. Originally referred to as *Nkunda* by people living in the region, it was renamed to the Stanley Pool after the violent mercenary “explorer” Henry Morton Stanley following his 1877 expedition as an agent of Leopold II.<sup>3</sup> The Pool was renamed to the Malebo Pool (or *Pool Malebo* in French) in 1972, after the Lilebo tree (*Borassus flabellifer*) which used to be abundant in the region.<sup>4</sup> In this paper I refer either to the Malebo Pool, or simply “the Pool.” I occasionally use place names according to the relevant historical period, but to avoid confusion, I generally use “Congo-Brazzaville” and “Congo-Léopoldville” or “Congo-Kinshasa,” depending again on period.

## Geographic Context and Trans-Pool Connectivities in the 19th Century

During and prior to the 19th century, many ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groups formed significant networks of economic and cultural exchange across the Malebo Pool region. These networks demonstrate the novelty and artificiality of the later imperial/national border and contextualize later river and Pool mobilities in their historical precedents. Renowned historian of Congo Jan Vansina adopts geographer Gilles Sautter’s term “Great Congo Commerce” to describe the trade between coastal regions, the Malebo Pool, and elsewhere along the Congo River. For Vansina, this term describes both the vast geography of exchanges “as well as the great intensity and astonishing scale of the trade.”<sup>5</sup> Vansina’s diagram of this “Great Congo Commerce” depicts land and water trade routes and shows the centrality of the markets at the large Malebo Pool (Appendix A). According to Vansina, the markets of the Pool “were the hub of the whole system,” with ferries operating across the river’s tributaries and contributing to the revenue of various groups there.<sup>6</sup> Didier Gondola further explains that this system’s key localities were “strategically located” on the Congo River. He emphasizes that these exchanges were fundamentally mediated and enabled by the vast river and, in this particular region, the navigable portion of the Malebo Pool where some of the most dynamic exchanges took place.<sup>7</sup> Yet, throughout the 19th century, networks reached beyond economic trade. There was also a great deal of cultural, linguistic, and political exchange

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<sup>2</sup>Note the irony, though, that “Zaire” was a Portuguese mispronunciation of the Kikongo word *nzere/nzada*, which means “the river that swallows all rivers.” Wyatt MacGaffey, “Am I Myself? Identities In Zaire, Then and Now,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 8 (December 1998): 291–307, doi:10.2307/3679299.

<sup>3</sup>Stanley’s expedition provided acclaim and legitimacy to Leopold’s interests across Europe and the United States. Traveling up the Congo River and across land, Stanley and his men killed and pillaged many people and communities as they went. He was an essential part of creating and legitimizing Leopold’s genocide Congo Free State. Hochschild, 30.

<sup>4</sup>Sylvie Ayimpam, “Vie matérielle, échanges et capitalisme sur la rive méridionale du Pool du fleuve Congo (1815-1930),” *Clio en @frique. Recherche en Anthropologie et Histoire de l’Afrique*, no. 18 (June 1, 2006): <http://www.cemaf.cnrs.fr/IMG/pdf/18>, <https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00723326>, 4.

<sup>5</sup>Jan Vansina, *The Tio Kingdom of the Middle Congo, 1880-1892* (Oxford University Press for the International African Institute, 1973), 248.

<sup>6</sup>Vansina, 255.

<sup>7</sup>Gondola, 27.

across the region. Groups like the Tio and Bobangi, both dominant in the “Great Congo Commerce,” mingled and co-produced linguistic and cultural forms. Juridical institutions hybridized the conventions of different groups as they overlapped, and ritual and healing practices from the southern side of the Pool were adopted well beyond their Kongo origins. Vansina concludes that this great cultural and political hybridity led to “a great enrichment of the texture of life.”<sup>8</sup> The diversity of languages, cultural practices, institutions, and goods that were exchanged through and across the Pool demonstrate the profound extent to which the Malebo Pool region has long been a site of exchange and mobility.

## Infrastructure, Technology, and Mobility in the mid-20th Century

Social, cultural, economic, and political linkages across the Pool could not have formed without the physical movement of people, goods, and ideas over and across the water. This movement was facilitated by several technological infrastructures throughout the century, including state-sponsored ferry services, illicit transport services, and communications technologies like radio that, by their nature, allowed for networks across space despite geographic and political borders. Jan Vansina cites 19th century Belgian force publique officer Alexandre Delcommune, who described trading boats as “15 m long (16 yd) by 80 to 90 cm (3 ft) wide, deep in the water with trading goods packed one metre higher than the sides and extending over the whole length of the boat.”<sup>9</sup> These trading boats moved people and goods across the river and through its many tributaries, allowing for the exchange of cultures, languages, ideas, and resources. They were often owned or controlled by major trading groups and individuals in the region, such as Tio chief Ntsuulu of Kinshasa who controlled much of the trade at the Pool by 1885, when Henry Morton Stanley arrived in the area.<sup>10</sup> This transit technology, as much as the trade itself, was essential to the structure of political and economic authority around and across the Pool.

These canoes and shipping vessels continued to be in operation after the introduction of Leopoldian and Belgian rule. However, colonial rulers also introduced other forms of cross-river transit to serve their economic and political interests. Despite these intentions, however, so-called “smugglers” were frequently able to use these state-sanctioned transit forms to move goods and people across the Pool for their own purposes. In 1935, the Belgian government initiated the *Office d'Exploitation des Transports Coloniaux* (Otraco) to operate railways and the river transport company, *Union Nationale des Transports Fluviaux*.<sup>11</sup> These transportation companies were designed for the explicit purpose of Belgian and European extraction of resources and labor from the Congo's interior, but they also facilitated cross-Pool mobility by Africans as well as Europeans.

Photographs from around 1957, not long before the January 1959 “Léopoldville riots” that further galvanized the independence movement, give visual evidence of transit infrastructure across at the time. One image, taken by Clarence Woodrow Sorensen, shows nine men at a ferry terminal, gathered below a sign giving times of the “Dernier depart” between “Leo” and “Brazza” (Appendix B). The last departures are listed as 17:30 (5:30) from Léopoldville and 17:45 (5:45 PM) from Brazzaville. The image suggests a relatively consistent schedule of ferry departures between the two

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<sup>8</sup>Vansina, 311–12.

<sup>9</sup>Vansina, 258. Delcommune was commissioned by Belgian businessman and Congo Free State profiteer Albert Thys to assess the practicality of a railway in the region. He played a significant and violent role in early expeditions of Leopold II's corporate colonizing mission.

<sup>10</sup>Vansina, 259.

<sup>11</sup>William Rodney Long, *Transport Control Abroad: Recent Outstanding Measures, Trends and Developments* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939), 64.

cities in this period, a conclusion also suggested by other images. Another photo by Sorenson shows three ferries docked in Léopoldville, with one highly populated vessel called “Congolia” seemingly moving towards the shore (Appendix C). A similar image from 1961 also illustrates ongoing ferry operations, seemingly with the same vessels photographed before independence in 1957 (Appendix D). This infrastructural continuity is also reflected in administrative continuity, as the Belgian *Office d’Exploitation des Transports Coloniaux* was renamed to the *Office d’Exploitation des Transports au Congo* in 1960. The acronym “OTRACO” was retained. Only in 1971 after several years of Mobutu’s rule was the office renamed to the *Office National des Transports* (ONATRA).

Photographs also provide evidence of the diverse individuals who used these ferries introduced under colonial rule. One photograph from around 1957 shows Black and white adults and children unloading from a ferry on the Léopoldville side, including one woman with a basket of goods on her head and two people with bicycles. The image of ferry passengers suggests that, at least by 1957, Africans and Europeans both used the ferry for service across the Pool (Appendix E). Other images from Sorensen’s collection, including some taken by Eugene V. Harris, further substantiate the apparent racial, generational, and gender diversity of ferry clientele (Appendix F). The presence of women carrying goods also highlights the enduring significance of market women’s trans-Pool mobilities. These women continued to traverse the Pool decades after independence as well, as later interviews reveal.<sup>12</sup> They frequently crossed the river from Ngobila Beach in Lé, where female merchants often met. The ongoing movement of merchant women between Léopoldville and Brazzaville demonstrates continuous transit infrastructures despite the profound political and economic changes of the latter half of the 20th century. This material continuity reflects ordinary peoples’ enduring economic, social and physical networks even in the face of historical transformation and state repression.

## State Surveillance, Oppression, and Mobility

### Urban African Cultures under Belgian Colonial Rule

Throughout Belgian rule, colonial officials and regulations subjected Africans in Léopoldville to curfews, segregation, and other severe forms of economic, political, and social oppression. Though extractive colonial labor practices created de facto racial segregation in Léopoldville, it was only in 1930 when this became “institutionalized policy.”<sup>13</sup> In 1956, sociologist Jean Comhaire wrote that “There is, for the time being, no question of interracial integration” in Léopoldville, despite recent nominal developments like the desegregation of “white street cafes.”<sup>14</sup> In his famous Independence Day speech that so disturbed Belgian and other Western powers, and that motivated other African and Black diasporic liberation struggles, Patrice Lumumba cited the violent racial segregation of Belgian colonialism:

“We have not forgotten that in the cities the mansions were for the whites and the tumbledown huts for the blacks; that a black was not admitted to the cinemas, restaurants and shops set aside for “Europeans”; that a black travelled in the holds, under the feet

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<sup>12</sup>These interviews showed that the “smuggling networks” of the late Mobutu period were “predominantly organized by women”. These women frequently met and crossed the river from Ngobila Beach. Tom De Herdt, “Economic Action and Social Structure: ‘Cambisme’ in Kinshasa,” *Development and Change* 33, no. 4 (2002): 683–708.

<sup>13</sup>Luce Beeckmans and Liora Bigon, “The Making of the Central Markets of Dakar and Kinshasa: From Colonial Origins to the Post-Colonial Period,” *Urban History* 43, no. 3 (August 2016): 412–34, doi:10.1017/S0963926815000188, 417.

<sup>14</sup>J. Comhaire, “Some Aspects of Urbanization in the Belgian Congo,” *American Journal of Sociology* 62, no. 1 (1956): 8–13, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2773798>, 11.

of the whites in their luxury cabins.”<sup>15</sup>

Lumumba pointed to the racial divisions of residential and economic space in Léopoldville, whose major public market was in the European quarter and later the *cordon sanitaire*—a line between African and European residential areas that was designed by colonial authorities ostensibly to prevent disease but practically to produce a complete division between racialized groups. This division between African and European areas also reinscribed African distance from the river, on whose banks Europeans had most immediate access to commerce and trade. Despite these urban borders, however, Africans consistently transgressed colonial attempts to control space and subverted restrictions to travel to markets. They “appropriated” the *cordon sanitaire* to create new markets that were accessible and useful to them.<sup>16</sup> They also defied spatial restrictions to travel to and from Brazzaville, where they accessed cultural freedoms restricted in Léopoldville.

In his study of Kinois youth masculinity and culture, Didier Gondola writes that African “cinephiles” in Léopoldville responded to these restrictions by simply crossing into Brazzaville “to binge on films and wine, which, true to form, the French never denied their colonial subjects.”<sup>17</sup> The restrictions on Léopoldville’s cinemas were so significant that Lumumba cited them in his Independence Day speech. Prior to independence, Belgian authorities were highly concerned about the influence of foreign films on so-called “youth delinquency.” According to Gondola, these authorities “conveniently downplayed” the agency of young people and the severe negative impacts of colonial economic (mis)management on the growth of “crime” and poverty.<sup>18</sup> That young Kinois were aware of the cultural opportunities available across the Pool in the French Congo, and transgressed colonial regulations to access them, signals both the strength of the trans-Pool informational network and the agency of borderlands people in generating creative possibilities even in circumstances of colonial repression and racialized violence. Like Niagaran Black peoples’ transnational border crossings in the 19th century, Kinois youths were motivated by differences in social, political, and cultural opportunities between empires.<sup>19</sup> Navigating violently anti-African, anti-Black imperial borderlands, Congolese people found pockets of opportunity for creative expression and consumption across the Pool. These practices were enabled by the physical mobility of Africans despite colonial restrictions on urban life and mobility, and contributed to the reproduction of trans-Pool social networks and the development of cultural forms that belonged equally to African residents of Léopoldville and Brazzaville.

## African Nightlife and Trans-Pool Rumba

Perhaps nothing demonstrates the existence of African mobilities fuelling trans-Pool networks more than the flourishing rumba and nightlife scenes in Léopoldville and Brazzaville throughout the early and mid-20th century. Thoroughly urban and cosmopolitan, African nightlife demonstrated the cultural dynamism of the period and the endurance of creativity, joy, and intimacy despite colonial violence and repression. These cultural forms also reveal the trans-Atlantic, in addition to trans-Pool, connectivities that shaped African cultural life. Rumba was innovated at the meeting of local performance forms and Afro-Cuban music, brought to the area through riverine trade and

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<sup>15</sup>Patrice Lumumba was the first Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (then the Republic of Congo). Already a giant of African politics, his 1961 assassination made him an icon for freedom struggles across the continent and world. Patrice Lumumba, “Speech at the Ceremony of the Proclamation of the Congo’s Independence” (Speech, Léopoldville, June 30, 1960), <https://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/lumumba/1960/06/independence.htm>.

<sup>16</sup>Beeckmans and Bigon, 422-23.

<sup>17</sup>Ch Didier Gondola, *Tropical Cowboys: Westerns, Violence, and Masculinity in Kinshasa*, African Expressive Cultures (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), <http://site.ebrary.com/id/11207624>, 59.

<sup>18</sup>Gondola, 63.

<sup>19</sup>Broyld, 2.

radio broadcasts.<sup>20</sup> Historian Phyllis Martin's important study of leisure and social life in colonial Brazzaville emphasizes how the Malebo Pool "served as a channel of communication rather than as a barrier" between Belgian-ruled Léopoldville and French-ruled Brazzaville.<sup>21</sup> Before World War II, Léopoldville dancehalls hosted performances by bands from Brazzaville, which were highly attended by residents from both capitals who traversed the Pool via ferries, often defying colonial curfews to do so.<sup>22</sup> These cultural practices demonstrated that these borders were constructions referring not to social and cultural realities but to the economic, political, and territorial interests of European empires.

The vividness of the nightlife produced by mobile Brazzaville and Léopoldville residents was captured most iconically by Angolan-born photographer Jean Depara, who spent decades living and working in Léopoldville/Kinshasa. Several of his photographs capture famous rumba bands like O.K. Jazz, which was made up of some of the period's most important musicians who drew large trans-Pool crowds. One of these images, like others Depara took in Léopoldville, reveals the liveliness of African cultural life in the city (Appendix G). Dressed fashionably and accessorized with necklaces and rings, the men in the photograph attest to the stylish aesthetics that accompanied the musical dynamism in Léopoldville and Brazzaville alike. Performing a musical style created across local and global influences, these members of O.K. Jazz embody the expressive cultures made possible by trans-imperial, trans-metropolitan, and indeed trans-oceanic exchanges of people and cultural forms.

Even the text on the drum at the center of the image illustrates these exchanges: "OK Jazz" stands for "Orchestre Kinois de Jazz," which features both French and the English "Jazz," attesting to the presence of American cultural forms in Léopoldville.<sup>23</sup> The French "Orchestre" extends from the "O" in "OK," while the bottom of the drum reads "Makila Mabe," which translates to "Bad blood" in Lingala and is the name of one of OK Jazz's songs. The inclusion of these three languages here reflect trans-border cultural hybridity within and beyond the Pool region. Within the mirroring Congolese capitals, the cultural innovations of African artists and audiences highlight the kinds of spatial mobilities and creativity required to gather, create, sing, and dance together. The liveliness of Depara's photograph defies expectations of this borderland as only restrictive, violent, and impassable; instead, musicians and their audiences embodied the possibility for creative practice despite colonial violence, the precarious transition to independence, and postcolonial authoritarianism. Rumba and trade networks made illicit under colonialism also intersected through the "lively black market" of records that grew across the river. *Martin, Leisure and Society, 148.* These and other illicit exchanges at the Malebo Pool border developed and transformed through the transition to independence and especially into the period of authoritarian rule under Mobutu.

## Postcolonial authoritarianism, political conflict, and "informal" economies

### The Congo Crisis, the Cold War, and Conflict between the Congos

Throughout the 1960s, Central Africa faced several interlinked crises marking the transition from colonial rule to national independence. Facing chaos and dissent, newly independent states on either

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<sup>20</sup>Phyllis Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville*, African Studies (Cambridge University Press, 1996), doi:10.1017/CBO9780511584756.

<sup>21</sup>Martin, *Leisure and Society*, 25.

<sup>22</sup>Martin, *Leisure and Society*, 26, 133.

<sup>23</sup>This point, especially regarding American western films, is elaborated in Didier Gondola's *Tropical Cowboys: Westerns, Violence, and Masculinity in Kinshasa*. The cover of Gondola's book features one of Depara's photographs as well.

side of the Malebo Pool attempted to assert control by restricting multiple mobilities across the Pool, now a national rather than imperial border. Despite the clear rupture of decolonization, new nation-state attempts to close the border were notably continuous with previous colonial attempts to do the same. Even more importantly, ongoing trans-Pool economic, cultural, and political mobility also continued from the colonial to the postcolonial period.

Immediately following the June 1960 independence of the then-named Republic of Congo (Congo-Léopoldville), political and military crisis erupted as various groups vied for authority, sovereignty, and independence. Patrice Lumumba was assassinated at the converging hands of domestic opposition and Western military intelligence. The UN and other international forces were deployed, and successive coup and coup-attempts rocked the new country. In this context, Brazzaville became a site of political refuge for many dissenters from the other side of the river, including Lumumbist Pierre Mulele. This, in addition to national interests in territorial sovereignty, led both newly independent states to increase restrictions on the river, though these restrictions were again frequently defied.

In 1964, Geneva-based *Le Courrier* reported that “Mulele terrorists” were blowing up infrastructure and buildings in Léopoldville, which prompted Moïse Tshombe’s government to “promulgate the curfew and to interrupt river traffic with Congo-Brazzaville,” whose government was accused of fostering the Mulelist opposition.<sup>24</sup> Awareness of ongoing Lumumbist activity north of the Pool was also expressed by leaders in Brazzaville. In an August 1964 speech, President Alphonse Massamba-Débat said, “I do not have to state the popularity and fame of Lumumba here [in Brazzaville].”<sup>25</sup> The presence and popularity in Brazzaville of dissenters against Léopoldville’s government motivated many of the frequent closures of the river border. It also reveals the persistence of trans-Pool mobilities from the colonial to the postcolonial periods and the emergence of new kinds of political networks after independence.

These networks again relied on physical movement across the Pool and were often accompanied by equally illicit material and economic exchanges. In August of 1964, the United States Foreign Broadcast Information Service, which also recorded the broadcast of the Massamba-Débat speech, transcribed a Moscow broadcast that “boxes with American arms and ammunition [...] had been smuggled in from the Congo Leopoldville,” ostensibly to arm opposition to the Brazzaville’s government.<sup>26</sup> Two days later, the Moscow Domestic Service reported in Russian: “The American brasshats are trying to set up a puppet state in the middle of Africa to service as a bridgehead for subversive activities throughout the continent” and cited the discovery of American military equipment in Brazzaville as evidence for the American alliance with Prime Minister Tshombe, who was characterized—in African and in much global reporting—as having “counterposed himself to all African countries who are continuing to struggle for the liquidation of the grave consequences of the colonialist regime.”<sup>27</sup>

Newspaper clippings and radio transcripts on both sides of the Euro-American Cold War thus reveal significant concerns about the human and political porosity of the Congo border. While these sources focus on the international military and intelligence conflict that fueled the violence and instability of the Congo Crisis, they also hint at a highly permeable material reality on the ground. The alleged exchange of American arms from Léopoldville to Brazzaville suggests that movement across the Pool continued, and perhaps even intensified, despite attempts by the two

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<sup>24</sup>Claude Stéphane, “CONGO: L’ONU s’en Va...,” *Le Courrier*, Genève, June 11, 1964.

<sup>25</sup>Alphonse Massamba-Débat, “MASSAMBA-DEBAT RECOUNTS STORY OF THE REVOLUTION,” (Speech Transcript, August 15, 1964), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/osu.32435063627061?urlappend=%3Bseq=3>.

<sup>26</sup>“Captured U.S. Arms,” Text (Moscow TASS International Service in English, August 15, 1964), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/osu.32435063627061>.

<sup>27</sup>Aleksey Nokorunskiy, “U.S. Congo Bridgehead,” Text (Moscow: Moscow Domestic Service, August 17, 1964), “Captured U.S. Arms,” Text (Moscow TASS International Service in English, August 15, 1964), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/osu.32435063627061>.

Congo governments to secure the border.

## “Informal economies” and illicit “smuggling” after independence: The Congo Crisis to Mobutu

Global newspaper reporting from the 1960s observed repeated closures of the border as political conflict evolved and intensified. In February 1964, *The Times* in London wrote that “Anti-Government rioting” in Brazzaville had led “all traffic and communications between the two Congo territories” to be cut.<sup>28</sup> Then, in November 1965, *The Times* reported that river ferries were to be reopened after 18 months of only air travel being allowed between the two countries.<sup>29</sup> Just five years later in November 1969, *The New York Times* announced that the border was closed again “as the frequently strained relations between the two African republics took an ominous downward turn.”<sup>30</sup> Yet, trans-Pool trade and mobility continued as these postcolonial states attempted to control the Pool and river. Labeled by Congolese and Euro-American authorities as “smugglers” or “traffickers,” people who engaged in this trade further demonstrated the limits of state control—limits that had also been revealed by comparable mobilities in the recent colonial past. In the early 1960s, these exchanges were contextualized by the Congo Crisis and struggles over political and social power, which was especially devastating for many in Léopoldville/Kinshasa who bore the consequences of Euro-American incursion and postcolonial authoritarianism.

Euro-American officials who entered the Congo with United Nations operations or related “humanitarian” or military-intelligence missions noted the significance of illicit economic activity to Brazzaville. In May 1963, <sup>31</sup> reported Director of U.S. aid to Congo Robert L. West’s observation of women “smuggling” American-provided butter to Brazzaville. West reported that ferry “passengers [could] now bribe their way through with almost anything,” and that increasing custom controls would not change the situation because “most foodstuffs are smuggled across the river at night in small boats” rather than via official ferries.<sup>32</sup> In addition to being a strategy to subvert state and international surveillance, these “small boats” may also have developed in response to the unreliability of ferry operations. The functioning of the ferries “depend[ed] on the state of relations between the two countries which in the past [had] fluctuated to a considerable extent” due to political conflict.<sup>33</sup> It is also significant that West observed women “padd[ing] single file past the United States Embassy and down the hill toward the Congo River” with packages of butter balanced on their heads.<sup>34</sup> Where Gondola’s work on youth culture and mobility largely emphasizes masculinity and young men, this source shows that women, especially market women, were also important players in the trans-Pool networks. Phyllis Martin’s work on leisure in colonial Brazzaville also historicizes this point as she writes that “women crossing the Pool by ferries hid [musical] records in their clothes” and were central to the “black market” of musical exchange across the river. <sup>35</sup>

Illicit economic activity continued and developed over Mobutu’s rule, which was supported for decades by Western powers and was characterized by corruption, authoritarianism, and state weak-

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<sup>28</sup>“Africans Riot In Brazzaville,” *The Times*, February 8, 1964, *The Times Digital Archive*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS117794376/TTDA?sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=248d470c>.

<sup>29</sup>“Two Congos Seek Ways To End Breach,” *The Times*, November 2, 1965, *The Times Digital Archive*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS117664098/TTDA?sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=fdbc0ae7>.

<sup>30</sup>“River Border Between Congos Is Closed as Tensions Increase,” November 25, 1969, <https://www.proquest.com/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/118586268/abstract/5655A689E26B4234PQ/1>.

<sup>31</sup>*The New York Times*

<sup>32</sup>J. Anthony Lukas, “Smugglers in Leopoldville,” *The New York Times*, May 28, 1963.

<sup>33</sup>“Living Conditions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.” United Nations Development Programme, 1959. United Nations Archives and Management Section.

<sup>34</sup>Lukas, “Smugglers in Léopoldville.”

<sup>35</sup>Martin, *Leisure and Society*, 148.

ness.<sup>36</sup> In 1979, leading Congolese political scientist and historian Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja wrote of the “neo-colonial character and tasks of the post-colonial state in Zaire,” where Mobutu consolidated power, served neocolonial and associated domestic bourgeois interests, and “relied on the use of violence and arbitrary force in order to perpetuate itself.”<sup>37</sup> By the next decade, Mobutu remained at the head of a Zairean state whose institutions, according to political scientist William Reno, were “experiencing a total collapse” as Mobutu continued to appeal to extractive Western Cold War interests.<sup>38</sup> The collapse of state institutions led to ever-increasing illicit economic activity, explored by a group of Euro-American and Congolese scholars in the 1991 *The Real Economy of Zaire*. In one chapter, Makwala Ma Mavambu ye Beda writes that his 1987 fieldwork had shown that the rural Luozi zone was “linked by extensive trade to Kinshasa to the south and to the north with Brazzaville, *in defiance of the official closure of the frontier*.”<sup>39</sup> Motivated by better prices for selling food and buying manufactured goods across the river in Congo-Brazzaville, networks of exchange developed between rural and urban areas on either side of the river. These were policed by state authorities, but people often successfully subverted surveillance nonetheless.

Much of the “informal” or illicit trade in this period developed in response to the collapse of social and economic services in Mobutu’s Zaire, where people were forced to find alternate ways to live and survive. Though certainly different from previous modes of trans-Pool mobility, these newer economic activities were continuous with prior refusals of state restrictions. Before and after independence, successive states’ attempts to control the border were therefore never fully realized. Here Nail’s *Theory of the Border* links the case of the Malebo Pool to a broader understanding of borderlands: “borders, both internal and external, have never even succeeded in keeping everyone in or out.”<sup>40</sup> To suggest a long pattern of the border’s failure to realize itself is not, however, to argue that the border has no real social or material impact. While the border at the Malebo Pool has been a site of refusal, it has also been extremely racialized, securitized, and policed throughout its lifetime. Political dissidents and ordinary people, motivated by a vast diversity of interests, developed strategies to subvert the state violence that threatened them as they traversed the river border. This was true from the colonial period, through the transition to independence, and to the later decades of Mobutu’s rule.

## Conclusion

Despite these striking continuities, much *had* changed by the late 20th century. Independence, the formal end of racial segregation, and the departure of many Belgians and other white European settlers had real and often positive material effects. Another significant change related to the unique economic and political decline of the late Mobutu period. The bankruptcy of the state, Mobutu’s financial and political corruption, and military-police violence that characterized this period of Zairean political history gave different shape to trans-Pool mobilities than before. Whereas previous

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<sup>36</sup>Jeroen van den Bosch, “The Mobutu Regime: Leveraging State Weakness,” *Studies in African Languages and Cultures*, no. 48 (2014): 83–109, <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=843948>; Crawford Young, “Zaire: The Shattered Illusion of the Integral State,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 32, no. 2 (June 1994): 247–63, doi:10.1017/S0022278X0001274X.

<sup>37</sup>Nzongola-Ntalaja, “The Continuing Struggle for National Liberation in Zaire,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 17, no. 4 (1979): 602, 614.

<sup>38</sup>William Reno, “Congo: From State Collapse to ‘Absolutism,’ to State Failure,” in *From Nation-Building to State-Building* (Routledge, 2013), 10.

<sup>39</sup>Makwala Ma Mavambu ye Beda, “The Trade in Food Crops, Manufactured Goods and Mineral Products in the Frontier Zone of Luzon, Lower Zaire,” in *The Real Economy of Zaire: The Contribution of Smuggling & Other Unofficial Activities to National Wealth*, by Janet MacGaffey (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), <http://archive.org/details/realeconomyofzai0000macg/page/91>, emphasis added.

<sup>40</sup>Thomas Nail, *Theory of the Border* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 8.

illicit river crossing had been organized to subvert colonial authorities, more recent “smuggling” has often been mediated through the willing participation of state agents officially tasked with policing the border. Personal relationships between officials and smugglers have been key in this process. From the economic and political decline of the 1970s into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, smuggling between Kinshasa and Brazzaville so often understood as part of an “informal economy” has really been integrated into the larger “formal economy”. In 1991, economic anthropologist Janet MacGaffey and her coauthors—other anthropologists working in Zaire—argued that the “Second and official economies do not form distinct sectors of the real economy, but were interlinked in many complex ways: the same individuals participate in both, a commodity may pass between the two in the course of successive transactions, unofficial and official modes of importing may be combined at all stages of the journey.”<sup>41</sup> The blurring of sanctioned and illicit economic activity differentiates late 20th and early 21st century trans-Pool mobilities from their earlier forms. Global neoliberalism and ongoing neocolonial violence in the Congos have produced novel economic formations and precarities that cannot be reduced or removed from their historical context. Yet these transformations have taken place alongside striking continuities easily missed with analyses that rely on conventional periodizations of Congolese history as marked by traumatic rupture. Following the pathways of ordinary people rather than focusing only on state leaders and elites reveals enduring patterns of refusal, subversion, and exchange in and across the borderlands, and ultimately challenges any singular narrative about the social and cultural lives of people across the Malebo Pool and the cities on its shores.

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<sup>41</sup>Janet MacGaffey, *The Real Economy of Zaire: The Contribution of Smuggling & Other Unofficial Activities to National Wealth* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 2, <http://archive.org/details/realeconomyofzai0000macg>.

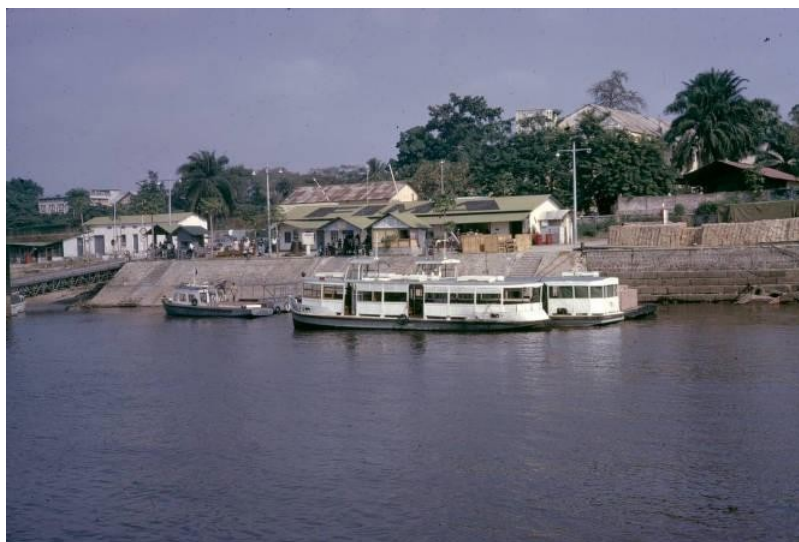


Appendix C: Democratic Republic of the Congo, ferry boats docked at pier in Kinshasa<sup>44</sup>



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Appendix D: Democratic Republic of the Congo, ferry boats docked along Congo River



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<sup>44</sup>Clarence Woodrow Sorensen, *Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ferries Docked at Pier in Kinshasa*, Photograph, ca 1957, American Geographical Society Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, <https://collections.lib.uwm.edu/digital/collection/agsafrica/id/2488/rec/69>.

Appendix E: Democratic Republic of the Congo, people unloading from Congo River ferry in Kinshasa<sup>45</sup>



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<sup>45</sup>Clarence W. Sorensen, *Democratic Republic of the Congo, People Unloading from Congo River Ferry in Kinshasa*, Photograph, ca 1957, American Geographical Society Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, <https://collections.lib.uwm.edu/digital/collection/agsafrica/id/3811/rec/157>.

Appendix F: Democratic Republic of the Congo, passengers disembarking river ferry in Kinshasa<sup>46</sup>



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<sup>46</sup>Eugene V. Harris, *Democratic Republic of the Congo, Passengers Disembarking River Ferry in Kinshasa*, Photograph, ca 1957, American Geographical Society Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, <https://collections.lib.uwm.edu/digital/collection/agsafrica/id/4065/rec/96>.

Appendix G: Batteur de l'OK Jazz de Franco<sup>47</sup>



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<sup>47</sup>Jean Depara, *Batteur de l'OK Jazz de Franco*, Photograph, ca 1954, *Revue Noire*, <https://www.revuenoire.com/en/jean-depara/>.

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