

Artl@s Bulletin

Volume 7

Issue 1 *A Global South Dialogue on African Art and
Historical Narratives from D.R. Congo*

Article 5


2018

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Recommended Citation

De Groof, Matthias. "Lumumba's Iconography as Interstice between Art and History." *Artl@s Bulletin* 7, no. 1 (2018): Article 5.

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Cover Page Footnote

This material is based upon work supported by the Research Foundation - Flanders (FWO) at the University of Antwerp. This work got completed at the Collegium for Advanced Studies at the University of Helsinki, thanks to the Kone-Foundation.

Lumumba's Iconography as Interstice between Art and History

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Abstract

How does Congolese art and artistic representations of Patrice Lumumba “mediate past, present and future”? How do they relate to historical narratives and to the dialogues within the Global South? This contribution proposes Lumumba's iconography as a case in point of the interstice between art and history. It positions the image of Lumumba as mediating between past, present and future for both the Congo and the Global South more broadly.

Résumé

Comment l'art congolais et les représentations artistiques de Patrice Lumumba ont-ils servi de médiations entre le passé, le présent et le futur? Quels sont leurs rapports aux récits historiques et aux dialogues au sein des Suds ? Cette contribution se propose de considérer l'iconographie de Lumumba comme un exemple de connections entre art et histoire, et de positionner l'image de Lumumba comme médiateur entre passé, présent et futur, non seulement pour le Congo et mais plus généralement pour les Suds.

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“Mediating Past, Present and Future: Historical Narratives and 20th/ 21st century art. Dialogues with Global South Experiences.” The title of the conference¹ that gave birth to this volume vaguely suggests that historical narratives and art have something to do with each other in mediating the past, present and future and that this mediation might take a different form within the perspective of a South-South dialogue.

Art mediates between these transcendental categories of time by reminding us to remember, inviting us to project, while dwelling on the moment of transition between both. The past is never there as such, but comes to life by being looked at. Consequently, art defies and even writes history, that is art can be seen as *historiography*. At the same time, historiography is known to be an art. The writing of the past is always already embedded within an iconography. After all, Clio is one of the nine Muses in Greek mythology and the daughter of *Mnemosyne*, the personification of memory.

Art as historiography and historiography as art is especially true in the case of Congolese art and more particularly in the case of the very rich representations of Patrice Lumumba which construct an imagery far beyond the factual historical person: Patrice Emery Lumumba, son of Tolenga, was the first Prime Minister of Independent Congo and was brutally murdered on the 17th of February 1961. It is no coincidence that he has merged into an imaginary afterlife in the arts. After all, his project remained unfinished and his corpse unburied. Different arts observe the memory and the undigested suffering that inscribed itself upon Lumumba’s body and upon the history of the Congo.

In the example of Lumumba’s “iconography,” art and historical narratives cross each other very clearly but never fully coincide with each other.² The intersection is thus also an interstice and it is the space between both which guarantees the *poiesis* as the creativity of the spectator to interpret the events depicted, sung or described. He or she ultimately builds his or her narratives in relation to the artistic object which, by consequence, becomes process.

The interstice between art and history is precisely what grants this process a *political* praxis, especially with depictions of Lumumba in so-called popular painting. These paintings, on which both Johannes Fabian³ and Bogumil Jewsiewicki⁴ worked extensively, are called “ukumbusho” in Swahili, things that make you remember: a gate to the past as well as a go-between to imagining the future.

Whereas Jewsiewicki has written at length about Lumumba’s images as both those depicting a hero and a redeemer, Fabian emphasized the role they play as producers of history.⁵ “History will have its say” and “Africa will write its own history,” Patrice Lumumba wrote in his last letter to his wife Pauline Lumumba.⁶ With Fabian’s historiographic function of art in mind, we can understand why Lumumba’s prophecy is being realized (to a certain extent) through art. But with Jewsiewicki’s redemptive Lumumba in mind, we can understand how these artistic depictions of Lumumba still hold—or at least repeat—a promise, such as the promise of decolonization.

¹ *Mediating Past, Present and Future: Historical Narratives and 20th/21st century art; Dialogues with Global South Experiences*. Académie des Beaux-Arts de Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo (ABA) University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa (Wits) Universidade Federal de São Paulo, Brazil (Unifesp), January 18 – 21, 2016. <https://dialoguesdusud.wordpress.com/>

² Iconography here, is understood basically as how an image (εἰκών, icon) has been written (γράφειν, gráphein). Lumumba’s iconography then includes the whole range of renderings and portrayals through the whole range of media and across a variety of representations.

³ Johannes Fabian, *Remembering the Present: Painting and Popular History in Zaire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

⁴ Bogumil Jewsiewicki, “Corps Interdits. La représentation Chrétienne de Lumumba comme rédempteur du peuple Zaïrois,” *Cahier d’études africaines* 36, no. 141-2

(1996), 113-42; Bogumil Jewsiewicki, “Figures des mémoires congolaise de Lumumba : Moïse, héros culturel, Jésus-Christ,” in *Patrice Lumumba entre Dieu et Diable : Un héros Africain dans ses images*, edited by Pierre Halen and János Riesz (Paris: Harmattan, 1997); Bogumil Jewsiewicki, D. Dibwe dia Mwembu. *A Congo Chronicle: Patrice Lumumba in Urban Art* (New York: Museum for African Art, 1999); Violaine Sizaire, and Bogumil Jewsiewicki, *Ukumbusho, Souvenir: Mémoires de Lubumbashi : Images, Objets, Paroles*. Mémoires Lieux De Savoir Archive Congolaise (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2001).

⁵ In his book *Remembering the Present*, Fabian shows how the painter Tshibumba produces or “performs” history, as enactment of a plot, by mobilizing different sources of memory.

⁶ Patrice Lumumba and Jean Van Lierde, *La pensée politique de Patrice Lumumba* (Paris : Présence Africaine, 1963).

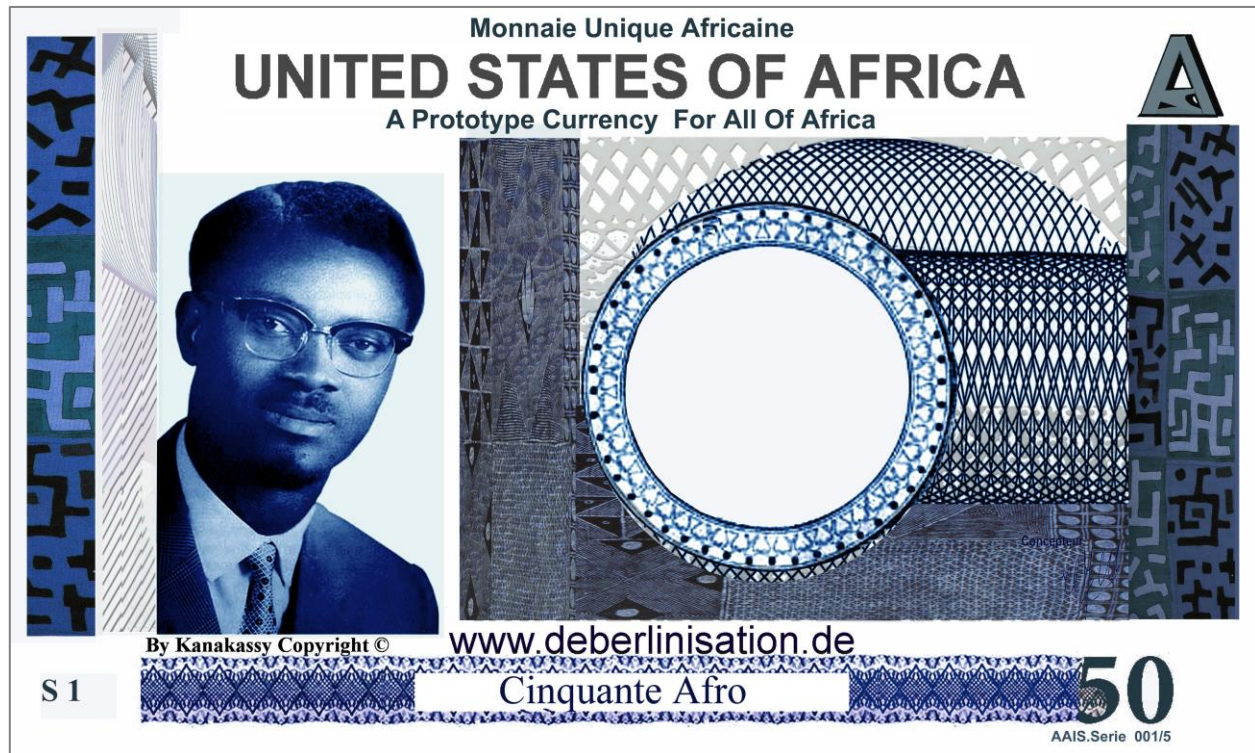


Figure 1. *Monnaie Unique Africaine*, by Mansour Ciss Kanakassy, Laboratoire Deberlinisation, 2010. Courtesy of the Artist.

The practice of remembering through artistic experience avoids the icon to be just an icon, depoliticized but venerated. Of course, heroisation through art diverts from the complexity of the struggle and the challenges on the ground. Deification does not help us to understand the reasons why human errors were committed by the hero-to-come. Once made into God, the masses forget why the scapegoat was sacrificed in the first place, suggests René Girard.⁷ The icon risks becoming a mask which prevents the man Lumumba from being seen.

But on the other hand, the mask makes us rediscover Lumumba. The *myth*—born from the necessity of an Ersatz for the undiscovered remains and for the empty tomb—can become *praxis*, since the embodiment of the icon through art re-inscribes the figure and its political legacy into history. Not *institutional* history—despite Mobutu’s recycling of the myth—but *popular* history.

⁷ René Girard, *Le Bouc Émissaire* (Paris : Bernard Grasset, 1982).

The fact that Lumumba remained unburied is crucial to understand both the easiness with which his mystification occurred (since absence calls for speculative answers); and his perpetual reincarnation in art which includes a political discourse evokes a political praxis.

The *re-politicizing* embodiment of Lumumba is already perceivable in his depiction in popular paintings as *objects of remembrance* around which a practice emerges that reinvents history. The image became object, became process.

Embodiment also occurs symbolically whenever performance artists in the streets of Kinshasa and other cities (re)present and incarnate him, or when rappers such as Teddy L and Badi identify physically with Lumumba and pronounce Lumumba’s own words.



Figure 2. Anonymous mural photographed by the author at Académie des Beaux-Arts, Kinshasa in 2016. Photograph © Matthias De Groof.

The “figure” of Lumumba, in its many contradictory forms, is *par excellence* an interstice between art and history that mediates between past, present and future, what I would call a “mediating interstice”. *First of all* because he himself is a figure of transition between colonial and postcolonial times, moving from someone who approved of the politics of assimilation in 1955 to becoming a nationalist independence leader in 1958. He decolonized himself before attempting to do so with his country. This immediately explains his relevance for artists today: the transition is yet to be completed, if it is possible at all. If Lumumba is alive today and remains an icon for many artists in

Congo and abroad, it is because the necessity (and promise) of decolonization is still alive.

Secondly, the image of Lumumba is a mediating interstice that functions as a metonymy for Congo’s history. As Congolese filmmaker Balufu Bakupa Kanyinda says: “We cannot think of Congo without Lumumba. When we think of Congo, we think of Lumumba.”⁸ Kimbangu—the prophet with whom Lumumba is often depicted anachronistically—is probably the only person who equals Lumumba in the imagination around him, in its capacity to confront Congo’s past, to function not as a tribunal of the past, but as “Sankofa,” an Akan-symbol to represent the need to reflect on the past in order to progress in the future.⁹

⁸ Balufu Bakupa-Kanyinda, “The Nigger Who Dared to Conquer the Sky.” Paper presented at the Avenue Lumumba, Extra City, Antwerp in 2009.

⁹ Sankofa is a word in the Twi language of Ghana that translates as “Go back and get it” and also refers to the Asante Adinkra symbol represented by a bird with its head turned backwards. Sankofa is often associated with the proverb “It is not wrong to go



Figure 3. Anonymous mural photographed by the author at Lingwala, Kinshasa, in 2016. Photograph © Matthias De Groof.

Lumumba’s figure subjectively recalls the ghosts from the past before going forward and presenting a vision of the future. The past has to be redeemed before changing the present and turning to the future.

Thirdly, Lumumba constitutes a nexus of another intersection which is inevitably also an interstice: the one called “South-South.” Lumumba’s iconography is explicitly part of a dialogue with Global South experiences. Paradoxically, his mystification is international before being Congolese.¹⁰ Heavy manifestations against the U.S.A., Belgium and UN, with protesters carrying his

effigies, followed immediately after the announcement of his murder. This occurred not only in Tokyo and Los Angeles but in Dakar, Johannesburg, Teheran, Singapore, Havana, Lima and Caracas amongst others. In Cairo and Djakarta, Belgian embassies were burned and sacked.¹¹ Lumumba entered the Pantheon of political martyrs and gave his name to streets, squares and boulevards in Iran, Kazakhstan, Zambia, Algeria, Tanzania, Nigeria, Ghana, Reunion, Kenya, Mauritania, Congo, Martinique, Namibia, Burundi, Mozambique, Madagascar, Brazil, Botswana, Morocco, Bahamas, Uganda, São Tomé and Príncipe amongst others. Nigerian theatre puts him on stage

back for that which you have forgotten.” Sankofa is also the title of one of Haile Gerima’s films.

¹⁰ The question of how representations of Lumumba differ between those in the Congo and those in wider Global South is beyond the scope of this article.

¹¹ Jean-Claude Willame, *Patrice Lumumba : La crise congolaise revisitée*. Les Afriques (Paris: Karthala, 1990).



Figure 4. Dominique Bwalya, *Qui se ressemble s'assemble*, 2005. Mural painting, Haiti. Courtesy of the Artist.

and he becomes Césaire's hero in *Une saison au Congo*.¹² He figures on the Guinean bank note of ten Syllis, in a highly exceptional act of putting a former foreign head of state of another country on your national bills.¹³ Nowadays, he is the effigy for the project on Panafrican currency by the artist Mansour Ciss Kanakassy (Fig. 1). He is depicted on murals in Kinshasa alongside Mandela and Sankara, looking as if he is having a chat with them (Figs. 2 and 3). He is placed on murals and paintings with figures outside of the African continent too, such as Ché Guevara (Fig. 2), Bob Marley (Fig. 2) and Toussaint Louverture (Fig. 4), the independence leader of the Haitian revolution who beat Napoleonic France in 1791.

¹² Aimé Césaire, *Une saison au Congo* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1967).

The artist who contributed most to Lumumba's iconography is without any doubt the Haitian compatriot of Louverture: Raoul Peck. With him, other filmmakers from the Global South, such as Jihan El-Tahri (*Cuba, Une Odyssée Africaine*), Balufu Bakupa-Kanyinda (*Nous aussi nous avons marché sur la lune & Juju Factory*), Solanas & Gettino (*Hora de los hornos*) and Ousmane Sembene (*La noire de...*) explore evocations of Lumumba in rewriting history from a Southern perspective. In the musical Global South and its diaspora, he is referred to by Miriam Makeba (*Lumumba*), Rico Rodriguez (*Lumumba Dub*), Balla et ses balladins (*Lumumba*), Ze Jam Afane & Vincent Courtois (*L'arbre Lumumba*), Maravillas de Mali (*Lumumba*), Dorothy Masuka (*Lumumba*), Rasyn (*Souviens toi*), Monsieur

¹³ Pierre Petit, *Patrice Lumumba : La fabrication d'un héros national et panafricain*. Collection L'Académie en Poche (Bruxelles: Académie Royale de Belgique, 2016).

R et Kenny Arkana (*de Buenos Aires à Kinshasa*), Baloji (*Tout ceci ne vous rendra pas le Congo, Le jour d’après, Karibu Ya Bintou*), Teddy L (*Lumumba*), Badi (*Lettre à ma femme*), Pitcho (*bras en l’air poing serré*) and Alesh (*Celebration*), amongst the numerous Congolese singers.

Lumumba’s iconography as a martyr—more so than his diabolization through Western comics, literature, historiography and journalism—superimposes the temporal interstice between the now and then, with the spatial interstice between the here and there. It mediates and dialogues. The gap which is inherent to both interstices is at least partly due to the incompleteness of the cause. Therefore, the gap is a space for creative possibilities. His martyrdom then becomes a testifying—through art or by other means—not only to the illegitimacy of his murder, but also to bear witness¹⁴ of the possibility of the continuation of his legacy as it is imagined and invented through art.

¹⁴ Witness is the etymological origin of martyr.