

In Memory of Patrice Emery Lumumba: His Speech at the Proclamation of the DRC's Independence - A Systematic Reflection

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Abstract

The improvised speech of Patrice Emery Lumumba on June 30, 1960, the day the Democratic Republic of Congo gained its independence from Belgium, was criticised by Western media as being unwise and ungrateful towards the so-called civilising mission of Belgium in the Congo. Yet it was acclaimed by many Pan-Africanists and black power movements. In this article, the author systematically observes, reflects on, and analyses the speech. The author finds that it is a life-giving and hope-filled speech that called for a restoration of dignity and respect to black Congolese who suffered decades of oppression and exploitation at the hands of the colonial power.

Keywords: Patrice Emery Lumumba; Democratic Republic of Congo; King Leopold II; Belgium; colonisation; systematic theology; Black theology; Pan-Africanism

Introduction

This article explores the improvised political speech that Patrice Emery Lumumba pronounced at the Independence Day celebrations of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), on June 30, 1960. Lumumba's speech was criticised by Western media. They accused him of being unwise and ungrateful to the country's former colonial power, the Kingdom of Belgium. I shall in this article systematically observe, reflect on, and analyse Lumumba's speech. Previous speeches by Lumumba will also be discussed to contribute to this systematic analysis of his independence speech.

Lumumba came from a humble social background. Born in the Belgian Congo in 1925, he is hailed by the Congolese, Africa, and the world as a Congolese national independence hero but

also as a champion of African unity. Lumumba's fight was against colonial oppression, for social justice and the freedom and dignity of Congolese people. He was known as a great speaker and political strategist. He participated in the first conference of African peoples in Accra, Ghana, in December 1958.

Although Lumumba had the support of the people, he faced opposition from both the colonial masters and domestic political elites. He was arrested by the colonial authorities but released under unanimous pressure of Congolese delegates attending negotiations in Brussels in April 1959, a year before the independence of the DRC. Delegates at this meeting considered the presence and participation of Lumumba crucial for the future of the DRC.

Lumumba became the first democratically elected prime minister and the first head of government of the independent DRC. During the ceremony of independence in June 30, 1960, he pronounced a speech which has been celebrated in Africa as a life-giving speech. Lumumba's independence speech and his Pan-African nationalism cost him his life. He was arrested, along with two other colleagues. After being savagely tortured, they were murdered execution-style by Belgian soldiers on a mission in the DRC.

A Brief History of Colonialism in the DRC

The history of the DRC is not different from the history of the rest of the African continent. Along with other African countries, the DRC faced slavery and colonisation. During the slave trade epoch, the country lost many of its people, who were taken to the USA as slave workers for the profit of the US economy. After the slave trade period, European powers sieged Africa, divided the continent into colonies, and looted its resources for the development of Europe. The Belgian Congo became the farm-field of the king of Belgium, Leopold II, and then later the Belgian colony. The Belgian royal family and the Kingdom of Belgium benefited from Congolese resources such as palm oil, rubber, diamonds, gold, copper, and many other minerals. As is evident from this brief summary, the history of the DRC is more a history of violence and exploitation, of oppression and killings, and less a history of people.

Due to its history of violence and exploitation, the DRC is among the countries in the world that has seen the greatest mass killings of humans, during the periods of exploration,

colonisation, Mobutu's dictatorship, and the Kabila regimes.¹ Congolese people were referred to as "savage", uncivilised, uneducated, and underdeveloped by the colonisers. These qualifications were "the vilest scramble for lot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience" (Hochschild 1998, 6). The exploitation of the Congo and the rest of the African continent was justified by the West as bringing civilisation to the savage. Hence King Leopold II was never concerned about exploiting and looting the Congo. People were forced to work under the pretence of civilising the savage; forced labour and violence became law in 1891 when indigenous Congolese were asked to bring rubber and ivory to Belgian agents (Hochschild 1998). According to Leslie (1993), Congolese people were taken from their villages in mass numbers and forced to go and work for seven years in plantations and mines. There they were tortured; some had their limbs amputated, and others were beaten and killed if they did not meet the quotas of production. According to Hochschild (1998, 5), the worst of the bloodshed and killing in the Congo took place between 1890 and 1910. Hochschild continues by saying that the inhumane activities of King Leopold II led to the deaths of about 10 million Congolese—by murder, starvation, exposure to diseases, and exhaustion. This is the first genocide and/or holocaust of the Congolese people.

Due to the atrocities and human rights abuses that King Leopold II committed in the Congo, the international community urged him to hand over the Congo to Belgium in 1908. The Congo was his personal property since. However, the handing over of the Congo to the Kingdom of Belgium did not stop the reign of violence and exploitation. Instead, it became even worse. During the period of Belgian colonisation, the Congo was characterised by three things: economic exploitation, political oppression, and cultural oppression. In terms of economic exploitation, the Congo became the centre for the extraction of natural resources. As regards political repression the Congo saw many of its kingdoms and empires destroyed and eliminated. Cultural repression led to many Congolese cultures vanishing and artefacts being taken to Belgium to be exhibited in museums such as the Tervuren museum (also called the Royal Museum for Central Africa), built to showcase the rich cultural and natural resources looted from the Congo by King Leopold II. All these forms of repression and exploitation were aimed at maintaining control and Belgian hegemony over the Congo. Belgian rule in the Congo was based on a distorted interpretation of the Trinitarian God called the "colonial trinity",

¹ By the Kabila regimes, I mean the first regime of Laurent Desire Kabila, who removed Mobutu from power with the help of the Rwandan, Ugandan, and Burundi armies, followed by the regime of Joseph Kabila, who took over from his father after the latter's assassination.

represented by Belgium in three forms on Congolese soil: Belgian rule as the state, Belgian rule as missionary (religion), and Belgian rule as private business (Turner 2007, 28; see also Viaene 2008).

The second half of the twentieth century saw Africa and Africans taking responsibility for their destinies and hence seeking independence from colonial powers. The Congo was no exception to that. During the 1950s, ten years before the Congo managed to access independence, an African nationalist movement developed among the black middle class. This nationalist movement gave birth to many political groupings with the aim of leading the Congo to its independence and reclaiming the lost Congolese identity. Among these political movements was the Congolese National Movement (MNC), led by Lumumba.

The mounting pressure from the African nationalist movement and their supporters led to a massive riot in Leopoldville—today Kinshasa, the capital city—in 1959. After a football game, supporters of both teams exiting the stadium started rioting. In the aftermath it was agreed to grant the Congo independence at the end of June 1960.

Background of the Speech

On June 30, 1960, all colonial officials and the few Congolese elites, among which was Lumumba, gathered at the national palace (today the House of Parliament) for the official ceremony marking the end of colonial rule in the DRC. The ceremony started with a religious ceremony at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Congo. This ceremony before the proclamation of the political independence of the DRC reflects the misinterpretation of the Trinitarian God discussed in the introduction. It is a confirmation of the church and state theologies found in the Kairos Document, issued in South Africa.

State theology is the theology of the oppressive colonial regime. According to the Kairos Document, state theology claims obedience to the state, insists on law and order, invokes the name of God, and misuses theological concepts and biblical texts. Belgian colonial officials on June 30, 1960, began the day in Kinshasa, with a religious service to justify/purify all inhumane and cruel treatments Congolese people suffered under Belgian colonial rule. Church theology is the theology of the institutional churches. It emphasises reconciliation, but without justice and repentance, without taking sides. It is also concerned with justice, but merely the justice of reform, focusing on individual conversion and morality. Church theology condemns violence,

but it does not condemn the systemic violence of oppression. It does not recognise the necessary violence of the struggle for liberation.

These were the religions that the colonialists in the Congo brought with them. The Cathedral of Our Lady of the Congo is a Roman Catholic cathedral where colonial oppressors and the “savage” oppressed all gathered to pray before proclaiming the DRC’s independence. Oppressors and oppressed met in the same church to give thanks to the God of “the poor ... the captives ... the broken” (Luke 4: 18–19)²—in effect giving thanks to God for sending to Africa colonisers who came to loot, steal, and kill the children of the soil and possess their land. This God, revealed in the scripture as the God of the oppressed, was invoked by the oppressors before freeing their slaves.

After the act of worship, the official speeches began at the Palais de la Nation, where the Belgian governor used to live while ruling the Congo. At the time of the DRC’s political independence in 1960, King Baudouin was the monarch of Belgium. At the ceremony he represented Belgium and gave the first speech, in which he praised the wisdom and genius of his predecessor, King Leopold II. For Baudouin, the end of colonial rule in the Congo was the apogee of civilisation in that country. For him, the mission of civilising the Congo had been attained successfully. This angered the many Congolese who were listening to King Baudouin’s speech on radio and outside over loudspeakers.

Following the Belgian king’s speech was the speech of the DRC’s first native president, Mr Kasa-Vubu, a former seminarian who had studied to become a Catholic priest but renounced his primary vocation to embrace politics. Kasa-Vubu gave a short and uncontroversial speech, thanking the Belgian king for his wishes of a mutual and continued relationship between the two countries and their people.

Lumumba’s speech came as a surprise. It was not scheduled in the programme, because Belgian officials regarded him as a radical nationalist who was opposed to their presence on Congolese soil. Less than an hour before the official ceremony started, Lumumba was ordered by a Belgian official to leave the hall in which the speeches would be made and independence proclaimed, simply because his prepared speech was not welcomed. Two of Lumumba’s collaborators also did not appreciate the speech written by Lumumba and thus altered it, replacing some paragraphs with what they considered to be less inflammatory language.

² The New African Bible. 2011. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa.

Lumumba was pleased with their editing work and promised to read the edited speech. However, while listening to the speeches of King Baudouin and Mr Kasa-Vubu, Lumumba decided to alter his script.

The Content of the Speech

Lumumba (1960) began his speech by praising the Congolese people for achieving independence after many years of struggle. He praised the nationalist movement for mobilising people to attain independence rather than waiting for independence to be granted as a result of Belgian concessions. He completely refuted King Baudouin's assertion that the independence of the Congo was the culmination of the Belgian civilising mission. Lumumba (1960) said:

Although this independence of the Congo is being proclaimed today by agreement with Belgium, an amicable country, with which we are on equal terms, no Congolese will ever forget that independence was won in struggle, a persevering and inspired struggle carried on from day to day, a struggle, in which we were undaunted by privation or suffering and stinted neither strength nor blood.

It was filled with tears, fire and blood. We are deeply proud of our struggle, because it was just and noble and indispensable in putting an end to the humiliating bondage forced upon us.

Lumumba (1960) continued his speech by outlining the sufferings that Congolese went through during colonisation:

We have experienced forced labour in exchange for pay that did not allow us to satisfy our hunger, to clothe ourselves, to have decent lodgings or to bring up our children as dearly loved ones.

Morning, noon, and night we were subjected to jeers, insults and blows because we were "Negroes". Who will ever forget that the black was addressed as "*tu*", not because he was a friend, but because the polite "*vous*" was reserved for the white man?³

³ In French the pronoun *tu* is used to address someone informally, in situations where it is not necessary to emphasise showing respect. *Vous* is used to address one person or a group politely, showing respect. Lumumba wanted to emphasise here the respect and reverence shown to whites compared to the disrespect and humiliation shown to blacks in the use of forms of address.

We have seen our lands seized in the name of ostensibly just laws, which gave recognition only to the right of might.

Independence, said Lumumba (1960), brought an end to these cruel sufferings the people of the DRC went through at the hands of colonial Belgians:

We have experienced the atrocious sufferings, being persecuted for political convictions and religious beliefs, and exiled from our native land: our lot was worse than death itself.

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 of the whites in their luxury cabins.

Who will ever forget the shootings which killed so many of our brothers, or the cells into which were mercilessly thrown those who no longer wished to submit to the regime of injustice, oppression and exploitation used by the colonialists as a tool of their domination?

He promised social justice and fair wages in a democratic DRC. Lumumba also promised the abolition of racial discrimination and repression to make the DRC the pride of Africa. He called upon the Congolese to banish tribalism and factionalism to build a prosperous DRC.

In conclusion, Lumumba called on Congolese of all walks of life to make sacrifices for the future of the politically independent DRC and to work resolutely to achieve the task of creating a national economy in order to also ensure the economic independence of the DRC. He appealed to locals to respect the rights of expatriates still living in the Congolese territory and he asked them to respect Congolese laws. Lumumba observed that the independence of the DRC was a decisive step towards the liberation of the whole African continent. Lumumba (1960) ended his speech with exclamations:

Eternal glory to the fighters for national liberation!

Long live independence and African unity!

Long live the independent and sovereign Congo!

Analysis and Observation

Lumumba's speech will forever be alive in the minds of so many Africans and friends of Africa, for its political rhetoric and content. One should not ignore the context in which the speech was written. Lumumba had been fighting for the liberation of the Congo for decades and had been waiting to witness the moment of freedom in his lifetime. When the moment came, all Lumumba could hear in the speeches of those before him were praises and hails. His speech was therefore a response to the patronising speech of King Baudouin of Belgium. His speech was a response speaking truth to the colonial power that thought to remain a permanent teacher and uncle to the independent Congo.

Lumumba advocated equal partnership and relations with Belgium as a brother country. He called on Belgium to support the Congo in establishing mutual beneficial relations between the two equal and independent countries.

This was the mistake made by Lumumba. How can yesterday's colonial master become a friend to its formerly enslaved country? A badly beaten dog can never receive a piece of meat or a bone from the person who beat it before. An oppressor cannot befriend an oppressed. If he does, it is because his interests are not yet met, or because he has the intentions of oppressing him further in other forms.

After Lumumba's speech, he was applauded by the Congolese delegates present in the hall. The speech was also broadcast by the Congolese national radio across the country and by the Belgian state broadcaster, RTBF. After Lumumba had finished his speech, the ceremony was halted, and King Baudouin of Belgium walked out of the hall. To make up for the delay caused by Lumumba's speech and the exit of King Baudouin, an official lunch was served quickly and a visit to certain sites was organised. After this break, Lumumba had to give a second speech; this one had a more conciliatory tone. After his second speech, the official act of independence was signed by Lumumba and the Belgian prime minister as well as by the foreign affairs ministers of both countries.

Western-owned media criticised Lumumba's speech as being unwise and ungrateful. One wonders on what basis this is done, given the truth spoken by Lumumba in his speech. The justification of colonialism is wrong and baseless. It is like state theology, which justifies colonialism and apartheid as civilising mission to blacks. Lumumba was seen as a dangerous radical by Belgium and the USA based on his speech. Hence, at the instigation of the two

countries, Lumumba was deposed from power as the first Congolese prime minister. He was arrested and executed with the complicity of the Congolese government of the time.

Among the Pan-African and Black Power movements, however, the speech was acclaimed, including by figures such as Malcolm X. In the words of Vellem (2015), what Lumumba wrote in his Independence Day speech was a “theology of life in the context of empire”; it was a cry for life. Lumumba was responding to historical facts in the lives of his compatriots, who suffered slavery and humiliation at the hands of King Leopold II and Belgium. He exposed the oppressive nature of colonisation, under which Congolese became victims of exploitation and oppression by Belgium. And in the words of Häussler, who sees “the political speeches and essays of Nkrumah and Nyerere as the best route to discover their views on human equality” (2017, 31), I see Lumumba’s independence speech as the masterpiece of his political vision for the restoration of human dignity and reconciliation.

This was not the first time Lumumba denounced colonialists’ abuses of the Congolese people. He also delivered a significant speech on December 11, 1958, in Accra, Ghana, at the Assembly of African Peoples, an international Pan-African conference which was sponsored by the then prime minister of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah. In this speech Lumumba presented the fundamental aim of his political fight: “to free the Congolese people from the colonialist regime and earn them their independence” (1958). Lumumba said he based his political actions on the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man, “rights guaranteed to each and every citizen of humanity by the United Nations Charter” and that “the Congo, as a human society, has the right to join the ranks of free peoples” (1958). Lumumba’s wish was to see a democratic state established in the Congo, a state which would guarantee freedom, justice, social peace, tolerance, well-being, and equality without discrimination. This he said in his 1958 speech in Ghana.

The fact that Western-owned media criticised Lumumba’s independence speech as being unwise and ungrateful makes one wonder what Lumumba and the Congolese citizens should be grateful for. Grateful for enduring oppression, exploitation, beatings, mutilation, rape, and killings at the hands of the colonisers? Western-owned media failed to see the widely known patience and goodheartedness exhibited for thousands of years by Africans who have suffered slavery, colonisation, and apartheid, despite the looting of their resources, extortion, discrimination, segregation, torture, and killings.

Lumumba, like many other African freedom fighters of his time, was never against individual colonialists or against King Leopold II of Belgium. He mentioned this during his speech in Ghana, when he said: “In our actions aimed at winning the independence of the Congo, we have repeatedly proclaimed that we are against no one, but rather are simply against domination, injustices, and abuses, and merely want to free ourselves of the shackles of colonialism and all its consequences” (Lumumba 1958).

If Western-owned media had understood Lumumba’s aspirations, they would not have qualified his independence speech as being unwise and ungrateful. In a 1959 speech in Nigeria, Lumumba once more thanked those Europeans who had sided with Africans in their quest for the independence and the emancipation of Africa. All that Lumumba wanted was a free and emancipated Africa which could remain sovereign but open to the world in a win-win friendship. This kind of leadership style is what Leshoele describes as “Pan African Nationalism”, a style which reinforced “the importance of psychological decolonisation of Africans and resolving [Africa’s] national problems through local efforts so as to remain sovereign in its interaction with the world” (2019, 30).

This is clear from Lumumba’s speech at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, in 1959, where he was invited to attend the international seminar organised by the Congress for the Freedom of Culture. Lumumba (1959) said:

Efforts must also be made to free our peoples psychologically. A certain conformism is noticeable on the part of many intellectuals, and its origins are well known.

This conformism stems from the moral pressures and the reprisals to which black intellectuals have often been subjected. The minute they have told the truth, they have been called dangerous revolutionaries, xenophobes ... elements that must be closely watched, and so on.

These moves to intimidate us and corrupt our morals must cease. We need genuine literature and a free press that brings the opinion of the people to light, rather than more propaganda leaflets and a muzzled press.

In this same speech, Lumumba echoed the “Pan African Nationalism” leadership and governance advocated by Leshoele (2019). Lumumba said, “The African unity so ardently desired by all those who are concerned about the future of this continent will be possible and

will be attained only if those engaged in politics and the leaders of our respective countries demonstrate a spirit of solidarity, concord, and fraternal collaboration in the pursuit of the common good of our peoples” (1959). Lumumba promoted the idea of a united Africa to better resist oppression, corruption, and the colonialist policy of “divide and rule”. Lumumba believed in Africa and Africans to such an extent that he promoted a border-free continent so that Africans could travel freely between different African states. For Africa to be truly free and independent, Lumumba said not a single part of the continent should remain under foreign domination.

As Vellem (2015) points out, Lumumba’s independence speech was, from the point of view of the 1993 Statement of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), indeed “a strident witness to the persistence of life. The cry for life is not a cry of despair, sorrow, hopelessness or grief. It is a cry that denies victory to torture, detainment, starvation and military might. It is a cry for bread, rice, water, land, housing, jobs, health care” (EATWOT 1993, 47). Lumumba’s cry was a cry for black dignity and respect. A cry against white supremacy and domination. A cry against death but for life—death and life in their all forms: physical, psychological, moral, and spiritual.

The relationship between white colonialists and enslaved blacks in the Congo was a relationship of forced labour and production, where the producer was a non-existent but production. Meaning, the black producer was a non-existent but not what he produced (his production). In other word, the product was more important than its producer. In analysing the existence of God in the context of the sufferings of black South Africans during apartheid, Biko said he had no problem with the question of whether God exists or not. Rather, he believed “that God has laid for man certain basic laws that must govern interaction between man and man, man and nature at large. These laws I see as inscribed in the ultimate conscience of each living mortal. I speak of ultimate conscience here because I believe man has enough power to dull his sensitivity to his own conscience and hence become hard, cruel, evil, bad, etc” (2004, 236–37).

It was upon these basic laws, laid out by God for humanity, that Lumumba based his speech, emphasising the wrongfulness of willingly oppressing and exploiting the other in the name of civilisation. Colonialists, somehow, are aware that what they did to Africa was wrong. It is this relationship of subjugation and subordination that Lumumba reminded the colonialists of

during his independence speech, which was described by Western media as unwise and ungrateful.

Conclusion

When Patrice Emery Lumumba systematically reflected on Belgian colonial oppression and exploitation of the Congo in his speech, he wanted to remind his fellow countrymen and -women of their historical sufferings. His desire was that the joys of celebration of political independence should not dominate their thinking and obscure in one day the humiliation they endured for decades. The Congolese had to remain conscious and aware of their humiliating and dehumanising past, caused, not accidentally but consciously, by the powerful racist King Leopold II and the Kingdom of Belgium. Lumumba wanted to awaken in the minds of the oppressed Congolese the little spark of life that remained in them, so that they could pick up those pieces and rebuild themselves and a new, prosperous DRC.

The mistake committed by Lumumba was to ask the former colonial power to accompany the DRC in its new era of rebuilding itself. He forgot that the oppressor can never help the oppressed to become free and prosperous, especially not when the economy of the oppressor depends on the soil of the oppressed.

Lumumba's speech was, therefore, a historical speech of liberation for the Congolese people—liberation from exploitation, oppression, suffering, humiliation, mutilation, rape, and killings. It was a restoration of the Congolese dignity and respect—a life-giving speech, as God is known as a God of life, a life-giving God.

Lumumba's political fight was the struggle against all external and internal factors that stood in the way of the full emancipation of the Congolese people and the unification of Africa. One could ask: What are those external and internal factors? Among those factors, in Lumumba's time, were colonialism, imperialism, racism, religious separatism, and tribalism. All of these factors, according to Lumumba (1958), hindered the flowering of a harmonious and fraternal African society. This is why Lumumba was passionately involved in the fight for a free and independent Africa. The implications of Lumumba's speech for the DRC are that sixty-one years later after political independence, many more lumumbas have risen to continue fighting against neo-colonialism and for the economic independence of the DRC.

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