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What is This?

Joseph Kasa-Vubu, ABAKO, and Performances of Kongo Nationalism in the Independence of Congo

Yolanda Covington-Ward[1]

Abstract

When most people think about the Belgian Congo and its path to independence on June 30, 1960, the figure that most frequently comes to mind is that of Patrice Lumumba and his strategy of uniting people across different ethnic groups. While Lumumba's contributions have been well documented and recognized, this essay argues that the Kongo ethnic association–turned–political party, ABAKO (Association des BaKongo), and its leader Joseph Kasa-Vubu, were the driving force behind the independence movement in colonial Belgian Congo. ABAKO, however, used a completely different approach that successfully privileged ethnic nationalism, demonstrating that ideas of ethnic identity were often more important than a burgeoning national identity. Through the application of a performative analysis to three key events—the ABAKO countermanifesto of 1956; the Léopoldville rebellion of January, 1959; and the civil disobedience campaign advocating for an autonomous Kongo state in mid-1959—the author shows that members of ABAKO and its leadership effectively used performances of ethnic and territorial nationalism to greatly impact and lead the movement for Congolese independence.

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When most people outside of the Congo think about the country's path to independence, Patrice Lumumba is the figure who most frequently comes to mind. Indeed, since his assassination less than a year after coming to office as Congo's first prime minister, Lumumba has been a global icon of resistance against colonialism and neoimperialism. Congo celebrated its independence on June 30, 1960. Lumumba had been head of the Mouvement National Congolais (MNC), which in the buildup to independence was the "first truly national party" (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002, p. 83). It recruited members on a national scale by reaching across ethnic boundaries (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002, p. 35). Lumumba delivered a firebrand speech at the independence celebration that was widely reported on throughout the world and solidified his position as an anticolonial leader and symbol of self-determination for oppressed peoples. Several years after he was assassinated in January 1961, Joseph Mobutu proclaimed Lumumba a national hero, and more recently, Congo's current president, Joseph Kabila, inducted Lumumba into the National Order of Heroes of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

While Lumumba's contributions to the independence struggle have been well documented and recognized, there were other figures and organizations before 1960 that employed different approaches to the anticolonial and nationalist struggles in the Congo and were in fact more critical in blazing the path toward independence. Remembrances of historical events are always based on a selective process, subject to the biases of the interpreter and chronicler and to politics, both past and present. This article asserts that although Lumumba is privileged in the historical literature on nationalism in the Congo, the Kongo ethnic association–turned–political party, ABAKO (Association des BaKongo), and its leader, Joseph Kasa-Vubu, were in fact the driving force behind the independence movement in the Belgian Congo. My focus on the contributions of ABAKO and Kasa-Vubu demonstrates the need for two key considerations for studies of African nationalism during the period of decolonization and independence. First, studies of nationalism in Africa must consider the complex and crucial impact of conceptions of ethnicity and ethnic consciousness on independence movements. Contrary to commonly held assumptions that ethnic loyalties are antithetical to nationalist movements, I demonstrate that ABAKO used ethnic Kongo nationalism with great success in its push for Congolese independence. Second, studies of nationalism should also consider the ways in which resistance to colonialism was enacted

and performed publicly on both large and small scales, from staged protests to everyday interactions. I show that ABAKO members and its leadership effectively used performances of ethnic and territorial nationalism to mobilize and rouse the larger Congolese population, and to spur decisive reactions on the part of the Belgians, through the application of a performative analysis to three key events: the ABAKO countermanifesto of 1956, the Léopoldville rebellion of January 1959, and the civil disobedience campaign advocating for an autonomous Kongo state in mid-1959.[1]

Background of ABAKO

BaKongo as an ethnic group identifies KiKongo-speaking populations in and around the area where the former Kingdom of Kongo was located in west central Africa.[2] In 1950, M. E. Nzeza-Nlandu founded ABAKO in Léopoldville (current-day Kinshasha), capital of Belgian Congo, and shaped it into the most revolutionary colonial-era BaKongo organization in the Belgian Congo.[3] It quickly emerged as a crucial force in the Congolese movement for independence from Belgian rule, although it began as a cultural organization with the modest aim to "unify, conserve, and perfect the Kongo language" (Centre de Recherche et d'Information Socio-politiques [CRISP], 1962, p. 10). Initially, it focused on publishing a journal in KiKongo and organizing cultural activities. The organization's initiatives in many respects reflected the increased anxieties among BaKongo over Léopoldville's changing demographics. Although the BaKongo composed an estimated 60% of Léopoldville's African population, the most widely spoken language in the city was quickly becoming Lingala, a trade language based on the Bobangi language of the Upper Congo River (La Fontaine, 1970, pp. 40-44; Verhaegen, 2003, pp. 90-91). Historically, the people from the Upper Congo River areas have been collectively referred to as Bangala and the language that they predominantly spoke as Lingala, although it is not the true indigenous language of any one group. Therefore, at the time, the emphasis of ABAKO on the preservation and expansion of the KiKongo language had critical salience in the plural society of colonial Léopoldville.

With its advocacy for the preservation and significance of KiKongo, Kongo nationalism became one of ABAKO's central projects. Rather than employ a narrow conceptualization of nationalism based on territorial entities, I follow Crawford Young's (1986) articulation of nationalism as "an ideology asserting collective and solidarity goals and entitlements for some community" (p. 424). Young (1966) describes ethnic consciousness as a critical component of Congolese nationalism and argues, "Ethnicity itself is part of the same

process which has produced territorial nationalism" (p. 39). In both ethnic and territorial nationalism, language, shared history, and geographical boundaries play a role in shaping nationalist sentiments.

The goal in this article is certainly not to reify an idea of Kongo ethnicity as essentialist in any way. The work of Wyatt MacGaffey (1998), among others, has shown that notions of Kongo identity among BaKongo changed over time. ABAKO activism and the events of Congo's nationalist period, however, reflect the ways in which KiKongo-speaking people imagined themselves as part of a larger community and mobilized themselves to action in decisive ways that greatly impacted Congo's independence. The unification of dialectical variants of KiKongo in the pages of ABAKO's journal can be seen as a sort of "linguistic nationalism" that sought to include not only all of the Kongo subgroups in the Belgian Congo (Bantandu, Bandibu, BaManianga, etc.) but also "a page for the BaKongo of the A.E.F. and another, for our dear brothers of Angola" (Verhaegen, 2003, p. 94).[4] In fact, all Kongo people who felt themselves "brothers who came from the same founder/roots: Kongo dia Ntotila" were encouraged to join (CRISP, 1962, pp. 11-12). ABAKO's first manifesto had most of the major ideological components of later manifestations of Kongo nationalism, including discussions of a Kongo cultural unity based on a shared language and the history of the Kongo kingdom, revitalization of Kongo culture and language, and an outlining of the Kongo areas geographically, including the relevant provinces in the Belgian Congo and people in the French Congo, Portuguese Cabinda, and Angola (Verhaegen, 2003, p. 127).

The tone that came from ABAKO's leadership became more militant after Edmond Nzeza-Landu stepped down on March 21, 1954, and Joseph Kasa-Vubu was elected as ABAKO's president. In August, under Kasa-Vubu's leadership, ABAKO affirmatively made the transition from a culture-based group to a political organization when it presented its leaders to the colonial administration as candidates for administrative head of the Congolese section of the city. Although the administration selected a non-Kongo person, ABAKO clearly demonstrated its interest in politics (CRISP, 1962, pp. 29-30).

In the mid-1950s, there were a number of events and publications related to Congo's independence that were significant to ABAKO's political activism. An early, transformative moment was the publication of an influential article by Belgian professor Antoine van Bilsen in December 1955. The article outlined a potential 30-year plan for Congo's eventual independence. In July 1956, leaders from among Congolese Catholic intellectuals endorsed van Bilsen's proposal for an extended transition to independence in a manifesto published in *Conscience Africaine*. Indeed, at the time, van Bilsen's proposal was a radical departure from the prevailing view among Belgian politicians and colonial

officials that Belgian rule in the Congo would continue for generations to come (Lemarchand, 1961, p. 346; Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002, pp. 81-82). The vast majority of these Catholic intellectuals were non-Kongo but rather Bangala and Baluba and members of an emerging petite bourgeoisie.[5] However, ABAKO soon followed with its own manifesto that was to radically alter the future of Congolese independence.

Performances of Nationalism

After the committee of Catholic intellectuals endorsed van Bilsen's plan, ABAKO conducted a study to help its leadership formulate a response to the *Conscience Africaine* manifesto, including a series of formal meetings from July 16 to August 23, 1956. On August 23, ABAKO presented its counter-manifesto through a public speech by Kasa-Vubu. This date and Kasa-Vubu's speech have widely been heralded as the marking the beginning of the struggle for independence in the Belgian Congo (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002, p. 82). Kasa-Vubu's speech is also the first major performance of Congolese nationalism.[6]

Performance is a contested concept with many related definitions. Yet it has proven to be useful for capturing the ongoing processes of social life. Richard Schechner (1985) defines performance as "restored" or twice-behaved behavior, based on past actions and observations (p. 36). Linguistic anthropologist Dell Hymes (1975) defines performance as conduct in which "one or more persons 'assume responsibility to an audience and to tradition as they understand it" (p. 18). Erving Goffman (1959), in his classic study and analysis of interactions in everyday life, presents performance as "all activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers" (p. 22). What these definitions share is the notion of behavior enacted in the presence of others. I consider performances to incorporate everyday interactions as well as performances that are more clearly bounded or set apart from everyday life. Anthropologist Victor Turner, considered one of the founders of performance theory, emphasizes the transformative nature of performance. "Performances are not simple reflectors or expressions of culture," he argues, "but may themselves be active agencies of change" (Turner, 1986, p. 24). Examining the nationalism of ABAKO reveals two significant characteristics of performances. First, they are public events that have some an influence on an audience. Second, and most importantly, they are not simple reflections of social life but in fact are critical in transforming social relations and shaping struggles for power.

The 1956 Countermanifesto of ABAKO

ABAKO's first step in responding to the *Conscience Africaine* document was to publicly read its own countermanifesto. Kasa-Vubu read the document at an ABAKO general assembly meeting in Léopoldville on Thursday, August 23, 1956, in the commune of Dendale in Léopoldville. Kasa-Vubu's public presentation of ABAKO's ideas contrasted sharply with the endorsement of van Bilsen in *Conscience Africaine* and even van Bilsen's 30-year plan. While the authors of the manifesto in *Conscience Africaine* and Professor van Bilsen initially conveyed their ideas in a published form—a journal article and pamphlet, respectively—ABAKO began with a public pronouncement, an oral performance of the organization's statement about independence based on the findings of its commissions.

After going over the major points of the *Conscience Africaine* manifesto, the ABAKO countermanifesto spoke out directly against colonization and the particular history of colonization in their country.

> It is in this way that the Congo Independent state was only a pretense of independence for twenty-four years. None of us, in fact, could be found at the Berlin Conference. And however everything was decided for us . . . the Congo possessed neither a ruler of his race, nor any at least of his choice, nor a government of his liking; the citizens were never citizens. (CRISP, 1962, p. 39)

Playing upon the title that King Leopold II applied to the Congo—l'Etat Independant du Congo—when it was under his control from 1885 to 1908, the ABAKO manifesto highlights the essential irony of naming a territory "independent" while refusing its indigenous inhabitants any political representation and even basic human rights. By referencing the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 as a meeting of Europeans deciding the fate of Africa and Africans without their permission or input, Kasa-Vubu shook the foundation of any claims that Belgians would try to make about their right to rule in the Congo. The language that he used to make his statement—*choice*, *government*, *citizens*—was an allusion to the representative form of government and ideas of citizenship that the Belgians in fact embraced for themselves and yet simultaneously denied their colonial subjects.

The countermanifesto not only takes on colonialism directly but also makes explicit political demands.

> Our position is clear and we demand: 1. Political rights; 2. all the freedoms, that is: individual liberty, of thought, of opinion and the press;

freedom to hold meetings, of association, of conscience, and of religion. By liberty, we mean evidently the right to do everything that doesn't harm our fellow man, thus, that which is not prohibited by law. The hour of indecision, of fear and of vain suspicions is past. The politics of prevarication and of vague promises have done nothing but diminish the confidence that the Congolese had in the Mother-Fatherland. (CRISP, 1962, p. 40)

With this statement, ABAKO demands many of the same rights that are freely accorded to all Belgian citizens, as per Title II of the constitution of Belgium. In so doing, ABAKO brought the humanity of all Congolese who are denied these rights and freedoms in their native land to the forefront of the discussion of Congo's political status.

An additional topic that the countermanifesto addressed was the separation of the Congolese elite and the masses. The common term in the Congo for educated Congolese was *évolué*, while *immatriculé* marked an even more exclusive, elite status of Congolese who had "achieved" a high level of assimilation to Belgian customs, language, religion, and lifestyle. To become *immatriculés*, educated Congolese submitted applications to the colonial administration and underwent a humiliating screening process that included actual inspections of their homes and probing questions regarding hygiene to ensure that they had "thoroughly adopted European civilization" (Young, 1965, p. 76). If their candidacy was successful, they received a *carte de mérite civique*, which served as evidence of their high status among other Congolese but did not lead to equal treatment by Belgians in the Congo.

The countermanifesto of ABAKO thoroughly dismissed such class distinctions among the Congolese population.

On the purely social level, the division of the population into social strata (évolués and masses) is not advised. Although there are elites, all are members of the masses and all are citizens. In no other civilized country do they give certificates to distinguish the elites from the masses. (CRISP, 1962, p. 42)

Here, ABAKO rejects the idea that some Congolese deserve more rights than others and embraces a populist movement for social and political rights that includes all Congolese, regardless of education or assimilation to European values and customs.

The seeds of Kongo ethnic nationalism can also be found in this countermanifesto. In its discussion of the need for political parties and the basis for developing Congolese unity, ABAKO emphasizes using groups that already

exist. It declared "that groups historically, ethnically, and linguistically united or obvious organize themselves to form political parties" (CRISP, 1962, p. 41). This is an early articulation of ABAKO's support for federalism, in which an independent Congo would consist of smaller states based on ethnicity, such that each state guards its autonomy. Thus, in this countermanifesto, ABAKO is already melding ethnic nationalism with ideas about territorial nationalism for the colony as a whole.

Performative Analysis

There are two ways in which Kasa-Vubu's public reading of the ABAKO countermanifesto is best understood as performance. One is the presence and interaction of the audience, and the second is its transformative nature. A key part of defining performance is awareness of being in the presence of others—having an audience. An audience is anyone who views or experiences the performance; the audience may be mere observers, active coparticipants, the performer himself or herself, or even not visibly present.[7] The public reading of this countermanifesto was no small feat, as the meeting was in fact being monitored. The presence of Belgian colonial administrators was required at meetings of Congolese organizations, and so on August 23, along with the Kongo membership, there were three Europeans: "district commissioner Jean Tordeur, administrator Jean Cordy (counselor of ABAKO), and lawyer Jacques Nyns" (Verhaegen, 2003, p. 155).[8] The Kongo people who made up the rest of the audience were in fact active coparticipants in the performance, as their "applauding frequently interrupted the speaker, notably for the passages condemning immatriculation and those [passages] relative to 'past treaties originally between the Congo Independent State and the indigenous chiefs'" (Verhaegen, 2003, p. 155). Joseph Kasa-Vubu and the leadership of ABAKO were therefore making a bold statement for change with their public pronouncement, especially with the Belgian Congo's history of imprisoning Congolese for less threatening activities.[9] Moreover, the following day, the audience for the countermanifesto expanded greatly when ABAKO published it as a text in *L'Avenir*, a daily newspaper in Léopoldville.

    In her groundbreaking study *Performing the Nation: Swahili Music and Cultural Politics in Tanzania*, Kelly Askew (2002) "relates performance unambiguously to the active construction of social life" (p. 23). Her focus is the ways in which performance actually constructs and gives meaning to the heterogeneous nation of Tanzania, such that performing the nation brings it into being. Through music, Askew shows how performances actively "reconfigure social relations" rather than simply reflect social realities (Askew, 2002, p. 23).

The transformative potential of the ABAKO performance is evident in the most radical statement in the countermanifesto. There was a noteworthy difference between what was performed orally and published as text in *L'Avenir.* In the published versions, one finds the following: "Our patience has already surpassed the boundaries. Since the hour has come, it is necessary to grant us even today emancipation rather than to delay it again for thirty years" (CRISP, 1962, pp. 40-41). When Kasa-Vubu read the countermanifesto publicly, he employed more radical language: *indépendence immédiate*. "With these two words, Abako defined the theme of revolutionary politics in the Congo for the next three-and-a-half years" (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002, p. 82).

In 1956, Kasa-Vubu's verbal call for immediate independence was quite radical. At the time, with the exception of Egypt, which gained its independence in 1922, independent African nations either had never been colonized by Europeans—Liberia and Ethiopia—or were the newly independent states of the Maghrib—Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya. Kasa-Vubu's fervent demand contrasted with the Catholic elite's endorsement in *Conscience Africaine* of van Bilsen's 30-year plan. ABAKO's public presentation of the countermanifesto was a transformative act. Declaring the Congolese people as fully capable and ready to run their own country without Belgian interference or paternalistic guidance was in itself subversive. The Belgian administration acknowledged ABAKO's statements as radical. For example, Jean Tordeur, a Belgian district commissioner, remarked that ABAKO had "seized the opportunity to go much further than the writers of *Conscience Africaine*" (Verhaegen, 2003, p. 155).

The performance of the countermanifesto challenged the existing status quo by undermining the very premise that the Congolese were in fact used to and best served by Belgian paternalism and that the Congolese were both unwilling and unable to administer their own affairs. The idea of immediate independence rejects the notion that Congolese colonial subjects would patiently wait several more decades to taste the very freedoms that Belgians in both the colony and the metropole enjoyed each day. With this statement, the Belgians were put on notice that the Congolese were not satisfied with their limited opportunities and quality of life and were in fact questioning the very nature of the colonial relationship. Colonial oppression would not, in fact, last forever. So while readers of the newspaper *L'Avenir* the next day did get the overall point that ABAKO rejected the 30-year plan, members of the general assembly who were present to witness and hear Kasa-Vubu's call for immediate independence left the meeting with the very possibility of an even more drastic and extreme goal burning in their hearts and minds.

The 1957 elections for local councils and *bourgemestres* (mayors) of communities in Léopoldville demonstrated ABAKO's growing influence in Congo. Of the 170 Congolese elected, 133 were BaKongo, including the majority of the communal mayors. Kasa-Vubu himself was elected mayor of the commune of Dendale, and other ABAKO leaders also garnered positions as mayors. The Kongo dominance in the local communal elections foretold the important role that they would grow to play in larger national politics.

Fire in the Streets: The Léopoldville Rebellion of 1959

On January 4, 1959, a crowd had gathered at the YMCA in the commune of Kalamu in Léopoldville for a scheduled section meeting of ABAKO, where it waited to hear reports from Arthur Pinzi, the mayor of Kalamu, who had recently taken a trip to Belgium, and Gaston Diomi, the mayor of the commune of Ngiri-Ngiri, who represented ABAKO at the recent All-African People's Conference in Accra ("Les éléments troubles," 1959, pp. 1, 4; Marres & De Vos, 1959, p. 73). However, there was a problem. After ABAKO leaders sent a letter to Jean Tordeur, the Belgian mayor of Léopoldville, that stated their intention to have a meeting at the YMCA, Tordeur responded with a letter of his own. According to Nzongola-Ntalaja (2002),

> on the pretext that the [ABAKO] letter did not explicitly ask permission for the party meeting, the mayor's office replied on Saturday 3 January that if the proposed meeting did not have the "private character" its planners seemingly intended, they would not be held responsible for any consequences. . . . ABAKO leaders interpreted the mayor's letter as a ban. (p. 85)

A week earlier, Patrice Lumumba had held a very successful rally not too far from the YMCA at which he described his experience at the All-African People's Conference.[10] Tordeur and the colonial administration must have been very leery of the increasingly vocal and public anticolonial sentiments among Congolese leaders. While certain newspaper sources claimed that the YMCA itself had refused to authorize the meeting ("Les éléments troubles," 1959, p. 4), in their own report about the incidents that transpired, ABAKO leaders state unequivocally that in the letter, Tordeur "was opposed to the meeting" (CRISP, 1962, p. 182).

ABAKO leaders also explained that they received Tordeur's letter the day before the scheduled meeting, when it was too late to publish a notice in the

newspapers canceling the meeting. Earlier in the day, the president of ABAKO's Kalamu branch went to the YMCA to inform members who already gathered there that the meeting had been postponed to January 18. Yet, by 2:00 p.m., there was a crowd of ABAKO members at the YMCA who had not received this message. The ABAKO report also notes that by this time, M. Hubert, Tordeur's assistant, was already at the YMCA. When the growing crowd was informed that the meeting had been postponed, they protested until M. Duvivier, a Belgian official, arrived and informed them that there were no longer restrictions on the meeting. People returned to the YMCA as this news spread. Joseph Kasa-Vubu and other leaders of ABAKO, including E. Nzeza-Nlandu and M. Kingotolo, who lived a short distance from the YMCA, arrived and worked to clear up all the confusion. According to the ABAKO report on the incident, the crowd was told to disperse in French, Lingala, KiKongo, and Kituba. Kasa-Vubu then spoke to the crowd:

> "Today's section meeting is postponed until 18 January 1959. . . . You have asked for independence. The Belgian government will make its declaration to us on the 13th. Have faith. The representatives will study the response of the Belgian government. Go well and have faith in your demands." Everyone shouted, "Vive l'Abako! Vive l'Indépendance!" After this the people dispersed. (CRISP, 1962, p. 183)

The report of the Belgian Inspector of Associations on the incident recorded more radical statements from Kasa-Vubu. "We are going to construct our home. It is useless to discuss it at any length today because they promised a big declaration on the 13th," it reports him saying. "In any case, we will not accept anything but immediate independence" (CRISP, 1962, p. 186). The inspector's report gives the impression of a poorly organized meeting and that many of the people could not even hear what Kasa-Vubu was saying except for when he said, "Indépendance!" and the crowd responded in kind (CRISP, 1962, p. 186). Duvivier appears to have been alarmed by the ABAKO membership's embrace of Kasa-Vubu. He describes the members as giving him a standing ovation when he took the stage to speak and referring to Kasa-Vubu as *roi*, or king. Duvivier's report that Kasa-Vubu said they would construct their "home" seems to be a reference to nationalist plans for a Kongo state.

While Duvivier left the YMCA before events escalated, he does state that at the meeting, there was palpable hostility expressed toward Belgians. As Belgian officials departed the YMCA, they were subject to verbal insults, including, according one report, shouts of "'Monkey,' 'Nyama-Flamand,' the indigenous of Belgium . . . Bunch of bastards. We were subjected to crushing,

intentional elbow jabs, spitting at our feet, and refusals to get out of the way" (CRISP, 1962, p. 186). If one accepts Duvivier's statements as true, all of this indicates that the Congolese present at the meeting were no longer enacting respect and reverence for colonial authority. By insulting and blocking the way of the colonial administrators present at the meeting, the crowd was beginning to show, through the use of words and bodies, the unraveling of the Belgian colonial power structure. Duvivier's report ends, however, by indicating that he did not see police forces on the scene and that he then left the YMCA.

There are differing accounts of what took place next, although all accounts seem to indicate that there was a conflict between police who had arrived at the scene and the ABAKO members. The ABAKO report continues,

> All of a sudden three commissioners and a group of armed policeman arrived. They began to arrest the people who had shouted 'Vive l'Indépendance.' The crowd became angry. Not only the arrests, a commissioner, on the order of the First Bourgemestre, revolver in hand, fires into the unarmed crowd. Seeing the slaughtered men, the crowd used rocks to defend itself. That is the very serious and uncivil fact that provoked the disorder and incidents in Léopoldville. (CRISP, 1962, p. 183)

One policeman who was in the process of arresting people in the crowd punched one of the members of the crowd who resisted him, according to Marres and De Vos, writing shortly after the event.

> In that instant, the crowd flew into a rage. He was hit and thrown onto the ground. . . . Both of them [commissioner and policeman] would claim, afterwards, this first gunshot. . . . The two commissioners and the police had to retreat rapidly while one of their jeeps was set on fire. Emotion was at its peak. (Marres & De Vos, 1959, pp. 76-77)

Moreover, in his interview with a daily newspaper, Arthur Pinzi, the mayor of Kalumu, stated that he told the crowd that he could not speak about his journey because his notes were not in order ("Les éléments troubles," 1959, p. 4). He left the meeting, while the crowd refused to disperse. It is not clear whether he witnessed the initial incident involving the police, but he also points to a confrontation as enflaming the situation. "Finally, after the intervention of the police, there were fights. Two commissioners were injured, a vehicle overturned and set on fire, and gunshots were fired into the air"

("Les éléments troubles," 1959, p. 4). Pinzi returned to the meeting after hearing gunshots and tried unsuccessfully to get the crowd to calm down.

The angered crowd, which continued to grow and increased dramatically with an influx of people leaving a soccer game at a nearby stadium, headed toward the European section of the city, "destroying and attacking all that was the work or property of Whites" (Verhaegen, 2003, p. 302). Stores were looted, vehicles and individuals were attacked, and the unrest spread rapidly as police and military forces were called in and Europeans armed themselves with guns and other weapons. "All along the avenues that cross the African section of the city, rocks were thrown at police forces and at all Europeans who traveled across the city" ("Les éléments troubles," 1959, p. 4). It took 3 days before order returned to the city through police forces and military paratroopers. Property damage was extensive, including 14 state and mission schools destroyed, three police stations, 40 stores, 11 missions, 11 social clubs, 17 public and administrative buildings, and six European homes, among other buildings (Verhaegen, 2003, p. 303). Estimates of the loss of life during the incident varied greatly. On January 8, the colonial administration reported that 208 Congolese had been injured and 42 killed, along with 49 Europeans injured and none killed. Nongovernment sources placed the dead at a much higher number, with ABAKO estimating 340 Congolese dead. In honor of all who lost their lives, January 4 is now a national holiday in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Martyrs Day.

The colonial government put the blame on ABAKO for instigating the "riot."[11] One Belgian newspaper reported that the minister of Congo had listed "social uneasiness, overpopulation and unemployment in the indigenous section of the city, the racial agitation of ABAKO, the influence of French politics in Africa, and the propaganda of Cairo" as the causes for the riot (*L'Echo de la Bourse*, January 9 and 10, 1959, cited in CRISP, 1961, p. 36). On January 11, the colonial administration banned ABAKO and declared it a threat to public order. Most of ABAKO's leadership were arrested and jailed over the 2 weeks following the rebellion, including Joseph Kasa-Vubu.

Performative Analysis

The participants in and audiences for the Léopoldville rebellion were vast and varied. Not only did members of ABAKO participate, but many other non-Kongo Congolese took to the streets as well. As many as 50,000 people were involved (Verhaegen, 2003, p. 302). Congolese of all backgrounds were able to openly express their sense of political and economic marginalization. They

targeted many of the physical symbols of colonial oppression: administrative buildings, police stations, Christian missions, and stores owned by Portuguese or other European businessmen. An example of the limited employment opportunities available to Congolese is the January 5, 1959, edition of *Le Courrier d'Afrique*, which reported on the unrest in Léopoldville. The paper's very limited classifieds sections listed positions for washer boy, houseboy, chauffeur, restaurant boy, and so on. Attacks on European-owned commercial establishments should therefore be seen as protests against the serious economic repression of Congolese people in a time of high and increasing unemployment and economic recession.

The rebellion and its surrounding events thoroughly disabused the Belgians of any illusions that the Congolese were happy and content colonial subjects. Moreover, the rebellion forced Belgian officials to confront the reality of Belgium's tenuous hold on the Congo. One Belgian newspaper noted the shock of the events for Belgians in the following manner:

> The clashes that have just erupted in Léo have deeply stirred Belgian opinion. Indeed, it has been known for some time that an uneasiness reigned within the black population in the Congolese capital. It was never thought however that they would externalize it with such violence and at the price of a bloody toll [of victims]. (*La Metropole*, January 7, 1959, cited in CRISP, 1961, p. 38)

The rebellion also garnered international media attention. An article in *The New York Times* titled "Congo Joins in Surge for African Freedom: Riots Add to Nationalist Moves Spreading Through Continent" described the following:

> The Belgian Congo, seemingly a vast island of colonial tranquility . . . has been seized with the ferment that has spread in this decade over most of Africa. . . . The names of Abako and its arrested leader Joseph Kasa-Vubu . . . [are] now being broadcast far and wide by the nationalist evangelists of the Cairo and Accra radios. (Love, 1959, p. E4)

The article suggests that presidents of independent African nations, such as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Abdel Nasser in Egypt, used the incidents in Léopoldville to inspire other African colonies to embrace a more aggressive position on political independence.

The January 1959 rebellion marked a clear turning point in the relationship between the Congolese people and the Belgian colonial administration. As Crawford Young (1966) described a few years after Congo's independence,

the riots in Léopoldville were a profound watershed in Congolese history. Only a week later came the king's promise that independence would be granted. . . . It began to be possible to speak freely—for the first time—and parties began burgeoning forth up and down the Congo. (p. 38)

King Baudouin's announcement on January 13, 1959, stated that independence would be granted in the future but avoided specifying a timeline. Nevertheless, Congolese people began to openly agitate for political independence on a much wider scale and began to form even more political parties.

Kongo Autonomy and the Civil Disobedience Campaign of 1959

In the aftermath of the rebellion, despite the jailing of its most prominent leaders, ABAKO asserted increasingly militant political positions. In addition to a clearly articulated demand for immediate Congolese independence, ABAKO oscillated between promoting a Kongo state within a federal system of government and an autonomous Kongo state. ABAKO and its members and supporters used a number of public acts of civil disobedience to push their agenda and demand action on the part of the Belgians. These acts of disobedience shall be considered our third case of performances of nationalism and included such acts as refusing to pay taxes, abstaining from voting, and refusing to participate in any meetings arranged by the colonial administration for existing political parties.

On January 15, 1959, while ABAKO leaders remained imprisoned, an anonymous letter was addressed to Kasa-Vubu in care of the public prosecutor. Signed by "All of the BaKongo," the letter called for immediate independence and the release of the ABAKO leaders and stated the intention of the BaKongo to form a separate government headed by Kasa-Vubu. This independent nation, separate from Congo, was to be called the "Republic of Bas-Congo," and Kasa-Vubu was to speak on its behalf in any discussions about future relations with Belgium (CRISP, 1962, p. 194). The letter also rejected references to the incidents on January 4, 1959, in Léopoldville as riots, emphasizing the intent and strategy that lay behind them rather than the perceived disorderly chaos. "The BaKongo consider these events as a revolution and not as riots," the letter stated (CRISP, 1961, p. 76). The letter never became public, but ABAKO leaders expressed similar sentiments in pamphlets that they circulated throughout Léopoldville. One pamphlet, dated February 10, called for the immediate release of Joseph Kasa-Vubu, "our president of the Republic of Bas-Congo and our other arrested leaders." It also warned Belgians of

a formidable offensive that we are going to launch against you. . . . You will see a terrible revolution of all of the BaKongo in all of the communes of Léopoldville and in all of Bas-Congo. . . . Return quickly to where you come from. (CRISP, 1961, pp. 79-80)

The letter ended with the following foreboding words: "Life or death, we must have OUR INDEPENDENCE" (CRISP, 1961, pp. 79-80). A pamphlet published by Committee for the Defense of ABAKO, a group of leaders who had taken refuge in Congo-Brazzaville, called for a completely autonomous status for the provinces of Bas-Congo and Léopoldville (CRISP, 1962, p. 216). ABAKO members and supporters continued to distribute pamphlets until the colonial administration finally released Joseph Kasa-Vubu, Daniel Kanza, and Simon Nzeza on March 4, 1959.

Following their release, these three ABAKO leaders traveled to Brussels, where they remained for close to 2 months to study its political institutions. In the meantime, ABAKO supporters continued their acts of civil disobedience. For example, in April 1959, in the province of Bas-Congo, people refused to pay their taxes because no specific date had been set for Congo's independence and other ABAKO leaders remained imprisoned (CRISP, 1962, p. 202).

While the three leaders remained in Brussels and future Congolese independence emerged as a foregone conclusion, ABAKO's political emphasis shifted to ensuring that the new independent state would adopt a federal system of government, in which each province would retain most of the governing power. In Brussels, at the end of April, the three leaders issued a written statement that declared that the true representative structure in Congo could only be one based on ethnicity and that an imposed unity of the Congo would be vulnerable. They argued that in embracing Congo's diversity, the nation would achieve the national unity of a "federation of autonomous political entities" (CRISP, 1962, p. 207). The ABAKO leaders also proposed that the government set a date at the end of January 1960 for the formation of provincial governments. Calling for federalism and a date for establishing local provincial governments illustrates the ABAKO leaders' continued aggressive push for independence but also a move away from calling for a separate BaKongo state. On June 3, after they returned to the Congo, the leaders issued another call for federalism.

By the end of June, however, the ABAKO leadership's goals had shifted once again. On June 21, 1959, ABAKO presented administrative plans for an autonomous "Republic of Kongo Central" to Maurice Van Hemelrijck, the minister of the Congo at the time. The plans, which included a proposed administrative structure, rules governing elections, and the geographic boundaries of the proposed republic, were soundly disapproved of and rejected by

the colonial administration. ABAKO members protested with a mass boycott of the rural subdistrict elections scheduled for July and August. ABAKO published and distributed numerous pamphlets in large cities, such as Léopoldville and Matadi, and small rural towns, such as Luozi in Bas-Congo, instructing its members and Kongo people in general not to vote (Verhaegen, 2003, pp. 333-336).

Many of the pamphlets still supported the idea of the Republic of Kongo Central. The Luozi pamphlet, for instance, said, "The 1st of January 1960 we want to see the flag of the Republic of Kongo Central flying" (CRISP, 1962, p. 242). By August of 1959, the colonial administration showed signs of nervousness. In the commune of Dendale in Léopoldville, where Kasa-Vubu was the mayor, ABAKO had opened a number of administrative offices for the Republic of Kongo Central, including an office of finance and economy and one for agriculture (Diakanoua, 1969, p. 34). These ABAKO offices, together with ABAKO members' refusal to pay taxes or participate in the national census and ABAKO's distributing of Republic of Kongo Central national identity cards, put the colonial government on high alert.

The colonial administration rescheduled local elections for December, but ABAKO continued its campaign of abstaining throughout October and November. On the front page of the September 19, 1959, issue of *Presence Congolaise*, an article juxtaposes a huge sign created by the colonial administration to encourage people to vote with a sign being held by ABAKO members, which read, "*Beto katuena votako mu declaration governmentale* [We will not vote according to the stipulations of the government]" (Maks, 1959).[12] As tensions mounted throughout September, Congolese leaders staged protests in the province of Bas-Congo (at Lukula, Kangu, Kitona, and Matadi), during which participants engaged in physical clashes with police forces. In one case, in Kangu, police threw a grenade into the crowd. These altercations led to some deaths and many injuries on the part of ABAKO members (Ngalula, 1959, pp. 1, 8).

Other organizations joined ABAKO in these protests and election boycotts, including Parti Solidaire Africain (PSA) and Lumumba's Mouvement National Congolais (MNC). This emerging united front and its associated civil disobedience pushed the Belgian colonial regime to organize a round-table conference on Congolese independence. Hoskyns (1965) argues,

It was because of this pressure and because the Belgians feared that Kasa-Vubu might indeed declare independence on 1 January that they agreed to plan the next steps in consultation with the Congolese and to hold the Round Table Conference in Brussels in January. (p. 24)

Elections for the councils of communes and rural subdistricts were held in December, with a very poor turnout and an almost total boycott in Bas-Congo, Léopoldville, and Kwilu, with an estimated 70% of the voters abstaining in Léopoldville and nearly 100% in Bas-Congo (CRISP, 1962, p. 308; Hoskyns, 1965, p. 31). ABAKO, PSA, one of two wings of the MNC (MNC-Kalonji), and the PP (People's Party) formed a united front supporting federalism and went, along with other Congolese political parties, to decide the fate of their country at the Brussels Round Table Conference in January 1960.

Performative Analysis

The civil disobedience campaign illustrates a performance of nationalism in several respects. The actions of ABAKO, its members, and its supporters were enacted for particular audiences: both for the colonial administration and for the Congolese people. The colonial government was targeted by people who refused to pay their taxes, carried signs rejecting the administration's call to vote in local elections, and even refused to engage in basic social services, such as vaccinations and participation in the census. In all, ABAKO members did all they could to disrupt the smooth administration of Léopoldville and Bas-Congo by the Belgians. ABAKO's refusal to allow even a semblance of normal life impressed upon the colonial administration the seriousness of their demands. The civil disobedience campaign was not just for the benefit of the Belgians, however. When national offices for the administration of Kongo Central were established in Dendale, they were a show of strength for the benefit of the Congolese population. The fact that ABAKO was able to physically alter the visible landscape with actual offices openly challenged the authority of the colonial administration, suggesting that the administration was becoming weaker. As people walked along Victoria Avenue and passed the offices each day, they were urged to question the very foundation of colonial authority. Moreover, for Kongo people in particular, the offices and national identity cards made the establishment of a separate and autonomous Kongo state a real, concrete possibility.

The civil disobedience campaign was transformative in a number of ways. In his analysis of events leading up to independence, Crawford Young (1966) notes the impact of the civil disobedience campaign on Belgian opinion: "Colonial self-confidence, nearly demolished by the Léopoldville riots, further eroded when in mid 1959 the Abako initiated a highly successful civil disobedience campaign to enforce its demands for an immediate date for independence and autonomy for the Lower Kongo" (p. 38). As Bas-Congo and parts of Léopoldville became essentially ungovernable, the acceptance of

Congolese independence sooner rather than later became inevitable. For the Kongo population, the civil disobedience campaign and promotion of a Kongo state demonstrated the ability they had to affect political change, even as poor people from mainly marginal rural areas. The rest of the Congolese population were also encouraged by the actions of ABAKO, because they were shown that resistance to the Belgians could happen through multiple means.

What particular performance of nationalism was ABAKO enacting? Was it a nationalism for a larger, territorial nation that included all of the provinces and ethnic groups in Congo, or was it a more restricted Kongo ethnic nationalism? What is reflected in the various documents, incidents, and speeches covered from the period is that ABAKO represented first and foremost an ethnic nationalism, although they also embraced a larger sense of nationalism as long as their autonomy as an ethnic group and region was respected. In his study of Kongo nationalism, René Lemarchand (1961) suggests that the connection of the BaKongo to the past of the Kongo Kingdom has an affect upon their cultural identity, attitude toward authority, and political orientation, providing a basis for group mobilization and common ground across geographical borders:

> The first and most familiar aspect of current nationalist goals is the revival of the tradition of the Kingdom of Kongo, not as it existed or may have existed at the time of the first penetration of Western influences, but as encompassing in its jurisdiction the kingdoms of Luongo and Ngoyo. (p. 347)

Therefore, the history of having come from a sovereign kingdom that far predated the arrival of the Belgians influenced the attitude Kongo people took toward Belgian colonialism. How could one peacefully accept the rule of a small, foreign European power when one's own ancestors were part of a kingdom that demanded the respect of Europeans during the first two centuries after the initial encounter in the 1480s? When European explorers arrived in the 19th century under the sponsorship of King Leopold II of Belgium, the Kongo Kingdom was already reduced in power and influence and was just a vestige of its former glory. However, the imagining of the former kingdom was enough to mobilize Kongo people in the fight for independence and was often evoked by ABAKO. In ABAKO's newspaper, *Kongo Dieto* (KiKongo) or *Notre Kongo* (French for "our Kongo"), Kongo people were told, "Be proud Kongolais patriots because you come from a noble people of a glorious past [and] whose future is predicted to be prosperous" ("De Tout en Peu," 1959, p. 4).

Another unifying factor was language. In speeches, slogans, and publications, ABAKO maintained a commitment to promoting KiKongo, while simultaneously reaching out to other non-Kongo people with publications in French, Lingala, and other languages. Through all of these methods, as well as through public performances, ABAKO used ethnic nationalism to lead the Congo into independence.

Conclusion

Through the effective use of ethnic nationalism and public performances, Joseph Kasa-Vubu and ABAKO were the driving force behind the independence movement in the Belgian Congo in the several years immediately preceding independence in 1960.[13] Patrice Lumumba did not emerge as a national leader until the Brussels Roundtable Conference in January 1960. The public performances of nationalism that ABAKO enacted and influenced, from the radical countermanifesto to the 1959 uprising in Leopoldville and the civil disobedience campaign, demonstrate that opinions and actions of both the Belgians and Congolese were transformed by these performances, thus affecting the move toward independence. Moreover, ethnicity was just as effective a rallying point in the independence movement as ideas of national consciousness that cut across ethnic groups. I reiterate the importance of examining ethnic nationalism in African independence movements and also of considering all types of public performances that are used to spread the sentiments and goals of groups advocating for change.

The crucial role of Kasa-Vubu in the liberation of the Congo from Belgian colonial rule has been recently recognized by the unveiling of a statue of his likeness on June 29, 2010, during the 50th anniversary celebration of independence in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo. Kasa-Vubu—the agitator, rabble-rouser, "king," and later, first president of the republic—stands at attention, his right arm raised in a salute, as he looks out over a round point that has been aptly renamed Kimpwanza, in KiKongo, or "Independence."

Notes

1. The main sources that I use for this essay are two compilations of primary documents from the colonial period, *Congo 1959* (1961), and *A.B.A.K.O. 1950-1960*

Documents (1962). Both of these compilations were created by the Centre de Recherche et d'Information Socio-Politiques (CRISP), a Belgian research center dedicated to the study of contemporary and colonial history. I also use newspaper articles and secondary sources for the writing of the essay. All translations from French to English are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

2. While many people that I interviewed during my research in 2005-2006 preferred the term *BisiKongo* to *BaKongo* at the time, I will use *BaKongo* in the article in keeping with the reference most commonly used during the colonial period by both Belgians and KiKongo-speaking people.

3. AMUBAKO (1940), RENAIBAKO (1944), and ABAKO (1950) are all examples of Kongo cultural organizations that were focused more so on Kongo people as an entire group rather than on local or regional differences. Before and after these organizations were founded until the present day, there continue to be many mutual aid societies or organizations that are focused on members being Kongo people from particular sectors, districts, and even villages. For further information on local and regional ethnic organizations and alumni associations in Kinshasa in general, see Verhaegen (2003, pp. 55-85).

4. At the time, AEF was the acronym for the Afrique Équatoriale Française, or French Equatorial Africa. This was a conglomeration of all of the French colonies in Middle Africa, including what are today the countries of Gabon, the Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic, and Chad. In the Republic of Congo, in particular, the Kongo ethnic group is the largest (estimated 48% of population). See CIA World Factbook (https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cf.html#PeopleUH).

5. BaLuba are the ethnic group primarily in the Kasai region of the Democratic Republic of Congo. They speak Tshiluba. See Verhaegen (2003).

6. Several scholars have mentioned that Joseph Kasa-Vubu made a speech in 1946 to a Congolese social organization titled "The Right of the First Occupant." See, for example, Lemarchand (1964, p. 181) and Nzongola-Ntalaja (2002). Unfortunately, I have not been able to locate a copy of the text of Kasa-Vubu's speech for analysis.

7. An audience that is not visibly present can exist in the case of performances for God, deities, ancestors, or other spiritual beings.

8. Nyns was actually a lawyer working for and with the leadership of ABAKO (Association des BaKongo).

9. In 1921, the healing and preaching of a Kongo prophet named Simon Kimbangu started a Christian religious movement. Thousands of people flocked to the Lower Congo to see him. The Belgians became so alarmed at the potential anticolonial nature of the movement that people were arrested, interrogated, and sent to penal camps for simply trembling, which was an embodied sign of having received the Holy Spirit during the Kimbanguist movement.

10. At the rally, Lumumba talked about his experiences at the Conference in Accra. For the full text of his speech, see Centre de Recherche et d'Information Socio-politiques (CRISP; 1961).
11. Following sentiments expressed in later ABAKO documents, I have consciously chosen to refer to the incidents on January 4 to 7, 1959, as a rebellion rather than riots.
12. *Presence Congolaise* was a weekly paper written by and for the Congolese population, which was placed as an insert within *Le Courrier d'Afrique*.
13. ABAKO and Kasa-Vubu continue to inspire other movements in the present as well. The socio-religious-political movement of Bundu dia Kongo uses many of the same methods, language, and symbolism of ABAKO during the movement for independence. Please see Covington (2008) for more.

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