

Remembering Patrice Lumumba

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I came to the Congo in search of its future and instead found myself marching down memory lane. On Thursday we went to the Museum of Beaux Arts, really a school for teaching sculpture, a subject close to me because my late dad sculpted in stone and wood as a hobby.

But there, surrounding the ageing art deco building, were statues of Congo's history of agony—large almost socialist realist renderings of soldiers carrying the wounded, or falling on the battlefield.

Even an art school cannot ignore the history around it. The curator told me that it is only recently that art students have been allowed to do work of social commentary.

On Friday, we passed a public monument alongside a well-traveled highway. It was for someone who took decades to be resuscitated as a national hero, the country's first post-independence prime minister later assassinated with CIA help in 1961.

His name: Patrice Lumumba.

What happened is still to some a mystery of history as US News reported in 2000:

"It was the height of the Cold War when Sidney Gottlieb arrived in Congo in September 1960. The CIA man was toting a vial of poison. His target: the toothbrush of Patrice Lumumba, Congo's charismatic first prime minister, who was also feared to be a rabid Communist. As it happened, Lumumba was toppled in a military coup just days before Gottlieb turned up with his poison. The plot was abandoned, the lethal potion dumped in the Congo River.

When Lumumba finally was killed, in January 1961, no one was surprised when fingers started pointing at the CIA. A Senate investigation of CIA assassinations 14 years later found no proof that the agency was behind the hit, but suspicions linger. Today, new evidence suggests Belgium, Congo's former colonialist ruler, was the mastermind. According to *The Assassination of Lumumba*, a book published last year in Belgium by sociologist Ludo de Witte, Belgian operatives directed and carried out the murder, and even helped dispose of the body. Belgian authorities are investigating, but officials admit de Witte's account appears accurate.

Does that mean the CIA didn't play a role? Declassified U.S. cables from the year preceding the assassination bristle with paranoia about a Lumumba-led Soviet Communist takeover. The CIA was hatching plots against Cuban leader Fidel Castro and was accused of fomenting coups and planning assassinations worldwide. And Lumumba clearly scared the daylights

out of the Eisenhower administration. "In high quarters here, it is the clear-cut conclusion that if [Lumumba] continues to hold high office, the inevitable result will [have] disastrous consequences . . . for the interests of the free world generally," CIA Director Allen Dulles wrote. "Consequently, we conclude that his removal must be an urgent and prime objective."

(The CIA still doing its secret dirty work in the service of empire, driven by new "urgent" objectives in Afghanistan and around the world, unchecked, unaccountable, unpunished. As for toothbrushes, it's now Swiss bankers who are being caught smuggling diamonds in toothpaste containers. (True!) Who knows if those diamonds originated here.)

Today, at "his" monument, the "P" in Patrice had fallen off but there it was, a giant memorial with a likeness of the legendary Congolese nationalist in a suit, arm erect, waving to the masses, only in this case, he's waving at the traffic, greeting and welcoming travelers to Congo on the airport road named after him. I waved back.

Under his name were the dates of the short years he lived, 1925 to 1961. He was just 36 when he was brutally killed. Had he survived, this would have been a very different country. The Russians set up Patrice Lumumba University, a political school in Moscow for international students named after him. Malcolm X, who met a similar fate years later called him, ""the greatest black man who ever walked the African continent."

He was a voice of memory and determination which is no doubt why he frightened many in the West who had profited from their relationship to Congo, His speeches were poetic. Here's part of what he said on June 30, 1960, Congo Independence Day:

...no Congolese worthy of the name will ever be able to forget that it was by fighting that it has been won [applause], a day-to-day fight, an ardent and idealistic fight, a fight in which we were spared neither privation nor suffering, and for which we gave our strength and our blood.

We are proud of this struggle, of tears, of fire, and of blood, to the depths of our being, for it was a noble and just struggle, and indispensable to put an end to the humiliating slavery which was imposed upon us by force.

This was our fate for eighty years of a colonial regime; our wounds are too fresh and too painful still for us to drive them from our memory. We have known harassing work, exacted in exchange for salaries which did not permit us to eat enough to drive away hunger, or to clothe ourselves, or to house ourselves decently, or to raise our children as creatures dear to us.

There is another monument up the road for another "assassinee," Laurent Kabilla, the father of the current president Joseph, just 38 years old. Kabilla was at one time one of the Congo's revolutionaries and backed Cuba's Che Guevara who many don't remember fought a guerilla battle in the Congo before his ill-fated adventure in Bolivia. Kabilla too would be killed in office.

Later that night I interviewed LEXUS, a powerful local hip-hop artist who told me that these national heroes are not really taught about in the schools, and should be.

After my "Lumumba moment"—and I had mourned his passing back in '61 in a solemn march as a freshman at Cornell as my fellow students and I began learning about the "winds

of change” in Africa.

From the monument for Patrice, I sought out another “monument” that far more Americans would remember—the stadium that hosted Mohammad Ali and George Foreman’s “rumble in the jungle” back in 1974.

It wasn’t easy to get in to the field because its self-appointed guards demanded bribes—something you can understand given the deep poverty they are experiencing, and given the way so much business is done here.

I found families huddled in the Stadium’s catacombs with fires for cooking and small children living in desperation in what were actually once prison cells under the sports arena. The bars are still there in that dark and dank basement. I don’t think the coverage back in the day noted that there was a “working” dungeon under the stadium maintained by the Mobutu regime.

He had his own GITMO similar to Pinochet’s stadium torture chamber in Santiago Chile. (As I complete this essay, BBC is reporting that Victor Jara, the Chilean singer killed in Chile was reburied today, 36 years later, the real lifespan of Patrice Lumumba.

Dictators of a feather tend to stick together! The Congo stadium was later named May 20th for the date Mobutu founded his political party. What was really disturbing was hearing people tell me that if Mobutu were alive, he would be re-elected because people remember his time as more stable when the country could defend itself. He was for many, despicable but also the Strong Man who could.

A woman in African dress accepted a small gratuity with gratitude and showed us the room that housed Ali and his trainers. It had been flooded, and smelled fetid. Someone was taking a shower in the back. A picture of “the Greatest,” mouth perpetually open, eyes defiant, was still plastered on a wall. Two deflated punching bags swing from the ceiling. There was no electricity.

Ali may have beat Forman but the place felt beat up too. It was like the wreck of the Roman coliseum. The field is still there but not the ring. There was no plaque, no photos, no historic marker except in my own memory and heart because that encounter was so thrilling.

If this was the USA, I could imagine the stadium being turned into a pugilistic museum with a screening room featuring clips from Leon Gast’s great decades-in-the-making doc, “When We Were Kings” of that Don King extravaganza, or perhaps even Will Smith’s recreation in the movie ALI—actually shot in Mozambique, not Congo.

But that will not happen because there is no tourist market here. Besides, a new humongous 80,000 seat stadium built by the Chinese who used prison laborers, somehow a practice not uncommon here is now just down the street. This communist creation is now named after its own capitalist corporate sponsor, Vodacom, the South African Telecom giant.

Congo has moved, on even if the chant “Ali Bumbaye” (“Ali Kill him”) still resonates. A Congolese told me the country started hating Foreman when he showed up with two giant dogs reminiscent of the ones imported by Belgian colonialists.

I was thinking about all this in part because today was the day the World Cup announced what teams would play in 2010, an announcement made in South Africa, and then heard

and seen worldwide on TV.

Sports and pop culture have become our politics of distraction. It is so much harder to keep score on changes in our world than on what's happening on the playing fields where games start and end in a few hours. They don't drag on over months and years as they do in the political sphere. There are winners and losers, period!

Highly paid athletes have become our role models, not the likes of political martyrs like Che or Lumumba. In this culture, worldwide, corporate marketing trumps political missions. You have to be a rock star like Bono to promote African causes. While respected for his football talent, David Beckham is better known for his endorsement deals, salaries and beautiful people lifestyle.

Just as South Africa spends billions on new stadiums to host a world sporting event, so Mubutu hosted the Rumble in the Jungle to try to clean up the international image of his brutal regime. The real game is designed to keep our eyes on the spectacle, not on the men and the money in the shadows.

Oddly, later in the evening I was taken across the street from our hotel to "The Shark Club," a new private sports complex with a pool and a gym said to be owned by the President's brother. There is also a modern field house with a state of the art boxing ring. On Friday nights, it becomes a private fight club with four scheduled slugfests.

What would Ali have thought?

Boxing is now an entertainment for the elite, not only a stadium sport for the masses complete with refs in white shirts, judges, and sexy young girls strutting around the ring with signs reminding the largely male audience having drinks at tables what the next round is.. Even this has been commodified so many miles away —like so much else. Everyone can now play at being a more modern Don King.

Back in his glory days, in the year I turned 18 and began discovering the world, Lumumba announced a new Congo with a new vision I followed those events closely then and I am exploring their aftermath now.

"The Republic of the Congo has been proclaimed, and our country is now in the hands of its own children.

"Together, my brothers, my sisters, we are going to begin a new struggle, a sublime struggle, which will lead our country to peace, prosperity, and greatness.

"Together, we are going to establish social justice and make sure everyone has just remuneration for his labor [applause]."

That promise and dream has yet to be realized. That "sublime" struggle continues. I hope to meet Lumumba's family next week.

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