



**The Charisma of Authenticity in the  
Democratic Republic of the Congo**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this paper is to propose an analysis which discloses the various interdependencies that may exist between modes of objectifying the nation and the legitimacy of discursive strategies of nation-building in the context of a grave social conflict. The paper advances two interrelated arguments. Firstly, it argues that the order of conflict in the Congo is contingent on the strictly symbolic efficacy of myths of identity. Secondly it argues that the “charisma” of some of the country’s “Big Men” is related to what I call the democratization of sovereignty, and neither to their supposedly exceptional individual qualities nor to a specifically African “Big Man”-syndrome. I propose that while one must be critical of the Weberian notion of “charisma” as a sociological theory of prophecy, one can nonetheless use the notion of “charisma” as a tool to analyse symbolic properties that accrue to a specific individual and his followers, to the extent that they embody a subjectivity which is held as absolute by his, or their, proper discourse.

## INTRODUCTION

The geopolitical site of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (henceforth: the Congo) has been the battleground of a highly complex and multi-layered conflict cluster involving a myriad of armed actors, since the early 1990s. These belong to all conceivable categories: strictly local militias, state armies, transnational insurgents, mercenaries, rebel groups, paramilitaries, international peacekeepers, etc.

The full scale of the effects of this prolonged tragedy can still not be accounted for, and quite a few commentators have not been able to resist the temptation to observe that the title of Joseph Conrad's famous novel *The Heart of Darkness* is still an apt metaphor to describe *le mal congolais*. However, the purpose of this paper is not to provide more tunes to the already burgeoning chorus which laments the current state of affairs in the Congo. Instead, the purpose here is to attempt an analysis which discloses the various interdependencies that may exist between modes of objectifying the nation and the legitimacy of discursive strategies of nation-building in the context of a grave social conflict. The paper advances two interrelated arguments. Firstly, it argues that the order of conflict in the Congo is contingent on the strictly symbolic efficacy of myths of identity, and secondly it argues that the "charisma" of some of the country's "Big Men" is related to what I call the democratization of sovereignty, and neither to their supposedly exceptional individual qualities nor to a specifically African "Big Man"-syndrome.

For the sake of clarity the paper falls into two sections. The first section deals with some theoretical problems related to using Weber's notion of "charisma" as a theory of prophecy. I argue that we must do away with the representation of "charisma" as a property attached to the nature of a single individual and as based on "affective" impulses. However, I also argue

that if one must reject the Weberian notion of "charisma" as a sociological theory of prophecy, one can drawing on Bourdieu (1991), nonetheless use the label "charisma" to designate the strictly symbolic properties that accrues to a specific individual and his followers, to the extent that they embody a subjectivity (e.g. the nation) which is held as absolute by his, or their, proper discourse. That is to say that the revelatory discourse of the "charismatic" leader does not owe its symbolic efficacy to the *ex nihilo* creation of truth, but instead to a historically dated concrete social configuration of power relations that allow an individual to find himself predisposed to express, with particular force and coherence, ethico-political claims already internalized by the recipients of his advocacy.

The second section presents an analysis of the nationalist discourse and practices of one of the belligerents of the Congolese conflict cluster, namely General Padiri's Maï-Maï militia, arguably the most influential of the multitude of armed groups calling themselves by that name. During the Second Congolese War (1998-2003) Padiri's group, like several of its namesakes, carried out an armed resistance against the Rwandan army which occupied large parts of eastern Congo, supported by their Congolese allies. Being a nationalist militia, the group made extensive use of national symbols in their political struggle to gain legitimacy among the civilian population. In effect, many in the Congo recognized the militia as an undisputable symbol of patriotism and Congolese authenticity, in part due to their recourse to traditional rituals and techniques of warfare. For many of the group's sympathizers Padiri himself was believed to have been chosen by God to lead the Congolese people to freedom from foreign domination. However, for others they were a rag-tag band of rebels dabbling with diabolical powers.

The argument that carries the analysis of the mythico-national discourse and practices of the Maï-Maï is that the “charisma” accruing to the militia and its leader has been made possible by an unquestioned faith in the inviolability of the connection between the Congolese territory and its authentic native population, as opposed to the foreign invaders. Related to this I argue that the labelling of the Maï-Maï as a traditional tribal Congolese self-defence mechanism, as outside observers sometimes are prone to do, gives credence to the militia’s claim to embody an authentically autochthonous mode of being. Rather than cloaking the present-day phenomenon of the Maï-Maï in the vestiges of an ancient primitive mode of being, I propose that we understand the phenomenon as resolutely modern, insofar as modernity is understood as an “attitude of mind” (Foucault: 1984), in spite of the fact that the Maï-Maï are immersed in a regime of practice which clearly contains practices and modes of thought which cannot be traced back to Western civilization.

The material for the empirical section was gathered during fieldwork in eastern Congo which took place between February and June 2005 and from November to December 2009. The research data were obtained through interviews with former and active Maï-Maï combatants at different levels in the military hierarchy, as well as civilian agents associated with the movement. Declarations, administrative, legal and programmatic documents produced by the Maï-Maï also form part of the data set.

## ON EPISTEMOLOGICAL INTERESTS AND THEIR REPRESENTATIONS

Even by African standards the Democratic Republic of the Congo’s former President Mobutu is considered to have carried out a

particularly radical version of personalized patrimonial rule. Borrowing a term from Weber, Young and Turner’s seminal work *The Rise and Decline of the Zaïrian State* categorises President Mobutu Sese Seko’s rule, from the early 1970s onwards as: “sultanism”<sup>1</sup> (a particularly extreme form of patrimonialism) (1985: 182). Taking another page out of Weber’s sociology of domination, Young and Turner also claim that Mobutu’s rule also contains “elements of charisma” (1985: 171).

According to the authors the Zaïrian state underwent three phases during its formation: consolidation, ascendancy, and finally, the decline. From a state that acted more or less rationally according to the behavioural standards of the legal-rational state, it gradually degenerated into an “irrational” delinquent “sultanate”. In doing so the authors visualize the reality of the regime in Zaïre through Weber’s historical rationalization-thesis, but in reverse order: as the state increasingly degenerated into “sultanism”, a process of irrationalization set in. In the final analysis Weber’s ideal-types are then employed to distinguish by way of contrast the modality of rule in Zaïre from those states acting according to the behavioural imperatives of reason of state. In doing so the authors inaugurate a moral distance between delinquency and

<sup>1</sup> Weber defines “sultanism” in the following way: “Patrimonialism and, in the extreme case, *sultanism* tend to arise whenever traditional domination develops an administration and a military force which are purely instrument of the master. ... Sometimes it appears sultanism is completely unrestrained by tradition, but this is never in fact the case. The non-traditional element is not, however, rationalized in impersonal terms, but consists only in an extreme development of the ruler’s discretion. It is this which distinguishes it from every kind of rational authority (Weber 1978: 231-232).



normality in the international system of states:<sup>2</sup> “In Zaïre, the central feature [of state decay] is the shrinkage in the competence, credibility, and probity of the state. It has progressively lost its capacity to relate means to ends”.<sup>3</sup>

The point here is that Young and Turner in retrospectively applying Weberian “ideal types” to categorise the regime in Zaïre inject *meaning* into their empirical object of analysis. In a sense this is a reflection of the inherent tension in Weber’s work between the demand for “freedom from value judgement” and the problem of “relevance to values”<sup>4</sup> (cf. Weber 1949). The issue is of pivotal importance.

In order to aspire to “freedom from value judgement”, Weber maintained that the sociologist should keep separate the establishment

of empirical facts and his or her “practical evaluation”, since these “two things are logically different and to deal with them as though they were the same represents a confusion of entirely heterogeneous problems” (Weber 1949: 11). Yet, he also recognized that science must necessarily have “relevance to values”, pointing to the fact the science is not produced in a social void by a pure Cartesian reason: “cultural (i.e., evaluative) interests give purely scientific work its direction” (Weber 1949: 22). Elsewhere, Weber formulated the term “epistemological interest” (*Erkenntnisinteresse*) to emphasize the constructedness of a certain perspective from which one could approach the particular object under investigation (Käsler 1988)<sup>5</sup>.

The epistemological contradiction between “freedom from value judgement” and “relevance to values” inherent in Weber’s “interpretive sociology” (*verstehende Soziologie*) can be seen as a particular version of a Kantian problematic: given that the world only reveals itself to us through subjective perception (Ding-für-mich), how can we understand it objectively (Ding-an-sich)? For Foucault the Kantian riddle is representative of modern systems of thought. Foucault claims that since the Enlightenment “Man” is simultaneously regarded as capable of understanding the rules governing his behaviour and as limited by them, whereas in earlier systems of thought “Man” was seen as governed by externalities, in particular divine will. Modern systems of objectification therefore begin with the incredible and ultimately unworkable idea of the human

2 This view is prevalent within “comparative” Africanist political science. In his “Introduction to African Politics”, Thompson boils down the Weberian tradition within Africanist political science as follows: “Colonialism brought “legal-rational” *institutional* states to Africa. Within this form of political order, offices and institutions are established, based on legal authority, to carry out the functions of government. Civil society supports these institutions as they follow patterns of accepted rules. Both those in government and those in wider society, know where they stand. Each side abides by clearly defined laws and practices, and the entire governing process gains predictability. In short, institutional norms take precedence over personal whims, and this is where legitimacy is generated... The public interest is paramount. In this respect, Max Weber declared this institutional legal-rational model as the most efficient form of government. Yet, as has been seen, post-colonial African states do not always follow this legal-rational pattern... and many public officials use their position within the state to serve their own, and not just the public interest” (Thompson 2004: 107-108).

3 A claim that seems to precipitate today’s hype surrounding the notion of the “failed state”, especially within Western technocratic institutions whose portfolio is international relations (see Di John 2010 for a review of the literature pertaining to the “failed state”).

4 Weber borrowed this term from Heinrich Rickert and he defines it as: “the philosophical interpretation of that specifically scientific “interest” which determines the selection of a given subject matter and the problems of an empirical analysis” (Weber 1949: 22).

5 Weber wrote on his own “socio-economic” perspective: “The quality of an event as a socio-economic phenomenon is not something which is ‘objectively’ attached to the event. Rather it is determined by the direction of our epistemological *interest*, as it emerges from the specific cultural meaning which we attribute to the event concerned in the individual case” (Weber in Käsler 1988: 195).

being as sovereign precisely by virtue of being enslaved (Foucault 1966: 320 pp.). “It is within this vast but narrow space, opened up by the repetition of the positive [empirical] within the fundamental [transcendental], that the whole of this analytic of finitude – so closely linked to the future of modern thought – will be deployed; it is there that we shall see in succession the transcendental repeat the empirical” (ibid.: 326, my translation). For Weber subjective “meaning” must be understood as the actuation of “motive”, an all-important driving force of human behaviour. For Weber then, the key to understanding (*verstehen*) “meaning” is explaining (*erklären*) “motive”, which may be known or unknown and rational or irrational (Weber 1978: 8-9). In this sense Weber’s interpretive model corresponds closely to the modern “episteme” disclosed by Foucault.

If the above points are granted, we can infer that Young and Turner injected Weber’s epistemological interests into their representations of the post-colonial regime in Zaïre. In effect Young and Turner evoke a very powerful modern myth by their simplified reordering of Zaïrian realities into ideational concentrates (pure types): the myth of progress associated with the rational-legal bureaucratic state. For we must not forget that even if Weber lamented the dehumanizing effects of rationalization and the concomitant “disenchantment” of the world – and many social theorists have followed him in this, not least the Frankfurt School – he, almost in spite of himself, acknowledged that the rational-legal bureaucracy was the only one capable of lifting the task of governing societies of the complexity of modern nation states. The latter is precisely the postulate of Young and Turner, who apparently do not share Weber’s reserved attitude towards “rationalisation”. The final word on the issue of “rationalisation” will be left to Foucault: “I don’t believe one can speak of an intrinsic notion of ‘rationalisation’ without, on the one hand, positing an absolute

value in reason, and on the other hand, taking the risk of applying it empirically in a completely arbitrary way” (Foucault 1991: 224). By retrospectively applying Weber’s ideal types as categories of historical interpretation, Young and Turner attempt to capture the “essence” (patrimonialism/sultanism) of the postcolonial state in Zaïre; an “essence” which is not at all present in the mind of the individuals whose concrete behaviour is nevertheless to be understood on its basis.

### PROPHECY AS ONTOLOGICAL ADVOCACY

Weber contends that the validity of “charismatic” claims to legitimacy rests on: “Devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person and of the normative patterns of order revealed or ordained by him” (Weber 1978). As a “pure type” of legitimate domination “charisma” has a number of unique qualities which clearly defines it from both the patrimonial and the rational-legal types of domination. It is among other things, according to Weber: “emotional”, “revolutionary”, “unsystematic”, “extraordinary”, and “individual”.

Bourdieu has criticized Weber’s notion of “charisma” for being overly focused on the extraordinary abilities of the “charismatic” leader and as overlooking the noseological qualities of mythical discourse (1991):

...the prophet is less the ‘extraordinary’ man of whom Weber spoke than the man of extraordinary situations, about whom guardians of ordinary order have nothing to say, and with reason, since the only language which they have at their disposal is that of exorcism. It is because he realizes, in his person and in his discourse, the meeting of a signifying

and a signified that predated him, but only in the potential and implicit state, that he can mobilize groups or classes that recognize his language because they recognize themselves in him. (Bourdieu 1991: 35).

According to Bourdieu, “charisma” can be linked to mythico-religious discourses and practices, but can readily be transferred to other spheres (such as art)<sup>6</sup>. In his attempt to make a sociological theory of religion Bourdieu makes a fusion between on the one hand structural-functionalist approaches to mythological thought and ritual, as developed by Lévi-Strauss and Durkheim, and on the other Weber’s sociology of religion. Bourdieu contends that while the structural-functionalist tradition provides the instruments to discover the immanent logic of myth, and which as such has proved that myths are no less sophisticated intellectual constructs than modern systems of thought, Weber’s primary contribution is linking mythical discourse to the historically contingent “religious interests of those who produce it”. In other words, Weber succeeds – along with Marx – with linking religious discourse to “domination” (Bourdieu 1991: 4).

Yet, Bourdieu contends that both Weber and Lévi-Strauss overlooks what he terms the “religious labour” carried out by specialists, producers of “religious capital”, labelled the “goods of salvation”<sup>7</sup>; a particular species of symbolic capital that agents compete for in the “religious field” (Bourdieu 1991; Rey 2004).

<sup>6</sup> An argument also advanced by Shils (1965).

<sup>7</sup> Thus Bourdieu is able to define strictly religious interest as follows: “...the interest that a group or a class finds in a determinate type of religious practice or belief and, in particular, in the production, reproduction, diffusion, and consumption of a determinate type of *goods of salvations*” (Bourdieu 1991: 15).

Another key argument for Bourdieu is that religious interest cannot be legitimated without alignment to determinate positions in the wider social structure. This is not only because the laity expects religion to provide the goods of salvation (cure from existential anguish of contingency, dereliction, sorcery, impurity etc.) but also because it functions as a kind of “sociodicy” of the good fortune of privileged classes. Mythico-religious discourse is thus ipso facto constitutive of the social order. That is, it is *structuring structure* as opposed to *structured structure*, as a one-dimensional discourse analysis might suggest.

With respect to “charisma” Bourdieu agrees with Weber that it is intrinsically revolutionary, precisely because the “charismatic” subject – the prophet (or the heresiarch) – and his followers with their “ideology of revelation” contest by their very existence the legitimacy of the existence of intermediary institutions in the relation between the natural and the supernatural worlds. According to Bourdieu, therefore, “charisma” is the “*professional ideology* of the prophet” (Bourdieu 1991: 21).

To this writer the advantage of Bourdieu’s re-conceptualization of mythico-religious discourse and practices – and by extension the notion of “charisma” – remains to have made the link between the strictly symbolic efficacy of mythico-religious discourse and the social order, and, therefore of *relations of power*. More precisely Bourdieu shows that subject positions, including that of the revolutionary “charismatic” subject, are defined in relation to each other in any given field.

If Bourdieu must be credited for modernizing the available approaches to the interface between relations of power and mythico-religious discourse and practices, there is nevertheless room for criticism. There is reason to be sceptical of Bourdieu’s insistence that the complex web of representations spun by mythico-religious discourse, and ideology in general,

is merely a distorted, and therefore *misrecognizable*, mirror image of the objective structure of economic and social relations in force in a given social formation; a misrecognition which makes domination the primary function of mythico-religious discourse. That is the reason why he labels all belief in faith and ideology, “self-deceit” and “bad faith”.

Therefore, Bourdieu, just like Weber before him, finds himself ascribing to the premise of the Enlightenment that the finitude of “man” must be found in the positivity of his own being, which simultaneously is the rule governing his mode of being. Whereas for Weber this “rule” was the concept of “motivation”, a rather crudely constructed psychological impulse, supposedly directing the subjective meaning of the actions of human beings everywhere and always, it was for Bourdieu an ever-present economic competition, which although endlessly variable in form, not only dictates the symbolic practices of any given field of social relations, but also is generative of class formations and as a corollary thereof the domination of man by man.

In contrast, I would like to suggest that it is worthwhile to attempt an analysis of mythical discourse and “charisma” which does not make any claim to disclose what is really at stake underneath the layers of “subjective meaning” or “symbolic practices”. In such an analysis the question would be: how has it become possible that a given individual and his followers have come to be seen as the embodiment of a given subjectivity held as inviolable? To answer this question it is necessary to remain on the strictly symbolic level and to be as concrete as possible. This can be achieved through Foucault’s genealogical approach. In his genealogical approach Foucault attempts to show how the subject constitutes him- or herself like an object. This process of self-objectification is simultaneously the formation of the subject’s “subjectivity”. By the concept “subjectivity”, Foucault intended

to encapsulate the way in which the subject experiences himself within a game of truth that enables him to build up certain kinds of power relationships to his self (Foucault 2001). It also implies that mythological discourse is analyzed not as the product of the superstitious belief system of an intellectually inferior and backwards people, but as symbolically efficacious, precisely because its primary function is to reorder the contingencies of experience in a credible way (cf. Lévi-Strauss: 1958 chapter 9-11). As Lévi-Strauss so memorably has pointed out, the difference between scientific thought and mythical thought lies not in the quality of the intellectual process, but in the nature of things to which it is applied. This leads him to conclude his famous essay “The Structural Study of Myth” by pointing out: “What makes a steel axe superior to a stone axe is not that the first one is better made than the second. They are equally well made, but steel is quite different from stone. In the same way we may be able to show that the same logical processes operate in myth as in science, and that man has always been thinking equally well” (Lévi-Strauss 1958: 264-265).

The logical consequence of treating mythico-religious discourse and practices on the same level as other discourses which disseminate truth and morality is to see it as *structuring structure*, as Bourdieu pointed out. It is in other words constitutive of “subjectivity”. If the above points are granted, it makes room for a re-conceptualization of “charisma” as the *strictly symbolic properties that accrues to a specific individual and his followers, to the extent that they embody a subjectivity (e.g. the nation) which is held as absolute by his, or their, proper discourse*, as suggested in the introduction. “Charisma” then becomes an abstract way of expressing that the extraordinariness – “gift of grace” – that accrues to certain “subjectivities” is linked, in a circular fashion, to the production and re-production of truth and the formation

and re-formation of new “subjectivity”. This in turn implies that we can conceive of prophecy as *ontological advocacy*<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, it follows that “charisma” does not necessarily need to be revolutionary, as Weber and Bourdieu claim, but may well reproduce the social order<sup>9</sup>.

## THE INVENTION OF AUTHENTICITY IN THE CONGO

In the following pages I will try to make my case for a re-conceptualized version of the Weberian concept of “charisma” through an analysis of nationalist discourse and practice in the Congo. Today ethnic, national and racial communal identities are completely naturalized in the Congo, but they did not drop like a fireball out of the sky. Instead the myth that there exists such a thing as an authentic Congolese nation has its origin in Colonial intervention.

The Congo, as we know it today, entered modern history in 1885 as the personal property of Leopold II, King of the Belgians (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2002). The colonial governing apparatus was designed to extract as much profit out of the territory as possible. To that end the agents of the state made extensive use of violence, often by enlisting African intermediaries to subjugate and terrorize the population in the name of progress and civilization (Merlier 1962). The framing of Africans as savage and backwards justified the violent subjugation of the native population (Dunn 2003).

Yielding to international pressure King Leopold handed over the “Congo Free State” to the Belgian state, which changed its name to “Belgian Congo”. However, the basic features

of economic exploitation, violent subjugation and authoritarian rule continued (Anstey 1966; Young and Turner 1985).

The practice of *administration territoriale* in Belgian Congo was informed by a mixture of rationalities of direct rule and indirect rule (Young and Turner 1985). In this system the native chiefs were vested with the authority to rule their subjects as agents of the state. They were harnessed for their potential for the exercise of power; in Mamdani’s words they became the “decentralized despotic arm of colonial government” (1996).

Colonial ethnographers were busy describing the traditions of the various tribes and chieftaincies in the colony. Indeed it was believed that in spite of the tribal variations the panoply of tribes inhabiting the Belgian Congo belonged to a race: the “Bantu”, a term coined by the German-born philologist Wilhelm Heinrich Immanuel Bleek (1827-1875). Bleek’s innovation lay in discovering that a series of African languages from the Union of South Africa in the south to British and German East Africa in the east to Senegal in the west and to the northern frontier of Belgian Congo in the north possessed a similar grammatical structure (Bleek 1862, 1869). Within the grid of perceptions of the Belgian colonial administration, however, the “Bantu” constituted a heterogeneous, yet interlinked cultural ensemble of “peoples”, with a similar way of life. In effect the Congolese subjectivity was Bantu-ised. In the words of Van Der Kerken, who was an administrator in the Equateur region:

The Bantu peoples – thus named for the first time by Bleek (1827-1875), the father of African philology, by virtue of belonging to the same linguistic family – are the result of a combination of various very diverse elements, which, even today, can be found in the anthropologi-

8 I am grateful to Afonso Moreira for suggesting this term to me.

9 See also Shils (1965) for a similar argument.

cal type of the individuals [...]. In the same way that the anthropological type of the Bantu differs from one region to another and even within the same tribe, which in itself is a testimony to the fact that diverse influences have contributed to the formation of the people, the cultural characteristics of the Bantus must necessarily be different [...] it is nevertheless likely that the Bantu peoples, who speaking languages that have preserved their unity and bear strong resemblances can have possessed at one time a common fount of civilisation (Van Der Kerken 1920: 38-39, my translation).

A most illustrative example of the Bantu-isation of the native population of the Congo is the writings of Fr. Placide Tempels, a missionary and *ethnophilosophe*, who was instrumental in the invention of Congolese authenticity. On the basis of his missionary immersion in the culture of the Shaba Luba, Fr. Tempels attempted to reconstruct a cohesive and logical African cosmology that revolved around the notion of “life force” and an ultimate supreme being. Tempels entitled his 1948 study “Bantu Philosophy” (Tempels 1948), going so far as to suggest the applicability of his epistemological discovery to an area that extended far beyond the actual delimited areas within which his own observations had been carried out. While Tempels was seeking an evangelical biochemistry that would permit an efficacious grafting of Christianity onto African cosmology, he would in effect provide the sketch of a blueprint of Congolese nationalism.

The Belgian colonial government thus not only salvaged the authoritarian potential of “customary power”, it also sculpted the very tradition, custom, and even philosophy of its native population in order to render the autochthonous population productive and docile. By this dual process, part salvage and part

sculpting, the Belgian colonial administration crystallized a range of native authorities, each armed with a “whip and protected by the halo of custom” (Mamdani 1996). Defined and marked as a member of a tribe, the colonised Congolese were encapsulated in customarily-governed power relations. The more custom was enforced, the more the tribe was recast and conserved as a more or less enclosed community – autonomous, yet subject to the colonial authority as it had never been before (Jewsiewicki 1989; Makombo 1998: 32-38; Merlier 1962). Encased by custom, frozen into so many tribes, each under the fist of its own native authority, the subject populations were, as it were, compartmentalised in an “ethnic” steel grid of Bantu tribes ordered into a civilizational hierarchy.

Encased within a territory, each “tribe” could be governed at a distance by their respective customary chiefs exercising the tribe’s customary laws. Yet, even if the governing ideal of the colonial state was to govern the native population through its own native authorities, the colonial state did not shy away from interfering in chiefly succession, or from expropriating the natives from their land, or from reorganizing the geography of the tribal grid of the colony according to the needs of the colonial state (Lemarchand 1982; Young and Turner 1985; Amselle and M’Bokolo 1985).

Whereas a policy of strict racial division separated the native African from the white citizenry, a process of ethnic differentiation divided the native sphere into so many Bantu “tribes”. These concomitant dividing practices objectified the Congolese population as not only a distinct nation of non-whites, but also as a culturally heterogeneous ensemble, a process that no doubt strengthened the national as well as the ethnic consciousness of the “natives”.

Ethnic differentiation bequeathed differentiation in the economic, social and political

realm too. This was in part due to the colonial authorities' practice of vesting resources and authority in the tribes that were deemed to be most adept at accustoming themselves to the norms of civilization and open to evangelization, such as the Baluba of Kasai, the Bakongo of Bas-Congo, the Congo River trading peoples such as the Bobangi and the Lokele, and the Tutsi of the Kivu. The ethnic differentiation of the native population was therefore infused with asymmetric inter-ethnic relations of power, meaning that class formation took on ethnic valences.

In 1956 a movement for the liberation of the Congolese from foreign domination was born, by a group of natives called the *évolués*, who were influenced by western ideals of freedom, progress and democracy. This led to a national awakening and the Congo became independent on 30 July 1960<sup>10</sup>. By this time the notion of the *Bantu* was used extensively by Congolese politicians to refer to the supposedly authentically African mentality of the Congolese people not least by the Congo's first prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, who today is revered as the nation's founding father. Lumumba and his followers advocated for a unitary Congolese state, but they were confronted by "secessionists", supported by the so-called Trojka: Belgium, France and the USA. Among the first generation of Congolese politicians Lumumba is the only one who today is widely revered as a "martyr" of Congolese independence across the country (he was assassinated by Western agents in collaboration with Katangan secessionists). The interesting point about Lumumba for the purposes of this paper is that the "charisma" accrues to him due to

the fact that he militated for the unity and inviolability of the subjectivity of the Congolese nation. Though he lost the battle, the allure of his nationalist discourse persisted, with its ontological advocacy based on the rediscovery of an ancient but violated truth of a supposedly authentic kernel of "congoness".

### THE "CHARISMA" OF AUTHENTICITY IN MOBUTU'S ZAÏRE

Following the tumultuous and violence-ridden first five years of independence – the so-called "*pagaille*" years – Joseph Desiré Mobutu, Commander in Chief of the Congolese army, and his staff carried out a coup-d'état on 25 November 1965. Mobutu's seizure of power was looked upon mildly by the "Trojka" which – eager to secure themselves a vital ally in the Cold War – were growing impatient with the ineffectiveness and political infighting of the incumbent government and was accepted by a public that was disenchanted by the *politiciens*. In their minds the political leaders of the First Republic had crashed the dream of independence on the rocks of their venal machinations. The coup-makers progressively dismantled the democratic framework of the First Republic, and from its ruins the New Regime built up its own institutional framework. Parliament was dissolved 23 March 1967 and the President's party, the *Mouvement Populaire de Révolution* (MPR), soon after was the only one allowed (Young and Turner 1985).

In order to legitimise its rule, the regime reinvigorated the myth of authentic Congolese nationhood; this was superseded by an ambitious program to promote "authenticity" as a philosophical doctrine, and this in turn was superseded by "Mobutism". As a part of this strategy Lumumba was declared a National Hero and the secessionists of the First Repub-

<sup>10</sup> See Makombo's thorough book on the subject of the emergence of the class of the *évolués* and their role in the formation of Congolese political consciousness (1998).

lic were declared agents of neo-colonialism. On May 19 1967 a new regime doctrine was inaugurated. It was unveiled in the “N’Sele Manifesto”, wherein nationalism was declared to be the doctrinal touchstone of the MPR. This nationalism revolved around affirmation of the independence of the country, the restoration of the sovereignty of the state, and economic development, all of which required that the country was able to free itself from being a colony of international financial interests. The country was also to be revolutionized meaning that the regime would carry out a societal transformation (Young and Turner 1985).

The manifesto made it clear, though, that the Zaïrian trajectory to modernity was to be uniquely Zaïrian, as opposed to inspired by “foreign” thinkers. Hence the oft-cited phrase: “neither left nor right”. It was to be inspired by “Bantu wisdom”.

As one official definition of authenticity put it:

“The term authenticity takes the sense of a movement tending to revive the moral, cultural, philosophic, social and economic values distinct to the Zaïrian nation. Such a movement repudiates contradictory foreign ideas. It proceeds from a crystallization of consciousness of the particularity of Zaïrians, and the conviction that their cultural patrimony is not, as the colonialists had maintained, the product of an infantile imagination, but the expression of the soul of a mature people, who have no reason to abase themselves before European culture.” (Manwana in Young and Turner 1985)

Of course the great irony of this was that the new state doctrine championing *recour à l’authenticité* based its strategy on a concept (“Bantu”) invented by Europeans. The fact that the concept of the “Bantu” migrated from

the desks and notebooks of European scholars to the symbolic summit of the Mobutu regime via colonial ethno-territorial policies and the fiery speeches and manifestos of the anti-colonial movement, shows with extraordinary lucidity its symbolic efficacy; a symbolic efficacy it owes precisely due to its quality as the concept that encapsulates the radical authenticity of the Congolese nation, and hence its *sovereignty*. As such it constitutes an anonymous amorphous strategy against internal as well as external dangers. A theme, which, as we shall see, plays itself out forcefully in the mythico-nationalist discourse and practice of the Mai-Mai.

Importantly, the New Regime’s political strategy for a national renaissance is described as “divine inspiration”: A Guide-Messiah (Mobutu) inaugurates a project of complete social transformation which in turn is justified through a supposedly self-contained African tradition, namely that of the majesty of the king. As Mudimbe (1994: 149) points out, it recites Mobutu’s virtues through three types of exegesis:

- a) A temporal model comments on the opposition “before vs. after,” and reveals the magnificence of the MPR centralization of power as the designation and arrangement of a salvation;
- b) A genealogical exegesis of the “ancestor vs. descendant” relation makes explicit the isomorphism between this theoretical model and a mythical African configuration.
- c) A social exegesis shows to what extent the paternalistic model “protector vs. protected” organizes the MPR pyramid as a “community” of interest.

The regime vigorously promoted the myth of Mobutu as the incarnation of the authentic African chief vested with divine authority as ex-



emplified by a declaration by Interior Minister Engely in 1975 and by one of his speeches:

In our religion, we have our own theologians. In all religions, and at all times, there are prophets. Why not today? God has sent a great prophet, our prestigious Guide Mobutu – this prophet is our liberator, our Messiah. Our Church is the MPR. Its chief is Mobutu, we respect him like one respects a Pope. Our gospel is Mobutuism. This is why the crucifixes must be replaced by the image of our Messiah. (Young and Turner 1985: 169)

And:

In our African tradition, there are never two chiefs; there is sometimes a natural heir of the chief, but can anyone tell me that he has ever known a village which has two chiefs? ... Among us in the Congo, a chief must ... seek counsel among the elders. He must inform himself; but after having taken counsel and informed himself, he must decide and resolve the issue alone, in full cognizance of the problem. For it belongs to the chief to live with his own decision, to evaluate it, and to accept its consequences ... It is on the sole condition – because he will have weighted in advance the consequences and accepted alone all the risks of his option – that his decision will be honest, and therefore good for the People and, finally, authentically democratic. (Sese Seko 1975: 104-105)

In Young and Turner's "The Rise and decline of the Zaïrian State", "Mobutism" is paramount to "sultanism". In order to explain Mobutu's ascent to the summit of the Zaïrian state, rather than someone else, they devote several pages to making a brief psychobiography of

him (172-178). The biography sketches out a psychological profile of man possessed with extraordinary abilities and gropes for motives that might explain his extraordinariness and thus his "charismatic" authority.

Mobutu's personal trajectory is not relevant for the conceptualization of "charisma" employed in this analysis. Of far greater importance is how Mobutu enacts the myth of Zaïrian authenticity as a political technology of nation-building.

While this writer does not ascribe to the structuralist supra-empirical premise that the relations between symbols are projected by a deeper function of the morphology of the human brain, the myth of authenticity in motion in Zaïre during the Mobutu years reveals at least two features which correspond to the logic of mythical thought expounded by Lévi-Strauss' (1958: chapter 11), namely that mythological time is simultaneously reversible and irreversible, and that one of the basic themes is overcoming the denial of autochthony. At the same time as the mythico-nationalist discourse of the Mobutu regime recounts the irreversible progression through time of the Zaïrian/Congolese nation, it recounts the drama of *overcoming the denial of authenticity of the Congolese by foreigners*.

Mobutu is cast as the "Helmsman" who answers the "call" to reconnect the Congolese nation to its authentic core and as the embodiment of authenticity. Insofar, as Mobutu is acknowledged as the personification of the virtues of the institutions of the authentic African chief the charisma of authenticity can be said to accrue to him.

## THE MYTHICO-NATIONALIST DISCOURSE OF THE MAÏ-MAÏ

The mythico-nationalist discourse and practice of the Maï-Maï reveal several homologies

to that of the Mobutu regime. Like its predecessor the universal and sacred pillar around which the Mai-Mai resistance to foreign influence is enacted, is the nation; a clear corollary to the notion of “autochthony”. For the Mai-Mai the nation is a sacred transcendental entity that flows unchanged through history, and when they fight to defend their nation against foreign aggressors, they believe themselves to be animated by the “spirit of nationalism”. The territory of the Congo is seen as a divine creation reserved for the Congolese tribes, making armed resistance not just a defence of a territory, but also the extension of Providence<sup>11</sup>, and the Mai-Mai see it as their sacred duty to secure the perpetuation of the nation’s sacred spiritual unity. The ever-present theme of “autochthony” is a way of positively affirming that the Mai-Mai belong to a particular nation and race. By linking the notion of the nation with the cosmic order the Mai-Mai produce what I call a sort of “cosmological nationalism”.

The exceptionally interesting point about the notion of the nation as a transcendental entity is not so much that it is mythical, but rather that it is connected to contemporary geopolitical realities; that the Congo is a country with territorial boundaries which is part of the modern international system of states. One does not have to be an expert to reflect on these realities. In this respect it is worth underscor-

11 Some might protest here and claim that this is an abuse of the secular principle of the sovereign nation state being exploited in order to justify war. However, while there is no doubt that the Mai-Mai undoubtedly justify their armed resistance as a virtuous defence of Divine Law, this sort of critique would be limited to a normative denunciation of the improper mixing of religion and politics. Such a critique would lose sight of the fact that religiosity and spirituality are crucial techniques through which the Mai-Mai are able to visualize a free Congo. As Geróid Ó Tuathail has suggested: “the complex relationship between geo-politics and religion needs to be acknowledged and investigated” (2000).

ing the precision with which the Mai-Mai have wed the myth of the nation with the principle of the sovereign nation state.

For the Mai-Mai the Congolese wars were not only fought over political or economic interests. Politics and resources were means through which the war could be won. For the Mai-Mai it was war between ethnic groups, nations and races; at stake was the survival of the Congolese ethnic groups, the nation (Congo), and ultimately the race. It was seen as a permanent racial war being fought over the hegemony of Central Africa, in which there was no alternative but to fight the foreigners to the bitter end, mainly represented in a racial adversary: the Tutsi. In the words of a Mai-Mai Assistant Territorial Administrator:

[I]t is necessary that the Hutu return to power in Rwanda as long as the Tutsi are in power in Rwanda there is not going to be a sustainable peace here in South Kivu. [...] the problem is that it is the Tutsi who are in power; he is predisposed to let the indigenes suffer. [...] It is necessary to destroy the nucleus of the Tutsi army which is in Uganda. That is the proposition for an effective peace in the Great Lakes Region.<sup>12</sup>

For the Mai-Mai, centuries of foreign dominance and exploitation have left the indigenous population alienated from its ancient Bantu ethos. As a consequence the indigenous population has become weak, insecure, and un-civic. As one Mai-Mai told me:

With the arrival of the white man here in Black Africa the big and solid civili-

12 Interview, Mai-Mai Assistant Territorial Administrator, May 2005.

sations and progenies became decadent and even weak. From that moment on social disorganisation reigned, there was the slave trade of the blacks, there was exploration and exploitation, pillage of the riches of the country, evangelisation, mental alienation, caused by the preoccupation of the whites to exploit our continent. It was the beginning of the aggression suffered by the black man at the hands of the white man.<sup>13</sup>

The vision of the Maï-Maï is that the Congo should be unified and purified. To this end, it is necessary to purify the nation from the stain of the foreigner, which is thought to be at the origin of the crisis of Congolese society.

Within the Maï-Maï thought-space, the enemy is a conglomerate of different actors, who have in common their seeking to exploit, re-colonize and enslave the Congolese by installing a “Tutsi-Hima empire” in eastern Congo. According to the Maï-Maï, the alliance to re-colonize the Congo consists of the Tutsi from Rwanda, Burundi and the Congo, the Hima from Uganda, and their “Hamitic”<sup>14</sup> allies from Ethiopia and Eritrea. They believe that the “Hamitic” alliance is supported

by the West, mainly USA, Great Britain and Belgium, but also South Africa<sup>15</sup>. The analysis that the Congo is the victim of an imperialistic war imposed upon it from the outside has produced a political project of emancipation. This emancipation includes the exorcism of foreign “negative values” believed to be instituted through contact with the foreigner. As such it operates with the same fundamental theme as Mobutu’s “authenticity” discourse, except that a new enemy has been introduced. Moreover, given that Mobutu is seen in part as responsible for *le mal congolais*, the perverse effects of his legacy need to be purged as well.

Like Mobutu before them, the Maï-Maï inaugurated a programme to reconnect the Congolese masses to their traditional way of life. But how should the population be transformed from a floundering alienated existence into a truly patriotic citizenry? The first step to be taken is to resist the corrosive impact of the foreigner on the Congolese citizenry. To avoid alienation and the subsequent spread of anti-values, the Congolese citizenry must be reconnected with its authentic cultural way of life. According to a political manifesto of the group:

[The Maï-Maï are] committed to bring the Africans on the path of regeneration, which is the course which will lead to the original state. It is a spiritual renaissance which should be edified around the purity of heart and voluntary humanism. Furthermore, the Africans are obliged to

13 Interview, Maï-Maï Assistant Territorial Administrator, May 2005.

14 Just as with the notion of the “Bantu”, the notion of the “Hamites” is a thoroughly western invention. The Hamites were said to be the founders of the great civilizations of Egypt and Phoenicia. This reorganization of the Hamitic hypothesis made is possible to cast the Hamites as external dispensers of civilization in “Negro Africa”. In addition, the Hamites were also said to share a single culture: unlike the Negroes who were regarded as agriculturalists, the Hamites were said to be pastoralists. As a result the Hamitic Tutsi was classified as a race apart from the Negroes; a sub-race which had migrated south from somewhere in Ethiopia and upon arrival in the Great Lakes Region of Africa had started sowing the seeds of civilization (Mamdani 2002; MacGaffey 2005; Sanders 1969).

15 It must be noted that it has been documented that the US and Great Britain supported Rwanda and Uganda and their Congolese allies during the Congolese wars, believing that Museveni’s and Kagame’s regimes would be capable of ensuring regional stability.

develop their physical, psychic and spiritual constitution.<sup>16</sup>

To this end agents of the Maï-Maï movement were given the responsibility of “awakening the nationalist conscience of the Congolese”<sup>17</sup>. The Congolese must shed the superficial shell of anti-values imposed upon him by the foreigner by devoting his self to a return to the “original state”. This attitude is exemplified by a verse from the Book of Revelation in the New Testament cited in the aforementioned political manifesto: “Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. Lest you repent, I will come to you and remove your lamp stand from its place”<sup>18</sup>. Part of the political project of the Maï-Maï is thus to guide the Congolese citizenry to find devotion to the authentic culture from which they have fallen. In sum, the crisis of the autochthonous subjectivity, which was inaugurated through contact with the foreigner, must be overcome by a return to an authentic mode of being.

## THE DEMOCRATISATION OF SOVEREIGNTY

Like Mobutu before him, General Padiri himself acted as the supreme authority of the Maï-Maï controlled territories. According to the Maï-Maï and their supporters Padiri was not merely a general acting as a proxy-authority for the state, which had collapsed in the Kivus, but rather a leader who had been chosen by God

to lead his people to the Promised Land; hence the name *Général de Dieu* (General of God)<sup>19</sup>. At first sight this focalisation on the sovereignty of the leader, might suggest that the regime of the Maï-Maï was a throwback to a pre-colonial African form of rule in which the chief enjoys unlimited rights over his subjects. But on closer scrutiny this is far from being the case. Padiri<sup>20</sup> is considered to be sovereign because he is *imbued with the spirit of nationalism*. “He had nationalism inside of him so he deserved to become the leader”<sup>21</sup>. If Padiri is today the leader it is because it is “the course of the people and the course of the people is the course of God”.<sup>22</sup> For the Maï-Maï it is not Padiri himself who is the sovereign, but the nation. Padiri has been chosen by God because of his ethical superiority as manifested in his commitment to the universal principle of the nation. Padiri is a symbol of the uncontaminated native, “an enlightened son of the country” (Nationalistes Résistantes Maï-Maï Haut-commandement 25 May 2003). There is an unmistakable symbolic parallel between Padiri and the Judeo-Christian figure of the shepherd-ruler who watches over his flock (the Congolese). However, it is God, and only God, who is the true shepherd; Padiri is seen merely as the medium of his intentions, he is endowed with a mission. It is God who has given, or promised, his flock a land (the Congo). Padiri, as God’s emissary, gathers the dispersed individuals and leads them to the Promised Land.

16 Mouvement des Maï-Maï Congolais pour la Révolution à l’Africaine. “Comprendre le MCRA/Maï-Maï”. Kinshasa. 2004. My translation.

17 Ibid. My translation.

18 Ibid. My translation.

19 See also Morvan 2005.

20 Padiri means priest in Swahili, but my interlocutors claimed that he had been called by that name since he was a young boy. It was not because he was chosen by God.

21 Interview, Maï-Maï Assistant Territorial Administrator, May 2005.

22 Interview, Maï-Maï Officer, May 2005.

In the mythico-nationalist practices of the Maï-Maï, the objective of power is not to perpetuate the rule of the bloodline of the chief, but rather to ensure that the destiny of the people is fulfilled, as exemplified in the following quotes:

In 1998 Padiri Bulenda emerged as the leader of the Maï-Maï. He hadn't followed any military education [...] he was called General of God because he was granted this grade without even knowing the capital of our country, but today he is a major general because of the combat he has waged for the country – it's one of God's miracles. He is also called General of God because he succeeded, at one time, in taking Bukavu without blood being spilled. [...] So he is chosen by God to do things that will amaze humanity.<sup>23</sup>

And:

Padiri is not from the royal family, but he is a hero. [...] If someone is capable of defending our cause, capable of overcoming great obstacles that we ourselves are not capable of overcoming, we consider him our King. He is not, but we consider him as such and we can crown him with leopard fur.<sup>24</sup>

In the discourse of the Maï-Maï, Padiri is presented as the people's who must steer the people out of harm's way; he must protect the sacred life of the autochthones, even in the

midst of war, and so he cannot expose them to death. Nevertheless, the Maï-Maï techniques of government are less concerned with the "art of leading the herd" than with enforcing and observing those natural and divine laws that provide security and facilitates development and, beyond this, leaves the autochthonous population free. His mission consists precisely in fighting for what is considered natural and divine laws, principally the sovereignty of the Congolese nation. The distinction is crucial, for it highlights the fact that it is the universality of the nation and the correlative democratisation of sovereignty, that are the touchstones of the Maï-Maï mythico-nationalist discourse and practice.

"Charisma" accrues to Padiri, firstly, due to the fact that he was seen as the embodiment of the sublime subjectivity: the "nation", and secondly, because his revolutionary ethic represents discontinuity with an intolerable social order (see Vlassenroot 2003).

Irrespective of the fact that the Maï-Maï, and Mobutu before them, frame their programs for the transformation of Congolese society in terms of a *recour à l'authencité*, these projects must be seen as resolutely modern. Where Weber circumscribed the essence of modernity as a relentless process of "rationalisation" that produces "rational-legal" bureaucracies, Foucault studied the specificity of the interrelationships between modes of knowing and modes of being in modernity. In this latter sense modernity cannot be captured by a single term such as "rationalisation". Instead it is an "attitude of mind"; a mode of relating to contemporary reality which "heroizes" the present with a "desperate eagerness to imagine it, to imagine it otherwise than it is, and to transform it not by destroying it but by grasping it in what it is" (Foucault 1984: 41). The acuteness with which the Mobutu regime and the Maï-Maï, standing on the shoulders of Western experts such as Tempels, Bleek and Van Der Kerken,

23 Interview, Maï-Maï Assistant Territorial Administrator, May 2005.

24 Interview, Maï-Maï Medecine Man and Maï-Maï Assistant Territorial Administrator, June 2006.

sought to re-invent Congolese tradition and inaugurate a sweeping revolutionary nationalist political programmes seems to me to be highly modern in the sense Foucault argued for.

sies invented by the colonisers, and reproduce asymmetric power relations. The subjectivities (colonialists, neo-colonialists, Tutsi, etc.) that must be overcome in order to ascend to a full closure of the authentic self, change over time, but their presence is indispensable for the myth to be able to reproduce itself.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Mobutu's claim that his style of rule imitated that of the sovereign traditional African chief must be seen as contemporary myth-making. Historical evidence shows that the political organisation of the societies that inhabited present-day Africa was thoroughly re-invented when they entered into contact with the European colonisers. However, there is little doubt that the "myth" has been symbolically and therefore politically, productive.

While I do not deny that there may be rationalities, moralities and mythologies that pre-date colonial influence still at work in contemporary Africa, it is misleading to make the connection between, for instance, "patrimonialism" and the remnants of an authentic African moral matrix. "Tradition", in present-day Africa, should probably be seen more as a continuously updating and transforming modern myth which is highly productive in terms of producing identities, and hence "charisma" and ontological advocacy. Therefore, far from framing the "essence" of society, the notion of "patrimonialism" provides more ontological substance to the ethical self-exotification of political leaders and their audiences in Africa.

It is on this background that this writer would like to suggest that the mythico-nationalist discourse of the Maï-Maï and the Mobutu regime is a radically modern project of national emancipation. Yet, in spite of the radical revolutionary messages of the ontological advocacy of Mobutu and the Maï-Maï, it is also highly reactionary insofar as the narratives of both invoke exotic and primordialist fanta-

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