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**Culture, Class, and Politics in Late Imperial Congo -
The Lumumba Generation: African Bourgeoisie and
Colonial Distinction in the Belgian Congo By Daniel
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Daniel Tödt, *The Lumumba generation: African bourgeoisie and colonial distinction in the Belgian Congo*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2021.

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The Lumumba Generation tells the story of the emergent African elite in the post-1945 era of modernization and developmental colonialism in Belgian Congo. With great clarity and pedagogic talent, Daniel Tödt analyzes the evolution of the colonial policy and legal system designed for the elite group of educated Congolese, as well as their attempts, claims, and recurring disappointments. This small group was called the “évolués,” a colonial category borrowed from the French empire and meant to designate a more civilized subset of the native population, loyal to the colonial mission.

Tödt renews previous research on the topic in many ways. With a global approach to the African bourgeoisie, his study considers the ambivalent cultural bourgeoisification of the Congolese elite in the infamously anachronistic Belgian Congo. The colonial government denied people access to higher education and political participation for far longer than in British and French territories. It was particularly reluctant to accelerate the formation of a Congolese elite that had the capacity to destabilize the colonial order it was supposed to maintain. The book highlights how the paradoxical elite-making policy produced unintended consequences and “sowed subjugation and reaped rebellion” (p. 352). It also shows how repeated frustration and the enduring of daily humiliations profoundly affected the évolués' attitudes towards and strategies for decolonization.

As equality with Europeans remained a highly contested question until the independence of Congo, heated debates accompanied the creation of special legal statuses for the vernacular elite, mostly male city-dwellers who stood out for their secondary education and their wage-earning. While divergent ideas enliven the debates over the social and political development of the Congolese population in Congo, Belgium, and internationally, the colonial government chose to implement slow-paced reforms and constantly refused to grant the Congolese elite with civil rights. Two different legal status—the *carte du mérite civique* introduced in 1948, and *immatriculation*, a new status extended to the entire applicant's family in 1957—offered few privileges, but no legal assimilation. Tödt's thorough analysis of the burdensome application procedures (with required statements about one's ethics and private life) and the mechanisms of selection reveals the persnickety and foot dragging nature of the Belgian colonial government. At the same time, the study also shows how Belgians pushed the Congolese elite toward a quest of “perfection” and a Catholic bourgeois culture that fit with the image of model colony propagated abroad. As home inspections were carried out to evaluate the civilized lifestyle of candidates to the *carte du mérite civique*, a “cult of the living

room” developed and was maintained by competitions rewarding the finest interiors across the colony and distributing the photographs of the winners in the press (p. 185).

Interestingly, Todt’s study of the evidence generated by selection processes also demonstrates the évolués’ perseverance and will to acquire these statuses, not only by presenting themselves as “embodiments of the “perfected black”” (p. 281), but also by urging their wives to attend household management schools. These institutions headed by European women completed the circuit of “self-optimization” (p. 164) through which the small Congolese elite eventually emerged: starting in mission schools, it continued in évolué associations, in discussions over manners, books and periodicals, especially the *Voix du Congolais*, in which rules of conduct and values of the “perfected black” were discussed.

As Tödt demonstrates, their aspiration for respectability and recognition was an integral part to “évolués’ subtle rebellions” (p. 7). Elites attempted to get out of the colonial waiting room in which they were held. For instance, Tödt shows how the Lumumba generation derived demands and claims from official discourses through the example of the struggle of Antoine-Marie Mobé, the president of the Association des Évolués de Stanleyville (AES) whose exemplarity and challenging views inspired Patrice Lumumba as he entered into the colonial public sphere. Mobé used the *Voix du Congolais*, the main publication in which the évolués expressed their views on colonial policy, to win the support from the General Government in Léopoldville and challenged local European colonial representatives in Stanleyville. Although limited, his success and determination were valued as “courageous” (p. 225) in the *Voix du Congolais*, suggesting that more combative qualities could also define an exemplary évolué.

The analysis of the dramatic acceleration of decolonization in the late 1950s provided in the last chapter of the book reveals the importance of the évolués’ relationships to other African actors and thus opens up avenues for future research. Scattered throughout the book, references to the évolués’ interaction with other actors of the Congolese society--but also competition with West African clerks--offer an interesting entry to look beyond the “privileged dialogue” with Europeans on which the study focuses. Further research on their relation to the “masses,” a loose category for whom the évolués were supposed to be role models, could particularly deepen our understanding of this period of anticolonial politicization. On the one hand, the General Government made the elite partly responsible for the civilizing mission regarding the less educated. On the other, évolués’ privileged status was often criticized as a threat for the cohesion of (African) society. For instance, both European missionaries and the highly educated Congolese clergy for whom the status of *immatriculation* was originally devised, considered that this privilege would alienate them from ordinary folks. As Gustaaf Hulstaert, a Flemish missionary, put it, African clergy had to “remain subject to indigenous law (...) and suffer injustices and harassment along with the ordinary people” (p. 285). More significantly, in the climate of politicization in the late 1950s, the évolués who sought to succeed in local government elections did not use their image of role model to connect to Congolese people: they chose to instrumentalize ethnicity and regionalism instead. Initially a Kongo cultural organization, the ABAKO (Association des BaKongo) became, for instance, a powerful political party supporting federalism and the existence of states based on ethnicity.

Patrice Lumumba and his party, the MNC, who advocated for a unified Congo were a major exception. In the capital where Lumumba was appointed a sales manager for a beer brand at his arrival in 1957, he mainly spread his supra-ethnic, nationalist, and Pan-Africanist message through his connection with popular culture. In that sense, he appeared closer to the younger and more radical generation of educated Congolese who celebrated urban music in defiant

publications such as *Quinze* and *Congo*. During the 1950s, actors of popular culture developed their own anticolonial consciousness in songs, bars, and in recreational, mutual-aid associations that flourished in parallel with évolués' associational activities. They also produced their own figures of success who were at odds with colonial elite-making policy and disqualified as "false évolués," but were elsewhere called "true ambianceurs." In Leopoldville, the most prominent figures of success sometimes created better linking between the "masses" and colonial authorities than the évolués. Maître Taureau, for instance, managed to organize beauty pageants, folkloric performances and Congolese rumba shows frequented by évolués, the "masses" and colonial officials alike. If the role of the ambianceurs has been studied in the scholarship on popular culture,¹ their relationship to the évolués remains little-known. While offering a deep historical understanding about the ways the Congolese elite acquired an intimate knowledge of Belgian colonialism and made use of it, *The Lumumba Generation* thus will also help us to rethink how subtle and multiple rebellions were linked to each other in the last years of the Belgian Congo.

¹ See for instance, Tshikala Kayembe Biaya, « La culture urbaine dans les arts populaires d'Afrique : analyse de l'ambiance zaïroise », *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines*, 1996, vol. 30, n° 3, p. 345-370.