The Mulele Rebellion, Congolese Political Regimes, and the Politics of Forgetting

Abstract

Between 1963 and 1968, Pierre Mulele, previously Minister of National Education in the first post-colonial government of the Democratic Republic of Congo, led a rebellion in Kwilu province against the Congolese government. Strongly opposed to the new form of colonialism expressed in the “Belgo-Congolese dream,” Mulele took up arms to change the order of things. The uprising ended in a heavy defeat for the rebel forces. Every political regime in Congo from the late 1960s up to the present has differently dealt with the memory of this rebellion. Through fragments of stories, this paper looks deeply into this history in order to understand the ways in which the politics of forgetting has been constructed since the late 1960s. During the Mobutu regime, this politics was incredibly violent. The regime distinguished itself by its ability to configure a set of strategies to enforce silence and create a public forgetting about Mulele. In so doing, the regime shifted the focus of discipline and control from the physical (or actual bodies) to the mental, the mind or the imagination. This way of proceeding, which consists of setting up a variety of strategies to control people and force them to forget images of their experiences of the rebellion, was primarily to do violence to these people. It was to impose a regime of suffering on these people and deprive them of their fundamental freedom to remember their own past. The result of this new form of control was that people were doomed to fall back on themselves as fragmented “bodies” and live piecemeal between the corporeal world (the body) and the incorporeal world (the world of memory). But this new form of control also proved to be “partially” a failure, given the fact that memories of Mulele merely became private (or secret) and that the potential for a ghostly avatar that would (re)publicize those memories remained, as evidenced by Kasongo, a self proclaimed Mulele. The advent of Laurent Kabila in 1997, as well as the inversion of the injunction to forget Mulele after he came to power, left Mulele’s victims feeling equally and mentally “colonized” by the political memory-work of the new regime. Theoretically, the paper draws on Ricoeur’s notion of manipulated memory, Derrida’s theory of specters, and Sartre’s conception of sadism.

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