A Continent for the Taking

Howard W. French
To my parents, who taught me to ask,
and to Avouka, William and Henry, who understood
CHAPTER SIX

Falling Apart

Wild rumors had been circulating in Kinshasa for weeks. Mobutu had suffered a heart attack. Mobutu was dying of AIDS. Mobutu had succumbed to a mysterious curse. Mobutu lay in a coma in the south of France. Then, one hot day late in August 1996, a street kid ran through one of the city's largest markets screaming, "Mobutu is dead, Mobutu is dead." Within a few panicked seconds, the huge market had emptied, demonstrating just how raw nerves can be in a city that had experienced repeated bouts of looting. Indeed, a scarce few minutes later, most of the shops in the surrounding neighborhood were shuttered.

Within the fraternity of Africa's longest-serving dictators, it had become a point of pride, a competition almost, to see who could spend the most time outside his country without inviting a serious threat to his power. Since the death of the founding father of Ivory Coast, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, in 1993, Mobutu, who liked to while away his summers on the Riviera, had been the continental champion, hands down.

Kinshasa is a singularly incestuous city of five million people. From the cool heights of Binza, where the rich live on the same baronial plots that the country's Belgian masters once inhabited, to the
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Cratered streets of La Cité, where the heavy rainy seasons leave puddles so deep they are dubbed Lake Mobutu, big news traveled as if by superconductor. What was so unsettling this time was that nobody seemed to know what was going on, and yet everyone could sense that something was badly wrong.

In early September the guessing game was brought to an end by a laconic statement issued by Lausanne University Hospital in Switzerland: Mobutu Sese Seko suffered from prostate cancer and had just been operated on. Later that day, hoping to calm the public, the ailing president granted a brief interview to a local radio station, which was immediately rebroadcast in Zaire. The palpable fatigue in Mobutu's voice, like the noncommittal answers about when he would return home, had the opposite effect, though, and word immediately circulated that the man who had single-handedly run this country since 1965 was in the final stages of a deadly disease.

Barley a month had passed since fifty thousand people had marched through downtown Kinshasa demanding that Mobutu organize elections by May at the latest, as he had only recently pledged, or resign. Now, suddenly, the nation was suffering a case of the chills. Mortality was just not something one associated with Mobutu—most Zairians had grown up with him as their leader and fully expected to die with him as their leader as well.

Feisty and rambunctious in normal times, Kinshasa settled into an awed and wary quiet. Too jaded or simply too poor, most Kinois had long ago given up buying the scores of thin, poorly set newspapers that proliferated in the capital. Instead, they gathered around newsstands where vendors laid out the most popular titles in sprawling displays, allowing people to read at their leisure, often aloud, and with Mobutu dying, the crowds had never been bigger.

The hush even included the city's politicians. As a class, these men had made careers attacking the president during the last, relatively freewheeling decade of his rule. But the capital's politics still ultimately remained Mobutu's game, and he knew well that for most of his critics, the dissenter's soapbox was viewed merely as a stepping-stone to some kind of lucrative appointment. If you could shout loud enough and draw big enough crowds, there was hope that Mobutu might name you prime minister. The lucky few stole as much as they could, first for themselves, then for their villages and finally for their clans, before the president's revolving door would spin once more. The result was a political class that was thoroughly co-opted. The only standout was Étienne Tshisekedi, whose short-lived stints as prime minister had made him a popular hero because, though powerless, he clung stubbornly to democratic principles.

Mobutu ridiculed his critics with his Louis XV-type warnings that after him would come the deluge, and if the prostate scare proved anything, it was that no one had ever seriously contemplated a future without the Marshal at the helm. Like orphaned children, a galaxy of people who had made their careers as professional opponents now trembled at the prospect of Mobutu's disappearance.

Mungul Diaka, a short-lived Mobutu prime minister and governor of Kinshasa, was a fairly typical specimen. A man full of ideas for his country, and like every prominent politician in Zaire, equally full of himself, he spoke to me about the need for federalism and decentralization for hours one evening on the huge, pillared balcony of his princely Kinshasa house. Finally, as I made my way to leave, he turned to me and confided his fears.

"The way Mobutu ran this country, I pray God that he'll have a bit more time; enough anyway for him to organize elections, so that he can be beaten and replaced," he said. "If he were to die now, we have no structures in place to govern this country. The army would try to take over, and it would be a catastrophe for us all."

Kinshasa's politicians might have been sweating, but remarkably, for the man who was supposedly dying, life's routines continued much as before. Mobutu owned a twenty-eight-room mansion in Lausanne, but for his cancer treatment he opted for some spiffy new digs nearby, renting a whole floor at the Beau-Rivage Palace Hotel, on the shore of Lake Geneva, for a cool $16,000 a night. Throughout his treatment, Swiss investigators sought to question Mobutu over the tens of thousands of dollars worth of telephone bills and other accounts left unpaid by the huge presidential entourage in Lausanne. But the Leopard would not be disturbed. During the final nights before his surgery, he was often spotted by reporters in a Beau-Rivage bar, fondling the high-priced prostitutes who paraded before him in casting-call fashion while he downed $3-$50 bottles of Dom Pérignon with hangers-on.

Here again were unmistakable echoes of Leopold II, who was named in a British courtroom in 1885 as a client of a "high-class" house
of prostitution, to which he allegedly paid £800 a month for a steady supply of young women.

The farther away one got from Kinshasa, the less fazed people seemed by the looming uncertainties of an era already being dubbed "l'après-Mobutu." The countryside was so neglected that for years people must already have been feeling that they lived in l'après-Mobutu. So I began making the rounds of the various ministries for the travel authorizations Robert and I would need to go see for ourselves.

After our brief abduction at the tuberculosis asylum, Tony, the timorous, roly-poly man who had been my first driver in Kinshasa, begged out of working with me any longer. He had decided that getting roughed up by agents of SNIP, the National Service for Intelligence and Protection, was above the call of duty, no matter how good the money I paid. In his place, Tony recommended another driver named Pierre, who one morning showed up at the Memling Hotel, where I was eating breakfast in the crowded and dreary buffet-style restaurant.

Old Man Bah, in Liberia, was serenity personified. Pierre, on the other hand, with his permanent look of slight dishevelment, a battered blue Fiat that was forever in need of urgent repairs, and creditors and relatives who constantly pursued him for funds, was the picture of ill ease. For all of his complaints of ulcers and bouts with malaria, though, Pierre, who was crowding fifty and dressed constantly in a uniform of grease-stained jeans and hand-me-down tee shirts, knew his country better than almost anyone I had met. He spoke Zaire's two most commonly used languages, Lingala and Swahili, with equal ease, and after years of working with journalists, he often seemed to know our jobs better than most of us did, with the critical difference that he was unfailingly humble.

I learned more about operating in sticky situations from watching Pierre worm his way through dangerous neighborhoods or into buildings that were officially off limits or into meetings where he had no business being than from anyone else. It was almost impossible to turn him away whether you had a big gun or a big title, and on those rare occasions when he was refused, he always figured out a new angle of attack. When I asked Pierre once how he managed his magical access, he looked genuinely surprised by my question, the answer so obvious, so natural. "Monsieur French, you can go anywhere you want to go as long as you look like you are sure of where you are heading and that you belong there once you arrive," he said, smiling sheepishly.

Our last stop in pursuit of travel authorizations was the Ministry of Information, a huge skyscraper in the center of the city built in Mobutu's heyday, when his regime was still busily creating monuments. The Americans had "given" him the biggest, the Inga Dam, near Kinshasa. This pharaonic project had required the erection of high-tension power lines across 1,100 miles of jungle, all the way to Shaba Province, home to the copper and cobalt mining industries in the far south of the country, and home to secessionist movements ever since the Belgians schemed to break the province—then known as Katanga—off from the rest of the country shortly after independence.

Abundant hydroelectric potential already existed in the south of Zaire, but the rationale for projects like these was never economic—at least it had little to do with Zaire's very real economic needs. What the dam offered, instead, was huge contracts for GE, and for Morrison Knudson, and for Citibank, which would make a handsome profit from the financing—all guaranteed with American tax dollars through the Export-Import Bank. Mobutu and his minions would undoubtedly get giant kickbacks, too. For the Leopard, the biggest selling point of all, however, may have been the idea of using an extravagant power project to lash Shaba to the capital. Secessionists would have to think twice about making a break with Kinshasa knowing that Mobutu had his hand on the power switch. What good, after all, would the world's richest copper deposits and 65 percent of the earth's cobalt be if there was no electricity to drive the heavy machinery needed to extract and refine it?

The skyscraper that housed the Ministry of Information was part of another grandiose scheme, this one largely promoted by France under Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. A vast array of state-of-the-art microwave transmitters was intended to give Zaire the continent's most advanced communications infrastructure. The truth was much sadder. It was nearly impossible to make an ordinary telephone call anywhere in Zaire. "The Domain, with its shoddy grandeur, was a hoax," V. S. Naipaul writes of a ruler very much in the mold of Mobutu in his African masterpiece, *A Bend in the River*. "Neither the president who had called it into being nor the foreigners who had made a fortune building it had faith in what they were creating. But had there been greater faith before?"
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When we pulled up to the ministry's outer gates, a sleepy-looking soldier approached swinging his old, rusted rifle and told us to halt. It was sheer redundancy, given that a chain stretched across the entrance. Pierre reached in front of me to hand his driver's license to the soldier through the passenger's side window and, instead of asking any questions, shouted, "Bajournaliste," identifying us as reporters. His sudden assertiveness took the soldier aback and the chain dropped immediately, allowing us into the sprawling complex.

The rest of the way would be more difficult, judging from the darkness inside the skyscraper. We had to reach the sixteenth floor of the building, but not even a distant hum could be heard from the elevator shaft. Even on the best of days, only one of the building's elevators worked, and since there were no functioning buttons to push, the only way to summon an elevator was by tapping on the metal doors, as Pierre began doing with his keys—to no avail. So we walked up the sixteen flights, passing breathless stragglers on our way up the pitch-black staircase, and receiving news from people on their way down, happily confirming that the people we needed to see were in their offices.

The sixteenth floor had two saving graces: It was never hot, because of the steady breeze that blew through the open windows at this elevation, and it offered majestic views of the city. We paid our fee for the travel papers and waited for them in a large conference room, watched over by a wall-length black-and-white photograph of a much younger Mobutu resplendent in his leopard-skin cap. The portrait was as faded as the regime, and yet like Mobutu himself, it still bore traces of a former grandeur.

After a long wait, Robert and I received our visas and were finally set. In the morning we were planning to head for Mbuji-Mayi, the capital of East Kasai Province and the diamond-mining capital of the entire country. We had chosen Zaire Airlines, one of the country's many makeshift carriers, all of which gamely attempted to make up in hustle for whatever they lacked in safety precautions. Never having been to Mbuji-Mayi before, and having heard many stories about the immediate arrest of "uninvited" foreigners, we decided to travel with one of the _Times's_ Kinshasa fixers, Kamanga Mutond. Pierre had also given us the name of an army colonel who, he said, might help us in case we ran into trouble there.

I had selected Mbuji-Mayi not so much for its diamonds, but because of its own creeping, de facto secession. When the zaire was introduced as the national currency in 1977, it was worth $2. On the day we left for Mbuji-Mayi, $1 was worth 59,000 zaires, and the currency's value was falling at such a clip that at least two new rates were introduced each day on "Wall Street," the congested warren of streets in central Kinshasa where foreign exchange was traded by plump, busty matrons who sat on stools.

Inflation was strangling anyone in Zaire who still lived in the money economy, and the insult was especially acute in East Kasai, whose diamond production made it the equivalent of the country's Fort Knox. When, in 1993, Mobutu's government tried to introduce a new currency whose bills came with a plethora of additional zeros, the exasperation sparked a quiet rebellion in Mbuji-Mayi that all but ended the president's authority in East Kasai. The people of the province were already famously intractable, and simply said no to the new denominations, and since that date they had been using the country's rusty old zaire notes—long invalid anywhere else in the country—as the legal tender.

Mbuji-Mayi's monetary solution was an example of Africa's genius for improvisation. If it could only be invested in institution-building, I thought, the country would be transformed. In the meantime, though, unable to print their own money, the people of Mbuji-Mayi were trading with carefully tied up stacks and bundles of the frayed, rust-colored banknotes, handling them gingerly to slow their disintegration.

The airplane had replaced the riverboat as the main means of commercial transport for these people. This was not because it was cheaper or safer—although it was clearly much faster—but because the country's big riverboat fleets had been decimated by years of corruption and poor management. Our six-hundred-mile flight was filled with hefty market women who wore their hair in fantastic braids that stood up like steel spikes pointing in every direction, and who swathed themselves in bright, printed cotton pagnes, the cloth wrap outfits that constitute the national dress. And while we flew, they drank from the half-gallon bottles of beer served by the flight attendants, preparing themselves for a few days of heavy haggling in some loud and sweaty market.

After a couple of hours in the air, we landed at Mbuji-Mayi's modest airport, where an abandoned old Boeing sat rusting on the apron and a handful of the smaller executive jets favored by the country's dia-
mond elite glittered under a brilliant sun. Following the other passengers, we began walking toward the low-slung terminal to find a spot in the shade from which to observe the unloading of our bags, but the instant we paused a young man beckoned, saying that the police were waiting to speak to us. I waved the man off and tried to look as unconcerned as possible, while keeping my eye on the luggage, which was being towed to the airport building on a wagon attached to a small tractor. This seemed to make the man who was summoning us only more agitated, though, and after a few moments' standoff, I understood why. The SNIP officer in charge was watching the scene from the window of his office, glowing all the while.

Getting arrested had become so familiar that I associated physical sensations with the experience, almost like the onset of symptoms in a recurrent disease. There was always a feeling of heaviness, like carrying a dead weight, a shallowness of breath and a slight elevation of temperature, which in this climate quickly led to sweating. All the while, as you tried to maintain as cool an expression as possible, your mind raced with ideas about how to outfox your captor, how to convince him that keeping you would be more trouble than it could possibly be worth. At the same time, operating on another channel altogether—one totally bereft of self-confidence or optimism—the brain pours over a skin of what-ifs for those situations where nothing works in your favor.

The airport commissar was a bit young for his job, scarcely over thirty. He had a healthy, well-fed look and a face whose rounded contours suggested tractability. My assumptions were all wrong, though. The first thing he did was to separate us from Kamanga, from whom he had immediately demanded an "order of mission," a legacy of colonial times when Africans often required official documents stating their business to move from one part of the country to another. And because of its diamonds, Mbuji-Mayi had always been more exigent. Before independence, Congolese residents of the town required special papers to move from one part of their city to another.

Naively, I had believed that Kamanga, who was born in Kananga, the capital of nearby West Kasai Province, would be able to circulate here with ease. But Mobutu had split the Kasai in two after the region had attempted to secede in the 1960s in sympathy with its native son, Patrice Lumumba. Ensuring they remained apart, the road between the two cities was allowed to crumble and dissolve under the assault of torrential seasonal rains. Old-timers told us stories about the three-hour bus rides they used to take to Kananga to attend soccer matches there, returning home in time for dinner. To reach Kananga nowadays requires at least three days with a robust four-wheel-drive vehicle, and even then the trip by road is possible only in the dry season. It was a perverse measure of Mobutu's success that few of today's young in Mbuji-Mayi had ever even been there. By the 1990s, Mobutu's divide-and-conquer approach had so atomized the country that only true locals trusted one another. And we were quickly confronted with the fact that here in Mbuji-Mayi, Kamanga was nearly as much of an outsider as we were.

The SNIP agent railed at Kamanga for a few minutes before finally telling him to move on. "Your employer must know where you are and what you are doing at all times, and approve of it." We had just landed in a province where the national currency no longer held sway, and where army deserters outnumbered men in uniform, but he seemed unaware of the irony of his words. Next he demanded our passports, and inspected them carefully, rubbing the pages noisily between his fingers, which he licked every few moments for effect. My passport was thick with dozens of supplementary pages, and he let them cascade out, accordion style, and read them one by one, taking his time, and demonstrating his cool by wearing a tracksuit jacket over his clothes while we dripped sweat in his airless little office.

"This is a very delicate time for our country, with the president ill and absent from Zaire," he lectured. "You call yourselves journalists, but people like you should know better than to come to Mbuji-Mayi at a moment like this. This is not just the center of our diamond industry; for Zaire it is a strategic zone."

We were asked to confess that we were spies, or that we were looking for gemstones. We were asked if we had come to fan the flames of separatism that flickered in East Kasai. Then, finally, we were asked what the airport commissar must have been wondering from the start: How much were we willing to pay to recover our passports and be allowed to circulate freely?

In situations like this, from the moment the conversation shifts to money, I usually feel that I have secured the advantage. This is for the simple reason that, as I said earlier, I have almost never agreed to part with any funds, and because the request for a bribe usually exposes the flimsiness of the arrest in the first place. This officer was more tenacious than usual, though, and when we had used up most of the after-
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noon, wasting a big chunk of our first day of what was meant to be a seventy-two-hour stay, I agreed to pay him $10, telling him that this was all I could afford. The tiny size of my offer shocked him, and forcing a smile, he said that we were free to leave the airport, but that we would have to collect our passports the next morning at the regional police commissioner's office.

The name Mbuji-Mayi means "big rock," appropriately enough for a diamond town that churns out huge stones like popcorn, but despite the stencil drawings of diamonds on many of the small storefronts that lined the road through town, the heavy battering that our car took from the rock-embedded road gave us a different appreciation of the name's meaning. For all of the wealth this city had produced for Mobutu, it had received nothing so much in return as one well-paved street. In fact, the road had been going on for at least a century, since Leopold's agents combed the Congo region for elephant tusks, and later for rubber, killing millions of unremembered Africans in the process. Today, the West's latest obsession is columbite-tantalite, or coltan, the $400-a-kilogram ore that drives a civil war in the post-Mobutu Congo (Zaire) that is still festering after two and a half million deaths. But that is getting ahead of the story. Then, as now, what had mattered most in this part of the world was not human lives—particularly not the lives of Africans—but the extraction of something deemed valuable in distant but allmighty markets.

In Leopold's day, frequent military campaigns were mounted to force Kasai villagers to venture deep into the forest to collect sap from rubber trees. Recalcitrant men and those who failed to come up with their quota were lashed with the chicote, a whip usually made of hippopotamus hide. Alternatively, they had their right hands chopped off, frequently resulting in death. But when it was a matter of survival for the laborers themselves, the collection of rubber to feed Belgian industry was literally a life-or-death issue for their families. Heavily armed Belgian agents, often traveling by river, would surprise a village, capturing as many women and children as they could before everyone could flee, and hold them hostage until the husbands and fathers returned to the scene with enough rubber to satisfy Leopold's envos. Just for good measure, chickens, goats and other domestic animals were slaughtered, while the captives were left unfed.

Mbuji-Mayi's routines have been brought up to date somewhat since then. But as we found out when we were stopped by a policeman on motorcycle, even before we could reach our hotel, social control remains just as important now as it was in colonial days. Life has become a tad less brutal, but with almost no alternatives, survival nowadays still impels young men to subject themselves to extraordinarily harsh jobs in the industry that has replaced the rubber collection of an earlier time: the digging or panning for diamonds. For most that means descending into narrow pits, scarcely the width of their shoulders, and scraping out by hand soil to be sifted by others. Sheer heat kills some of the workers. But the biggest worry is the ever-present risk of a pit collapse, which almost always suffocates the digger before he can be pulled out.

East Kasai's plains roll and tumble endlessly under a big Montana sky, so the ubiquitous pits are invisible, except when you stumble upon one. Every now and then, a kid will get out a diamond big enough to put away some money, or to return to his village like the prodigal son. Sometimes it is even enough to make him feel rich. When I met Boaz Muamba-Nzambi, he was one of those diggers. Luck had brought him a fortune in diamonds, and all over town the fortune had won him fame. His success story had begun a few years ago, when he sold his goats for $300 and hired a digging crew. On their very first outing they found a stone worth $17,000. Strikes like these are rare, but by all accounts the thirty-year-old entrepreneur continued to have uncanny luck, and rather than squandering his earnings, he has used them to buy up several plots of land, as well as a shiny new Toyota Land Cruiser. By the time I met him, Muamba-Nzambi was into diversification, opening a drugstore and running his own traders back and forth to Nigeria to buy cheap manufactured goods for sale in Mbuji-Mayi.

"I have friends who have found twelve-thousand-dollar diamonds, and in three weeks they have nothing left," he said. "They simply went crazy, treating hundred-dollar bills as if they were tens, and running around with three or four women at a time."

The lore built up around rags-to-riches stories like these worked as an irresistible lure, bringing moths to the flame. It was free publicity for an industry that in these parts demands only dispensable young lives to keep it going.

Others prefer to prospect in the Mbuji-Mayi River, a deceptively lazy-looking waterway dotted with small islands where crocodiles lurk menacingly in the stagnant pools, regularly claiming human victims.
But the best prospecting, and probably the most dangerous, too, consists of poaching on the sixty-five square miles of the Belgian mining company MIBA's concessions, a huge quantity of land that the company has never managed to exploit fully. Imagine an army of James Bonds in the film 
*Dr. No* sneaking onto a forbidden island, only to be pursued and fired upon by relentless security patrols. That only begins to give an idea of MIBA's problem with the local diamond poachers who wait for the fall of night to creep onto the concessions to fill their rucksacks full of the mounds of earth freshly turned by the company's huge digging machines.

Mbuji-Mayi was built around MIBA's concessions, after an Englishman discovered diamonds in this region in 1918. And from the beginning, MIBA has operated like a state within a state, providing the city with its only electricity, its only drinking water, its only hospital and its best schools. But most of this bounty is restricted to the five thousand or so people who work for the company, and live at the factory's edge, clinging like a baby to its mother's breast. These small luxuries come from shipping off the company's precious product under tight controls, and sending the proceeds of the sale of the gems to far-away masters.

Mobutu may have Africanized the company in the early 1970s, but seeing black faces in the front office did little to change MIBA's economic model. Half of Zaire's diamond production comes from here, but almost nothing comes back to Mbuji-Mayi in the form of revenue. As with ivory and rubber—and, indeed, most of the commodities that Africa has continued to produce for the world since the colonial era—the real profits, the big fortunes, are being made elsewhere: in Antwerp for diamonds, London and Paris for cocoa and coffee, and France, Japan and Singapore for Africa's best timber. In any one of these markets, the money that put the swagger in Boaz Mwamba-Nzambi would be considered nothing more than chump change.

But just as East Kasai tired of Mobutu's currency manipulation, Mbuji-Mayi was growing sick of being a company town built around MIBA. Indeed, the city's educated elite, men and women who had been engineers, doctors and teachers in Lubumbashi, the far southern city that is the capital of Shaba Province, seemed sick of diamonds altogether. Most of them returned here in 1992 when Mobutu orchestrated a murderous pogrom in the copper belt against migrants from this region. Overnight, well over 100,000 people from neighboring Kasai Province were chased out of Zaire's copper belt, and untold thousands were killed in a bout of officially sanctioned ethnic cleansing that presaged the purge of the Banyamulenge, people of Tutsi origin from North Kivu Province, in 1996.

Mobutu had thrived by the very same divide-and-rule strategy that Belgium had used to dominate the country, his tactics growing steadily more violent over time. But the events at Kivu would prove to be one ethnic cleansing too many, because they persuaded post-genocide Rwanda, which was Tutsi-led, to invade Zaire in order to save its Tutsi kinsmen, and ultimately to bring Mobutu down.

Still, for the strivers of East Kasai, known throughout the country as the Jews of Africa, the massacres at Lubumbashi were a perverse blessing. After returning home by the tens of thousands, by foot or on the backs of badly overloaded trucks, they began to pick up the pieces of their shattered lives, little noticed by the outside world. Even if doomed to repeated setbacks, theirs is a vision of an Africa under design and construction by Africans themselves, and ultimately it is efforts like these that hold the key to the continent's resurrection.

Men like Kalala Budimbwa, fifty-one, a former copper mine manager who survived the ethnic cleansing in Lubumbashi, are now taking the measure of their native region's possibilities and plotting ways to develop East Kasai with its own means. "We have kept inflation down and steady here for three years in a country where it is rising through the triple digits," Budimbwa said in the courtyard of the prim residential hotel he built on the edge of town. "We have already built new roads with money raised locally. Our dream now is to build a highway to Luanda [Angola], nine hundred miles from here, and to build a hydroelectric dam to provide us cheap electricity."

The people of Kasai had never asked to belong to a country called Zaire. Indeed, like so many Africans locked into the fanciful creations of faraway mapmakers, this invention of the Europeans a century before had become a source of perpetual alienation and a huge cross to bear. Zaire was falling apart, and it seemed ever more likely that other parts of Africa would follow. But for Budimbwa and other Kasaians of his generation in a hurry to leave something concrete here for the next generation to carry forward, the beginning of the continent's necessary reconfiguration was now.

"Our dreams are the dreams of people everywhere, aren't they?" he said. "We want to be able to turn on the lights and read to our chil-
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dren at night. We want affordable cement so that we can build houses for our families. We want roads so that we can truck our produce for sale in other markets, instead of seeing it spoil. We want to be able to put money in the bank and know that it won’t be stolen or have its value melt away. If we had our own state we could take charge of ourselves. But who can wait for that? Zaire has already lost the means to stop us from moving forward.”

As we prepared to leave Mbuji-Mayi, lining up at the airport early in the morning, the air was still but refreshingly cool. I scanned the dingy little hangar for the SNIP agent who had demanded a bribe, fully expecting more trouble on the way out of town, but he was nowhere in sight.

After we had boarded the Air Zaire plane and were heading toward our seats, he suddenly appeared, dressed in another fancy tracksuit. He was showily accompanying a pretty young woman to her seat.

“I hope your visit went well,” he said to me, with practiced oiliness. “No thanks to you,” I replied, without a smile.

“I hope you don’t bear any hard feelings,” he said, extending his hand.

Ignoring his gesture, I took my seat.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Where Peacocks Roam

For as long as one could remember, Zaire had been the oversized bully: the schoolkid who meddles willfully in the disputes of others, or steals their candy or lunch money on the least whim. Then came the attack, a brutal jolt awakening the country from its prolonged and self-indulgent dream. And in the sudden wakefulness, a nightmare was unfolding.

It all began with an implausible fiction. One of Zaire’s most marginal ethnic groups, the Banyamulenge, had mounted a rebellion, and for Zairians in the west of their country, as for the international press stampeding into the region attracted by the scent of flowing blood and cordite, the question of the hour was, who are the Banyamulenge?

Suddenly, out of nowhere, along a hundred-mile corridor of Zaire’s Great Lakes region, an eastern hinterland a thousand miles removed from the capital, city after city—Uvira, Bukavu and then, finally, the provincial capital, Goma—was falling under a rain of mortar fire marshaled with uncanny precision. When the dust and smoke settled, a newly minted, and yet strangely disciplined, rebel army had materialized. Somehow, in a region of desperately poor countries, they showed up freshly tricked out with shiny new Kalashnikovs and Wellington boots.

In a matter of days the mysterious new rebels had achieved their
A pro-democracy march in Kinshasa led by Etienne Tshisekedi (center), dismissed as prime minister by Mobutu.

Borrowing a page from Mobutu, President Laurent Kabila built a personality cult in Congo before his death in 2001.