Introduction

In the mid-twentieth century, thousands of women moved from diverse communities across central Africa to new towns in an area historically associated with Lamba, Lunda and other societies, some of whom had produced valuable minerals there. These women, many joined by their husbands and families, engaged in a wide range of economic activities including subsistence and commercial farming but also informal trade and labour. Over the next decades – as their number swelled to tens and then hundreds of thousands – they built vibrant communities based on new forms of social, cultural and religious association and identities. They and their families had, however, to contend with repression and attempts at political domination by illegitimate authorities over which they lacked control, severe market fluctuations in the buying power of their customers and the environmental effects of their neighbours’ activities on their health, land and economic opportunities.

This is a history of the Central African Copperbelt that is every bit as representative as one that is far better known. The dominant history of the Copperbelt region, encompassing the mining towns of Haut-Katanga (in today’s Democratic Republic of Congo – DRC) and neighbouring Zambia, is of male migration for wage labour – first temporary and later permanent – to new industrial mines run by Western companies, intimately connected to the colonies that drew their borders, ruled them and enabled the exploitation of their mineral wealth. Male migrants, this history tells us, brought their families to new company towns, where they founded ethnic associations, political parties and trade unions, and where they secured improved living conditions, funded by the revenue generated by expanding production of copper and later cobalt. With national independence came mine nationalisation, but this was followed by economic decline commensurate with falling mineral prices and the late twentieth century saw corrupt privatisation processes and (in the DRC) military conflict that accelerated the collapse of these communities.
The latter history dominates our imagination of the Copperbelt for a number of reasons, some obvious, some less so. The region mattered for global capital and policy-makers insofar as it produced strategic minerals: copper that enabled the global post-World War Two boom and modern warfare, supplying the uranium used on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It came to the attention of company and colonial officials (and their post-colonial successors) when its residents rioted, struck work and organised politically, disrupting the flow of minerals and threatening their control over it. For social scientists, some of whom were funded by and some of whom were critical of these mine companies and states, this version of the Copperbelt provided revealing evidence of social change enabled by new urban contexts, change that needed careful management and specific policy interventions. Later, the Copperbelt provided a cautionary tale of skewed development, unsustainable consumption and over-dependence on a wasting resource. By the 1980s this inspiring hyper-modern space had become a dinosaur, in need of external aid and reform: social scientists now explained the failure of Copperbelt modernity and charted its residents’ efforts to challenge or to manage their decline, as well as their nostalgia for its better times.


Introduction

If these external characterisations were the only reason for the hegemony of this one-sided vision of Copperbelt society and the marginalisation of the historical experiences highlighted in the opening paragraph, then the primary task of this study would be to displace them by a sustained consideration of Copperbelt stories that have not been told, adding to the historical record the ‘hidden’ or ‘invisible’ histories of, among other things, women’s work, informal communities, farming and the despoliation of land by pollution. And this book does do this by extending the social history of the Central African Copperbelt to these and other topics that have not been the sustained focus of scholarly and institutional attention, of what is termed here official or elite ‘knowledge production’.

And yet the dominant history of the Copperbelt, of men and mining, of politics and economics, of boom and bust, modernity and its fall, is also the history that has been narrated and told, in the past and today, by Copperbelt residents both to social scientists and to each other. The mythic modernist narrative identified and eloquently critiqued by James Ferguson two decades ago is one that, despite its evident distortion of the complex, open-ended realities of recent Copperbelt history, underwrites the dominant political, social and cultural discourses of the region. The simplistic, distorting, modernist narrative of a binary transition from rural village life – supposedly traditional, static, superstition, communal and reciprocal – to the modern, materialistic, individualist and Christian town – while now happily rejected by post-modern, postcolonial social science, has underpinned the aspirations of politicians, the demands of protestors and the songs and paintings of Copperbelt musicians and artists and, in an era of sustained decline, still does so today.

This is then the dominant history of the region both because of the distorting and silencing effects of intellectual knowledge production (with its Western gaze, colonial archive, white researchers and male subjects) and because Copperbelt communities have produced their own knowledge that, while differing from the binaries of ‘tradition/modernity’ in subtle and important ways, nonetheless largely


4 Ferguson, Expectations of Modernity.
articulates its own modernist narrative from below. This book will, therefore, in presenting an intertwined history of Copperbelt society and the production of knowledge about that society from within and without, attempt to explain the relationship between the two. It argues that, from the start, popular and elite ideas about the region have been intimately interconnected and mutually constitutive, even if profoundly unequal in their reach and influence. African communities, which provided policy-makers and social scientists with the raw material for their understanding and articulations of historical and social change, had their own diverse ideas about and claims for social advancement that they articulated in forms that resonated with those with power over them and who they sought to influence. The language of urban social change – of civilisation, citizenship, status and development – infused the individual and collective self-expression of Copperbelt communities and informed the ways they explained the relationship between past, present and hoped-for future.

The fact that the Copperbelt is such an intensively studied region is both a reason for this study and the underlying basis of it. Readers are, however, entitled to ask what they can possibly learn about the Central African Copperbelt that they don’t already know. The book’s claim to innovation and originality rests on the following three interlinked approaches.

Historicising the Cross-Border Copperbelt

Despite the many common factors linking – as well as important differences between – the Zambian and Congolese Copperbelt regions, they have, with very few exceptions, been studied separately: their presence in their respective colonies (Northern Rhodesia and Belgian Congo) and nation-states has been taken for granted by a methodological nationalism that assumes their relationship to these states and downplays or ignores their parallel developments and, more importantly, the extent to which this has been a single region, linked by flows of people, minerals, goods and ideas, divided by a (post)colonial border that has then itself acquired a range of meanings and values for its resident communities.5

5 For a characteristically insightful engagement with the cross-Copperbelt region, see Luise White, Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 269–306.
This study aims to both holistically analyse the Copperbelt region and to compare its two component parts, drawing out their similarities and divergences and the way these have been shaped by the interaction of material differences and the way those differences have been imagined and given meaning. These date back to the early (pre-colonial) exploitation of the region’s mineral wealth, when it provided a significant basis for the growth of important Luba and Lunda kingdoms in what is today the DRC. Whereas in Katanga prominent outcrops provided access to significant copper ore, to the south most copper sulphide ores lay deeper underground and could not be mined effectively without industrial technology. This led to a vital difference in the way that copper mining is imagined: whereas in Zambia copper is largely associated with externally imposed industrial-scale mining and migrant labour, in Katanga the historical memory of indigenous pre-colonial mining partly shaped the late-colonial political discourse of its secession and the ethnicisation of Katangese politics.

The early development of Copperbelt industrial mining was, however, deeply interlinked by the overlapping capital formations of three principal mining companies and their parallel prospecting initiatives. The early development of Katangese mines was likewise enabled by the recruitment of labour from Northern Rhodesia’s Northern Province, primarily Bemba and neighbouring populations that would later form the largest part of the labour force of Northern Rhodesia’s own mine industry as it developed from the late 1920s. Labour recruitment, a general problem in a region of sparse population, was addressed (as across southern Africa) by recruitment agencies but – from the early 1920s – in divergent ways. The suppression of the 1919 white workers’ strike in Katanga led the mine company Union Minière du Haut-Katanga (UMHK) and the Belgian state to encourage ‘nationalist’ recruitment: a smaller number of Europeans from Belgium itself and an emphasis on attracting African migrants from Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi. During the 1920s and 1930s UMHK invested in mechanisation and labour stabilisation, skilling its African workers and extending their contracts but also encouraging them to bring

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their families to settle in Katanga’s mining camps. South of the border, in accordance with southern African racial thinking, recruits to the mines of the Anglo-American Corporation (AAC) and Rhodesian Selection Trust (RST) were treated as temporary migrants with no rights in town until the 1940s. While the number of European workers in Katanga was effectively contained, white labour in Northern Rhodesian mines steadily increased in the inter-war period: this divergence resulted partly from the more basic nature of (mostly) open pit mining north of the border, while to the south (mainly) underground mining required greater technical skills. There, the European Mineworkers’ Union (MWU) secured an agreement that barred Africans from jobs currently held by Europeans. By 1945, while UMHK employed 1,100 European mineworkers in the most senior roles, there were in 1956 still c.7,000 whites employed in Northern Rhodesian mines: as a result of a ‘colour bar’, Africans were less able to advance to more senior roles.8

In the mid-twentieth century, rapid social and economic change in sub-Saharan Africa ignited interlinked debates regarding the impact of colonial rule, education, urbanisation and migration on African ideas, identity and associational life.9 Africans developed new ideas and organisations – sometimes under European paternalistic guidance and sometimes expressly against their direction – to defend themselves from violence and exploitation, claim a place within the colonial and capitalist order and challenge (partially or entirely) its legitimacy on moral, legal, cultural and political grounds.10 On the Copperbelt this took

9 It is clearly impossible to provide a satisfactory account here of relevant literature on these vast topics. For the nature of colonialism see A. Adu Boahen, African Perspectives on European Colonialism (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011); Martin Chanock, Law, Customs and Social Order: The Colonial Experience in Malawi and Zambia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and Crawford Young, The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994).
a specific form that reflected its experience of urban migration and focussed on – but was not limited to – wage labour in the mining industry and the communities associated with them. From the 1940s, Bemba political leadership became prominent in Northern Rhodesian mining towns and Bemba-speaking mineworkers would play a leading role in union organisation and in Zambian nationalism in the 1950s. In a similar vein, Kasai Baluba migrants flocked to work in the Katangese mines and were stereotyped, like the Bemba, as culturally receptive to ‘modern’ wage labour by state officials and, in particular, Catholic missionaries, who played a far greater role in shaping UMHK social policy than their mission counterparts in Northern Rhodesia.11

The growing (though unequal) literacy and educational opportunities available to some Copperbelt residents certainly generated an increasingly vibrant intellectual life that can be usefully compared with the ‘public spheres’ of west and east Africa, analysed to such powerful effect by, in particular, Karin Barber, Stephanie Newell and Emma Hunter.12 Mission-educated Africans, like their counterparts elsewhere, used new cultural and political associations to establish a fragile place for


themselves within the late colonial order, reflecting on their changing identity and what it meant to be both African and modern in a context in which the attributes of ‘modernity’ were characterised as inherently Western. By the late 1940s and 1950s a literate Copperbelt public, mission-educated and politically active, was organising in Katanga’s cercles and Northern Rhodesia’s welfare associations (see Chapter 4) and articulating their views about social change in new periodicals, most still run by European publishers or the mine companies themselves, which are discussed in Chapter 5.13

Meanwhile, a steady expansion in the social services provided to mineworkers’ families in the UMHK ‘camps’, including early childcare and housing for larger families, was predicated on the notion that the modern nuclear family would provide the ideal domestic environment for productive and apolitical workers.14 The threat of radicalisation, symbolised in the 1941 mineworkers’ strike, was equally countered by an authoritarian system of surveillance and propaganda. In Northern Rhodesia meanwhile, a similar strike in 1940 was taken as a sign that ‘migrant’ Africans needed urban settlement and modern political associations, leading to post–World War Two British sponsorship of African trade unionism.15

As can be seen, similar historical dynamics and material circumstances were imagined, both by Copperbelt residents and those who ruled them, in both similar and distinctive ways, leading to interventions and ideas that fed back into these societies and further shaped their development. Two broad ideas of Copperbelt society – presented here in a necessarily simplified way and elaborated on further throughout this book – would, as a result, develop on either side of the border. In Haut-Katanga, the early and sustained intervention of

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14 Donatien Dibwe dia Mwembu, *Histoire des Conditions de Vie des Travailleurs de L’Union Minière du Haut-Katanga/Gécamines (1910–1999)* (Lubumbashi: Presses Universitaire de Lubumbashi, 2001). The term ‘camp’ continued to be used long after these areas had become permanent areas of their respective towns and cities, but was ultimately replaced by ‘cité’.

UMHK in shaping this new urban society was to some extent successful: generations of residents of mine cités have internalised and reproduced iterations of the idea that the company, UMHK and its successor Gécamines, was the ‘mother and father’ of their workers and their families. This patrimonial loyalty nonetheless enabled those residents to make specific, limited claims on the company and other actors.\(^{16}\) The suppression of implicitly redistributive political association – indeed, of any meaningful independent organisation outside company and state control – led, as elsewhere in the Belgian Congo, to the dominance of ethnicity as the framework of political aspiration, influencing the ethnic violence of the early 1960s and early 1990s that resulted from effective elite manipulation of these identities. In Northern Rhodesia, in contrast, the provision – by the mid-1950s – of a broadly comparable system of social welfare was perceived to be the result not of company generosity but instead of industrial combination and action by mineworkers and their families. The marginalisation of the indigenous Lamba population, and the relative unimportance of historical memory of pre-colonial mining societies, meant the absence of the building blocks necessary for the construction of a ‘Copperbelt’ ethno-nationalism rooted in autochthonous claims. The continued colour bar, and the white supremacist threat posed by the Central African Federation (CAF) which in 1953 unified Northern Rhodesia with Nyasaland and settler-controlled Southern Rhodesia, accelerated the development of a multi-ethnic African nationalism in which the Copperbelt’s residents and their labour organisations played a central role.\(^{17}\) This self-consciously cosmopolitan materialist identity has been central to Zambian Copperbelt political culture ever since. These very different ideas of Copperbelt society would not, however, have taken the form they did if it had not been for the central role played in their articulation, documentation and crystallisation by those who studied and disseminated knowledge about these places.


Comparative Knowledge Production in the Belgian and Anglophone Academies

In the early colonial period, the ‘fact’ that all Africans lived in ‘tribes’ was a central assumption in much European colonial policy-making, particularly that of Britain and Belgium. The classification and documentation by colonial officials, missionaries and ethnographers of ‘tribal’ cultures, languages, laws and structures across much of the continent constituted a massive exercise in knowledge production, a process that helped fix and give socio-political meaning to identities that were hitherto more contested and subject to continuous historical change. Such identities, despite recognition of their ‘constructed’ nature, continue to be central to political contestation and affiliation in post-independence Africa to the present day. As has been increasingly recognised, a vital role in the construction of these identities was played by African intermediaries – chiefs, their councillors, translators and other middle-men – who for various reasons supplied Europeans with the raw historical and cultural material that enabled them to distinguish one ‘tribe’ from another.

This process of tribal documentation can be usefully compared with the social scientific analysis of late colonial Copperbelt society between the late 1940s and the early 1960s. As already indicated, the Central African Copperbelt has been central to academic analysis of modern urban historical change in Africa. Copper production, driven by global demand and enabled by European imperialism, transformed market relations and brought, social scientists agreed, modern industry to an African interior otherwise isolated from progressive historical change. The African mineworkers recruited to produce that copper likewise provided an ideal type of nascent working-class identity. A new urban society was understood to be developing in its new towns, producing in turn a modern social and political consciousness. Political nationalism and economic nationalisation of strategic mining resources were equally seen as flowing directly or indirectly from mining-led
