

Lumumba's tooth: Belgium's unfinished reckoning with its colonial past

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The remains of Congo's independence leader are forcing the country's colonizer to confront its brutal history.

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The tooth's journey begins in the Belgian Congo in the 1930s. In the Katako-Kombe region, not far from the colony's geographic center, it pushes through the gum and into the mouth of a young, precocious boy.

For the first part of its history, the tooth does what teeth do. It plays its part in eating and speaking — helping to enunciate Catholic prayers, amateur poetry, declarations of love and anger, the daily patter of everyday life. Later, it forms part of a dazzling smile and shapes the syllables of political speeches, oratory that transforms the history of its country. At some point along the way, it gets damaged or decayed and is capped with a glittering golden crown.

Then comes a darker period. The tooth's owner is Patrice Lumumba, the first democratically elected prime minister of Congo, a man many want dead. In 1961, Lumumba is assassinated, his body is buried, disinterred, dismembered and dissolved in acid. The tooth is preserved — brought to Belgium by a Belgian police officer named Gérard Soete as what he later describes as “a type of hunting trophy.”

For nearly 40 years, the tooth is out of public sight, until Soete goes on television to admit his participation in Lumumba's murder and displays it. Years later, it is seized from the house of Soete's daughter and its next — and most likely final — chapter begins.

Today, Lumumba's tooth is the center of attention, as the Belgian government gets ready to hand it over to his family as the independence leader's only known remains. For now, it sits in a “custom-made box” in a safe in the offices of the Belgian federal prosecutor in downtown Brussels, according to Eric Van Duyse, spokesperson for the prosecutor's office.

But on June 20, Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo will formally [hand it over](#) to Lumumba's descendants, in what is planned to be the first step on its journey back to the country of its origin.

For Lumumba's children, the ceremony is an opportunity to finally lay their father — one of the great figures of the African independence movement — to rest.

“For us, as Africans, the mourning started about 60 years ago,” said Roland Lumumba, one of Patrice Lumumba's children. “With the return of a part of him, ... it's his body, we can finish the

mourning and move on. It's a relief for us."

Asked whether he had ever seen the remains of his father, he responded, "not yet."

For Belgian authorities, the handover is part of an ongoing effort to smooth relations with its former colony. The prime minister travels to the Democratic Republic of the Congo with the king and queen of Belgium and other officials next week.

But Lumumba's tooth, and its troubled, terrible history, is also an unpleasant reminder of a history Belgian authorities were reluctant to take responsibility for — and still appear to want to keep at arm's length.

In 1999, the Belgian sociologist Ludo De Witte published a book "The assassination of Lumumba" that spurred a national reckoning, including a parliamentary inquiry into the independence leader's death. Since then, however, progress has been "quite disappointing," De Witte said.

"We need to concretely recognize the responsibility in this affair, to draw practical conclusions on all levels, to give Lumumba a place worthy of his fame, of his importance for the history of Africa," De Witte said.

Belgium's role, he added, should be clearly expressed, "on all levels: political, ideological ... and financial."

Morally responsible

Lumumba's time as head of his newly independent country lasted less than three months.

On June 30, 1960, as part of the ceremony marking the end of Belgian rule, King Baudouin gave an address in Kinshasa praising the benefits of colonialism and wishing for warm relations between Belgium and its former territory.

Lumumba, just installed as prime minister, [responded](#) with a speech denouncing the atrocities committed under Belgian rule. Congo's freedom, he reminded his listeners, had been achieved not through its colonizer's magnanimity but through a fight for which the Congolese spared neither their "force" nor their "blood."

Patrice Lumumba, the first democratically elected prime minister of Congo | Dominique Berretty/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images

Coming at the height of the Cold War, Lumumba's ascendancy sparked fears in the West that he could turn his country toward the Soviet Union, to the extent that the CIA plotted to assassinate him.

His brief, tumultuous tenure was followed by a coup in September and his arrest later that year. He was killed in January 1961 by the authorities of Katanga, a breakaway Congolese state, after being tortured in the presence of Belgian officers.

For decades after Lumumba's murder, Belgium maintained an official silence on the circumstances surrounding his death. But in 2001, as the country began wrestling with its brutal history as a colonizer, a [parliamentary inquiry](#) found the Belgian government was "morally responsible" for Lumumba's assassination.

The inquiry [found](#) "no single document" that proved the Belgian government gave the order to kill Lumumba, but it concluded Belgian officials had previously plotted to kidnap and possibly

assassinate him in the months leading up to his death, and the government did nothing to try to stop his murder when he was transferred to Katangese authorities.

It also found King Baudouin was [informed](#) in a [letter](#) that there were plans to “physically neutralize” Lumumba but did not act on the information.

The parliamentary commission “tried in a way to limit the damages with its conclusions” and shied away from linking Belgium directly to the assassination, De Witte said, “because the diplomatic, ideological and financial consequences would be extremely great.”

In 2002, then Belgian Foreign Affairs Minister Louis Michel expressed “sincere regrets” for Belgium’s role in the murder.

Nadia Nsayi, a political scientist specialized in Congo, said Belgium’s assumption of responsibility had been slow, but it was nonetheless welcome.

“Lumumba has become a symbol of the struggle against colonialism, the struggle for freedom, not only for Congolese but for Africans as a whole,” Nsayi said. “Belgium has recognized moral responsibility. It also includes political responsibility. The crux of the matter is that Belgium did not give the Congolese a fair chance of independence.”

National hero

For many Congolese, Belgium’s attempts at reconciliation fall far short of atoning for the country’s colonial past. Congo’s occupation, first by King Leopold II and then by the Belgian state, is considered one of the more brutal in African history, featuring forced labor, systematic mutilation and the death of up to 10 million people.

And while Belgium has slowly started to try to make amends, its efforts have largely been small and symbolic. Last year, King Philippe — an indirect descendent of King Leopold II — [broke his silence](#) on the country’s colonial past. He expressed his “profound regret” for the “acts of violence and cruelty” committed in Congo under Belgian rule.

And in February, Prime Minister De Croo [agreed to discuss the return](#) of 84,000 artifacts to the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The Belgian government’s treatment of Lumumba’s tooth is in some ways indicative of the slow, halting progress.

Photograph of Lumumba’s tooth | Jelle Vermeersch

It was only in 2016 — after Lumumba’s children filed a complaint against 12 Belgian officials suspected of participating in his murder — that his tooth was recovered from the family of Soete, the police officer who had disposed of his body.

In 2020, during the global Black Lives Matter movement, Lumumba’s daughter Juliana addressed a letter to the king asking him to hand over her father’s remains.

That prompted the prosecutor’s office to notify the family the tooth was at their disposal. But rather than simply being allowed to collect the remains, the family and others in the diaspora campaigned for an official handover ceremony.

“We really wanted to return the [remains] of Lumumba with honor and all the recognitions on behalf

of Belgium,” said Jean-Marie Mosengo, a Congolese artist currently living in Paris who has argued for a ceremony to mark the occasion.

“Lumumba is a part of Congolese heritage to this day,” he said. “Everyone knows him, he is a national hero.”

When the royal couple travels to the Democratic Republic of the Congo it will be their first visit in 10 years. But the fact that the king is keeping his distance from a ceremony considered of high importance by many in Congo and Belgium has some questioning the sincerity of his remorse.

Asked whether the king’s absence was a way to put some distance between the monarchy and the process of restitution, De Witte, the author of the book on Lumumba, said, “Yes, of course.”

“It’s already a big concession from the Belgian establishment that De Croo is going to speak” during the handover, he added.

The king’s trip was separated from the restitution of Lumumba’s remains because the Congo trip is a response to an invitation from the Congolese president, said François Bailly, spokesperson for De Croo, whose team is in touch with the Congolese to organize the tooth’s repatriation.

Bailly said that because the tooth was held by the prosecutor’s office, it was a matter for the government to handle, rather than the king in his role as head of state.

Relations between Brussels and Kinshasa in the restitution process are “positive,” according to the Congolese Embassy in Brussels. “There is no cloud. It’s good ... There is good feedback, a good feeling between the two countries.”

The tooth was originally scheduled to travel to the DRC last year, but its return was delayed because of a spike in COVID cases there.

‘Still pending’

Further complicating matters is the unfinished investigation into Lumumba’s assassination. Prosecutors [have said](#) they are treating the act as a war crime and are investigating whether they can charge the two suspects who are still alive.

“It is a relatively complex investigation,” said Van Duyse. “With time passing by, many witnesses have disappeared, there are not many survivors left. Even among the potentially incriminated persons, there are not many survivors left.”

Soete, the police officer who carried the tooth to Belgium, died in 2000.

“Almost until 2020, justice has not really moved,” De Witte said, pointing out that prosecutors took more than nine years to request access to the relevant documents held by the parliament.

“During this period, they just wanted to wait until all 12 [incriminated] had died, and then they could close the case without any further action,” he added.

Earlier this year, the Belgian parliament rejected the request by prosecutors to access the documents, ruling they were off-limits because the discussion had been held behind closed doors. “I don’t want to hinder the investigation, quite the contrary, but I am the guarantor of compliance with the rules of the assembly,” [said](#) Eliane Tillieux, the president of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives.

Prosecutors say they will ask an arbiter to determine whether they should be able to use the commission's private deliberations.

One of the last photos to show Patrice Lumumba, alive before his murder in 1961 | Horst Faas/Associated Press

Van Duyse, the spokesperson for the prosecutor's office, pointed out that no DNA test has been carried out to prove the tooth was Lumumba's and said that doing one would have destroyed it. During his television appearance, Soete said he had also taken another tooth and a piece of a finger. The whereabouts of those is not publicly known.

Perhaps inevitably, given the man it once belonged to, the tooth is at risk of becoming embroiled in Congolese politics. The country is scheduled to hold a presidential election next year.

"Everyone wakes up on the eve of the elections and puts forward their links with Lumumba's thinking ... It is a classic; it does not surprise anyone in Congo ... It is the game of all parties," said Marie Omba Djunga, a Congolese consultant working on the remains restitution.

One of Lumumba's sons, Guy-Patrice, [opposed](#) the return of the remains last year, accusing the Congolese leadership of seeking to "reap political gains" out of the restitution.

Following the handover ceremony, the tooth is expected to remain a day in Brussels to allow the diaspora to pay their respect at the Congolese Embassy and at Place Lumumba, a square in central Brussels.

After that, it will be taken on a tour of Congo, traveling first to Lumumba's home village, then to Kisangani in the north, where he spent most of his political career. It will then go to Shilatembo, the village where Lumumba was killed, before finally traveling to the capital Kinshasa, where a mausoleum is being erected to hold it.

Then, if all goes according to plan, 62 years after Lumumba led his country into freedom, his tooth will finally be laid to rest.

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P.S.

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