

Ndaywel è Nziem, Isidore (Hrsg.): *Les Années UNAZA (Université Nationale Du Zaïre). Contribution à l'histoire de l'Université Africaine*. Paris: L'Harmattan 2018. ISBN: 978-2-343-12831-3; 978-2-343-13478-9; 2 vol., 271 & 222 p.

**Rezensiert von:** Pedro Monaville, New York University Abu Dhabi

In few countries has university education been such a central point of fixation as in the Democratic Republic of Congo. In 1960, when the Congo collapsed into civil war and chaos days after its independence from Belgium, commentators pointed to the limited development of higher education as the underlying cause that had derailed the transition to nation-stateness. Six decades later, hundreds of universities operate in the country. Yet, most lack funding for research and teaching, while their facilities and buildings are often dilapidated and run-down.

Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem's two-volume *Les années UNAZA* seeks to periodize the Congolese universities' decline. It asks whether the current crisis began with the creation of the National University of Zaire (UNAZA) in 1971 (also the year when the Congo became Zaire) or, instead, with that institution's de facto dismantlement ten years later. *Les années UNAZA* extends two previous edited collections on the history of Congolese universities already published by Ndaywel, one of the Congo's most prominent historians.<sup>1</sup> Most of the volumes' two dozen articles are original recollections written by former students and faculty members of UNAZA. The volumes also include contributions on higher education and the so-called politics of authenticity originally published as journal articles in the early 1970s, as well as a few other documents relevant to the history of UNAZA.

The creation of UNAZA resulted from the nationalization and fusion of all existing institutions of higher education in the country, bringing together under one umbrella the Catholic University of Lovanium in Kinshasa, the Protestant Free University of the Congo in Kisangani, the State University of the Congo in Lubumbashi, and a dozen professional schools around the country. Ten-

sions between President Mobutu and student activists provided the immediate context for this major shake-up. Just days before the creation of the new institution, around three thousands students in Kinshasa and Lubumbashi had just been forcefully conscripted into the army as a collective punishment for their defiance of the president's authority. In the eyes of Mobutu, a national university would increase his regime's capacity to tightly control students and their professors, while allowing to better streamline institutional organization and resource allocation. This translated into a refusal to duplicate any departments across the different sites of UNAZA and into the choice to instead opt for the specialization of each of the campuses around a few disciplines: medicine, economy, law, sciences, and engineering in Kinshasa; history, philology, sociology, political science, anthropology, and geology in Lubumbashi; psychology and education in Kisangani. It was that element of the reform that was repealed in 1981, when each campus became fully autonomous again, paving the way to the gradual disintegration of UNAZA and, ultimately, the complete liberalization of higher education.

Some of the most interesting articles in Ndaywel's edited collection provide close-ups on key moments in the history of UNAZA: the forced enrollment into the army (Nyunda ya Rubango and Obotela Rachidi), a little-known strike in 1979 (Mbomba Nkoy'Iluta), and the „ideological training“ seminary organized by the state for university professors in 1980 (Ndaywel). Contributors also revisit the institutional architecture created by the 1971 reform (Yoka Lye and Lufungula Lewono), everyday life in various campuses of the new national university (Nyunda ya Rubango, Maindo Monga), gender and sexuality (Ngwarsungu Chiwenggo and Kalulambi Pongo), or the relation between academia and politics (Ndaywel, Mabiala Mantuba, and Kaumba Lufunda). As already mentioned, a key question in the two volumes is the establishment of a causal

<sup>1</sup> Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem (ed.), *L'université dans le devenir de l'Afrique. Un demi-siècle de présence au Congo-Zaïre*, Paris 2007; id. (ed.), *Les années Lovanium. La première université francophone d'Afrique subsaharienne*, 2 vol., Paris 2010.

link between the history of UNAZA and the current crisis of university education. While some contributors insist on the deterioration of students' standards of living after 1971, the dominant tonality is a defense of UNAZA. Ndaywel himself argues that the 1970s was a period of a unique cultural and intellectual flourishing in the history of postcolonial Congo. He also presents his decision to include five articles about cultural authenticity initially published by UNAZA faculty members in the early 1970s as a way to illustrate the quality of the intellectual debate at the time. Authenticity was Mobutu's central ideological catchword and the basis for a politics of cultural decolonization that deeply transformed the country. Mobutu's turn towards that thematic served his propaganda and legitimization needs. Yet, as testified by the five articles reproduced by Ndaywel, authenticity also enjoyed traction among intellectuals at the time. One of these articles, authored by Mbulamoko Nzenge Movoambe, a linguist who later occupied important political functions within the Mobutu regime, reads as slightly sycophantic and compares the president to Cicero. However, it is remarkable that the four other pieces do not directly reference Mobutu and that they instead provide original takes on authenticity, which in at least one case (Ngandu Kasahama) even suggests a subdued critique of the regime. In the volumes' concluding article, Prince Kaumba Lufunda echoes elements from the authenticity debate. Kaumba, a former rector of the University of Lubumbashi who recently served as the security advisor to president Joseph Kabila, denounces the detractors of UNAZA as nostalgic of the colonial model of higher education. His article is an unabashed defense of the national university and argues that the 1971 reform successfully changed universities from a force of alienation into a tool of nation building and cohesion.

Despite its multiple angles, *Les années UNAZA* fails to engage with a few important questions. For instance, the university reform's exact genealogy and the circumstances that led to the end of the experiment ten years later remain unelucidated. Similarly, while multiple articles revisit developments in literature, arts and humanities, none evokes the

place of medicine, science and technology at UNAZA. On the other hand, comprehensiveness may not be the collection's aimed goal. Most of its contributions present themselves as strategic attempts at uncovering a „usable past“ in the service of a critique of the present.

In 1978, the Belgian Marxist scholar Benoit Verhaegen published a book on the politics of university education and knowledge production in Congo-Zaire. Verhaegen, who had taught in the country for more than two decades at that point, had been very influential in shaping methods and debates in Congolese-Zairian social sciences, but his book concluded with a pessimistic judgment on the ability of UNAZA to produce socially relevant research. According to Verhaegen, university education was structurally connected to imperialism and the entrenchment of a capitalist class-society. Therefore the only productive venue open to progressive researchers was „the narrow and ascetic path of [...] self-criticism.“<sup>2</sup> Ndaywel's edited collection testifies to the durability of Verhaegen's assessment. In a context in which resources for research are extremely difficult to produce, looking at oneself and looking back at one's past could seem as paths to knowledge production by default. Yet, Congolese academics' penchant for self-reflexivity comes with a genuine purposefulness. *Les années UNAZA* do not directly conjure up the Marxist telos that animated a segment of Congolese social sciences in the 1970s, but the critical spirit is very much akin. The articles in Ndaywel's edited volumes operate as an intellectual history of the present, shedding light both on an important decade in the formation of the Congo's postcolonial elite and on the mood in academic circles today. They will appeal to scholars in Congolese studies and to those interested in the conversation about the decolonization of knowledge and university education that has travelled around the world in recent years.

HistLit 2019-1-087 / Pedro Monaville über Ndaywel è Nziem, Isidore (Hrsg.) : *Les Années UNAZA (Université Nationale Du Zaire). Contribution à l'histoire de l'Université Africaine.*

<sup>2</sup> Benoit Verhaegen, *L'enseignement universitaire au Zaïre. De Lovanium à l'UNAZA*, Paris 1978, p. 193.

Paris 2018, in: H-Soz-Kult 12.02.2019.