



Bodys Isek Kingelez

Questions the work confronts us with

+

Bio and contextual background

TRIGGER WARNING (for contextual background): Mention of violence, torture, and mutilation (no images of these things will be shown) during a description of Congo's colonial history – during King Leopold's rule in the late 19th century.

Questions the work confronts us with



What are these things?

**The artist called them
“extreme maquettes”
(or extreme models).**





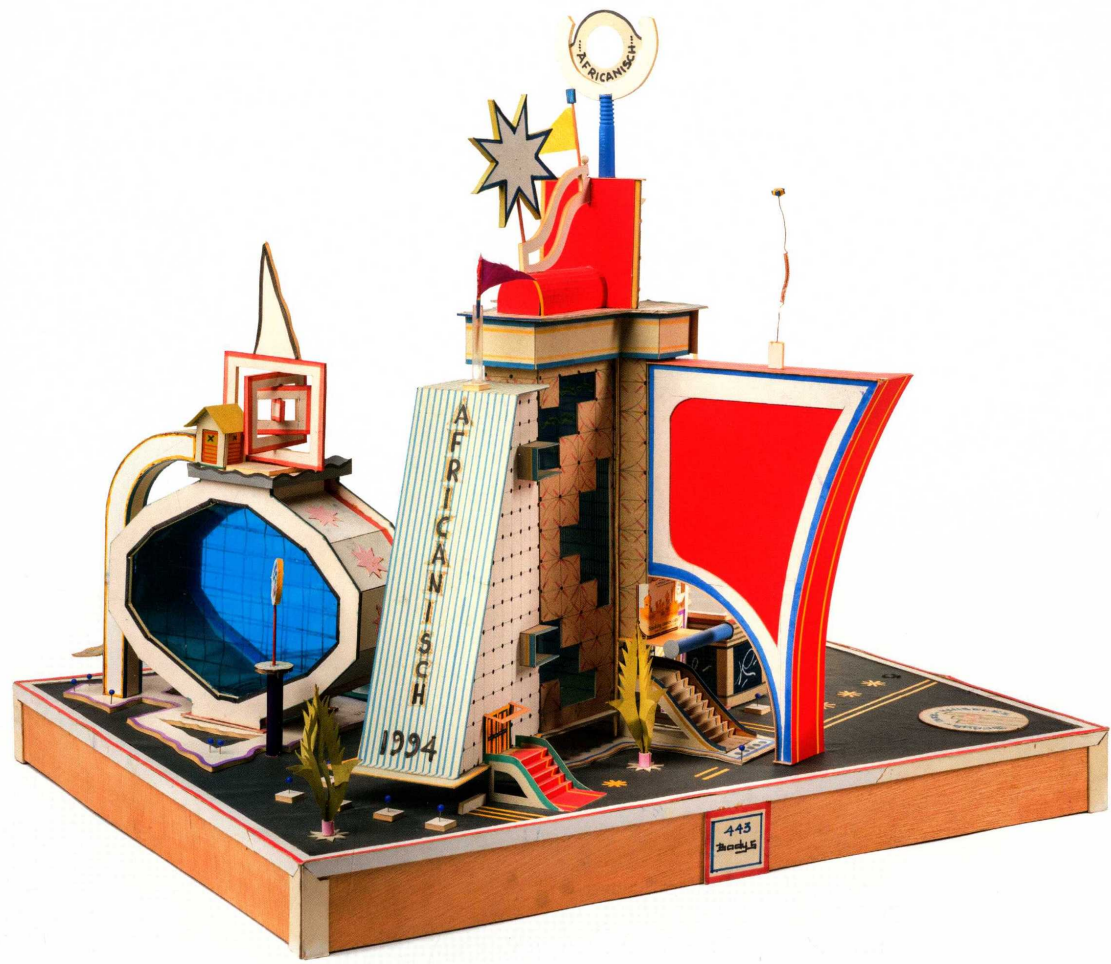
30

Ville de Sète 3009. 2000
31 1/2" x 9' 10 1/8" x 6' 10 11/16"
(80 x 300 x 210 cm)
Collection Musée International des
Arts Modestes (MIAM), Sète, France

122





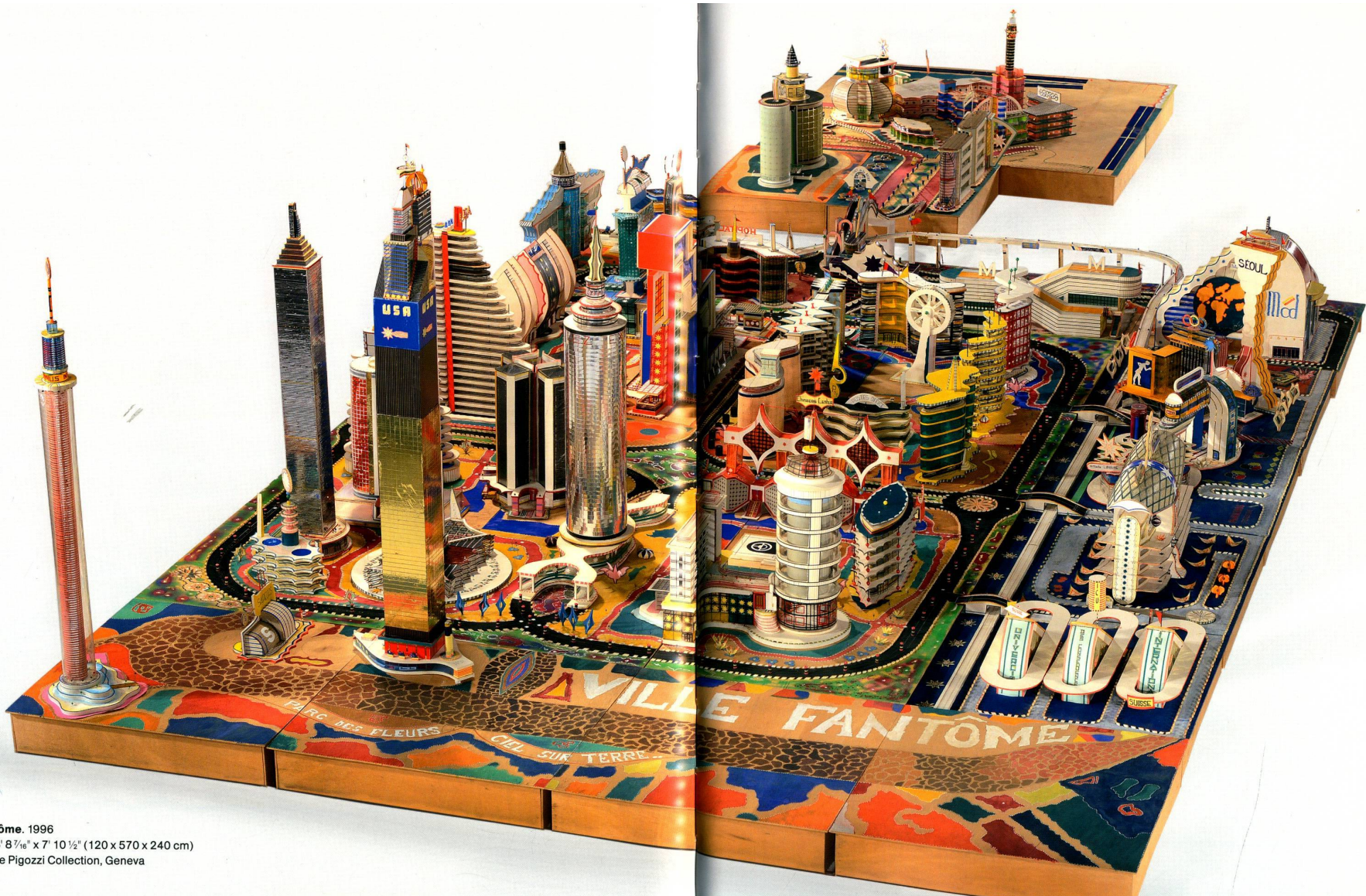




Are they really models?

...in the sense that they were meant to be built?





Ville Fantôme. 1996
47 1/4" x 18" 8 7/16" x 7" 10 1/2" (120 x 570 x 240 cm)
CAAC—The Pigozzi Collection, Geneva



If they weren't meant to be built, then why make the models?





Kingelez said of himself and his work:

“Since time immemorial, no one has had a vision like this.”

He also said:

“Architects and builders worldwide can try to learn from my perceptions so as to help the forthcoming generations. I’m dreaming cities of peace. I’d like to help the Earth above all.”



Kingelez referred to his models as “extreme maquettes” while others call them super hybrids for their mixing of media, or propositions -- ideas not intended for building. As with most utopian designs, one can imagine that if built, especially into whole cities, they would feel tyrannical.

But as objects they are among the most distinctive and ambiguous creations in the histories of sculpture, architectural model-making and the decorative arts. They celebrate, criticize and satirize. Some make political points right up front; his models include a hospital for people suffering from AIDS, of which Kinshasa was an early epicenter; another is dedicated to Palestinians.

--Roberta Smith, “Fantastical Cityscapes of Cardboard and Glue” (review of the 2018 MoMA exhibition, published in The New York Times)

Kingelez said that all he needed to make his work was

“...some scissors, a Gillette razor, and some glue and paper...”

The work is made out of basically little more than these things. Roberta Smith (the art critic) lists some of these things as among his materials: cut paper, cardboard, cigarette packaging, translucent sheets of tinted plastic, and glue.

Kingelez also said of himself and his work:

That a nation “must have models” if it wishes to build.

And that his work would result in “lasting peace, justice, and universal freedom.”

Bio and contextual background



This is where I am going to contest this truly problematic statement that the French curators put on their website for the 1995 exhibition of his work in Paris.

They had the gall to write on the website of the Fondation Cartier:

“Literally atypical, his work has no direct relation to the cultural values of his country, his era, or his context.”

This statement...!!!

Bodys Isek Kingelez

Born: 1948 in Kimbembele-Ihunga, in what was then “Belgian Congo”
Moved to Léopoldville (today, Kinshasa), the capital city, in 1970
Died: 2015

Born/baptised Jean-Baptiste Kingelez to
Maluba Abraham *Kingelez* (father) and
Isek Mabo Bendele (mother);
Bodys was his grandfather’s name...

His surname, or family name, Kingelez, is basically a
Frenchified version of *Kinguele*, the capital city of the
Kakongo region. (Some pronounce the “z,” others don’t.)



Bodys Isek Kingelez

--King Leopold slide 1

So-called “Belgian Congo” (today the Democratic Republic of Congo or, often, “Congo-Kinshasa”) was in the colonial period distinguished from the *other* Congo, which was colonized by the French (today the Republic of Congo or, often, “Congo-Brazzaville”) won its independence from colonial rule on June 30, 1960.

The DRC’s colonial and postcolonial histories have been complicated and brutal.

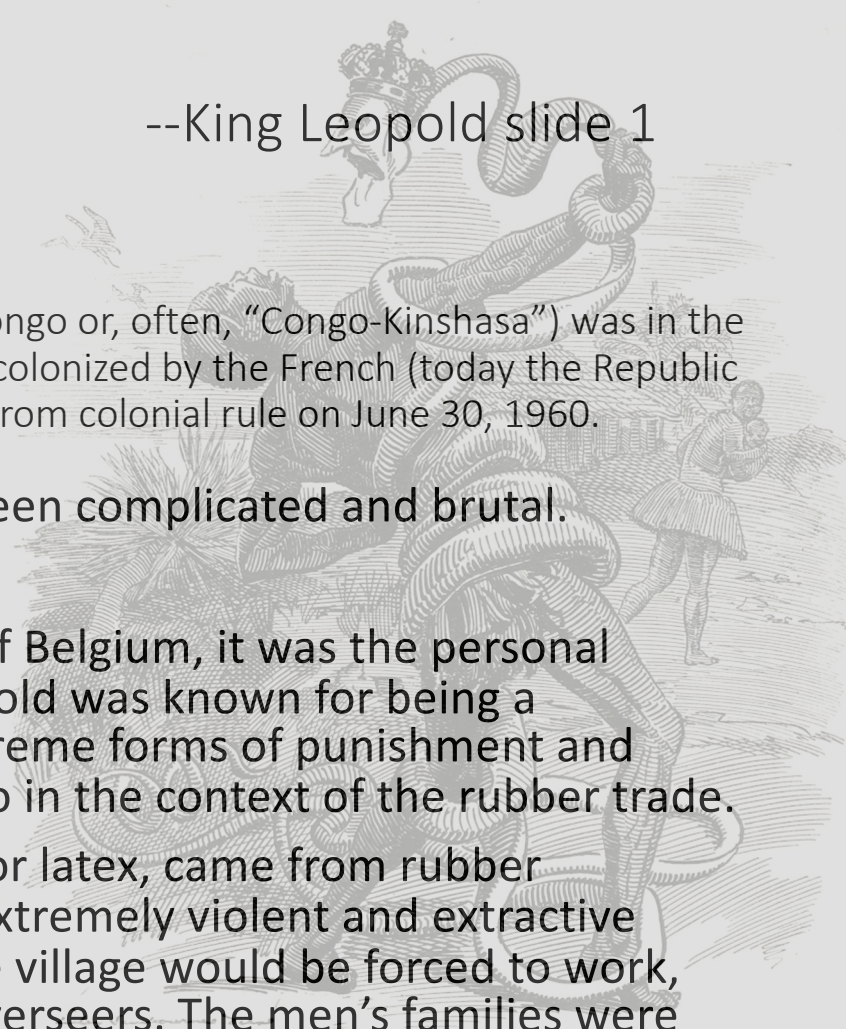
Leopold’s rule...

Before the DRC – which is large – became a colony of Belgium, it was the personal colony of the Belgian emperor, King Leopold II. Leopold was known for being a particularly violent and brutal despot, who used extreme forms of punishment and policing to extract forced labor from people in Congo in the context of the rubber trade.

In the late 19th century, most of the world’s rubber, or latex, came from rubber extraction in Congo. The rubber trade relied on an extremely violent and extractive forced labor model, in which all the men in an entire village would be forced to work, with the men delivering daily or weekly quotas to overseers. The men’s families were held hostage while they worked.

IN THE RUBBER COILS.

SCULPTURE – The Congo “Free” State.



Bodys Isek Kingelez

Leopold's rule...

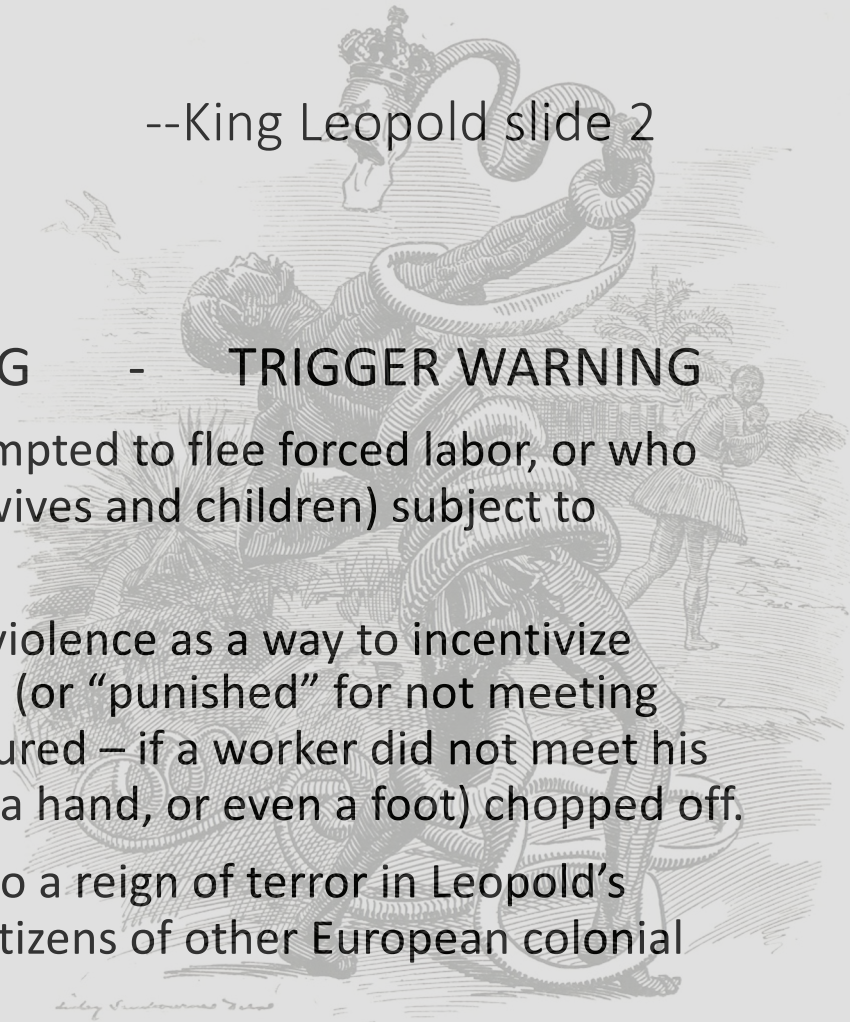
TRIGGER WARNING - TRIGGER WARNING - TRIGGER WARNING

Those who did not deliver their quotas, or who attempted to flee forced labor, or who disobeyed their overseers, saw their families (their wives and children) subject to extreme forms of torture and mutilation.

Leopold encouraged the systematic use of extreme violence as a way to incentivize “productivity”: specifically, workers were sanctioned (or “punished” for not meeting their quotas) by seeing members of their family tortured – if a worker did not meet his quota, a family member would have a limb (an arm, a hand, or even a foot) chopped off.

These practices (which were, again, systematic) led to a reign of terror in Leopold's Congo that was, at the time, criticized even by the citizens of other European colonial powers.

--King Leopold slide 2



IN THE RUBBER COILS.

SCENE—The Congo “Free” State.

Bodys Isek Kingelez

Leopold's rule...

TRIGGER WARNING - TRIGGER WARNING - TRIGGER WARNING

Documentation of these practices (and their victims) by activists produced the first atrocity photography that the world ever saw, and human rights campaigns waged against Leopold and his personal colony gave rise to the notion of “human rights” and human rights discourse, in the 1890s, on a widespread scale.

It is estimated that between 8 and 12 million people died in Congo due to the extreme forms of violence to which the mass of the population was subjected during the years of Leopold's rule.

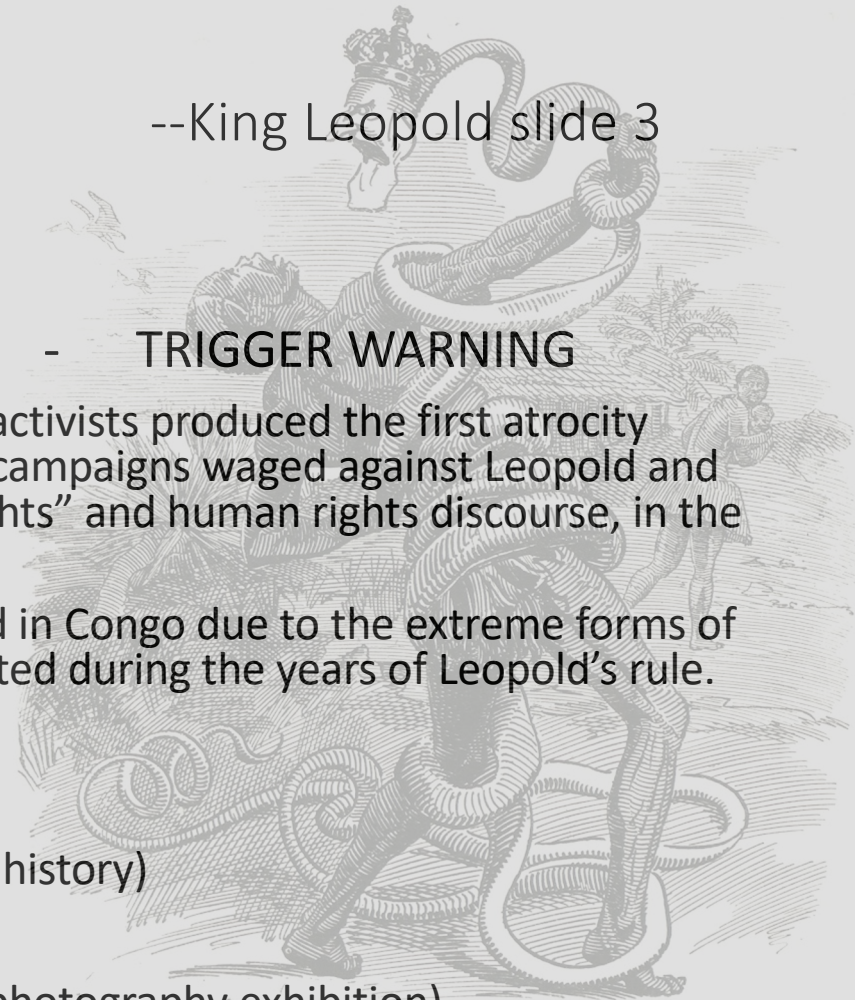
Sources to check out:

Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost* (book telling this history)

Raoul Peck, *Exterminate All the Brutes* (film)

Alice Seeley Harris and Sammy Baloji, *Congo Dialogues* (photography exhibition)

--King Leopold slide 3



IN THE RUBBER COILS.

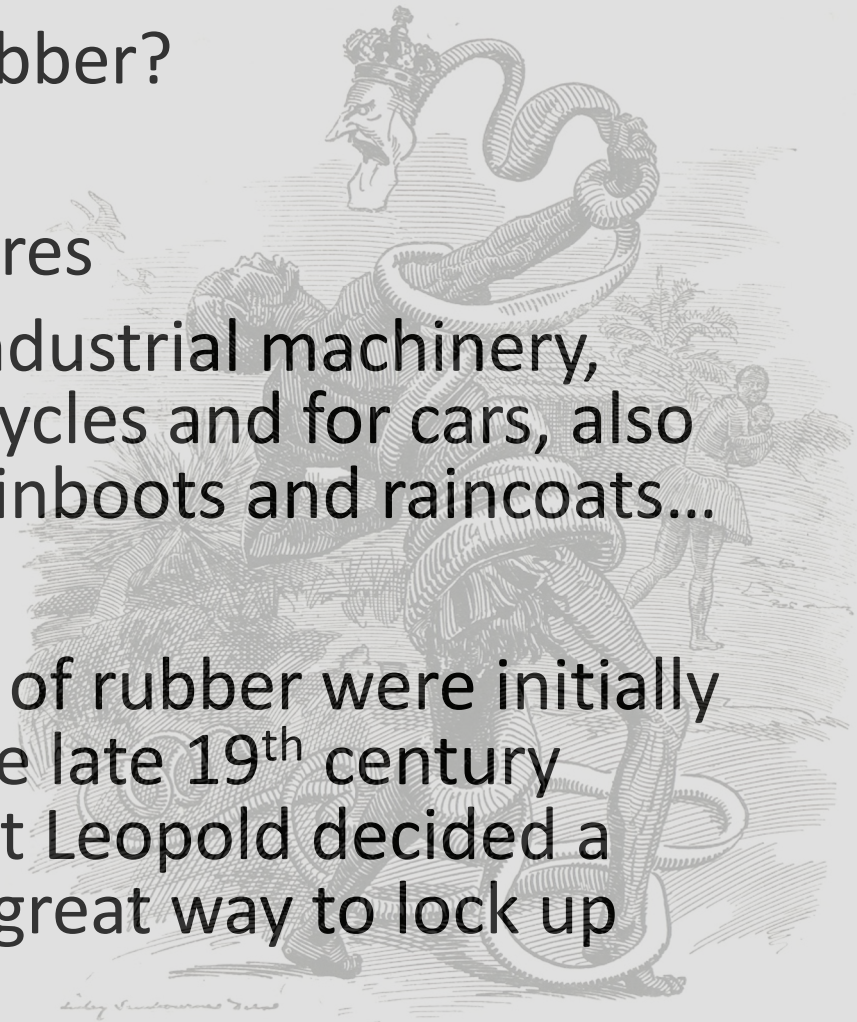
SCENE - The Congo "Free" State.

Why did the world need all this rubber?

Belts, hoses, gaskets, pneumatic tires

Needed for industrialization: for industrial machinery, and tires needed especially for bicycles and for cars, also balloons (hot air balloons), also rainboots and raincoats...

Although South American sources of rubber were initially dominant, particularly Brazil, in the late 19th century demand became so significant that Leopold decided a captive rubber colony would be a great way to lock up the market. Hence Congo.



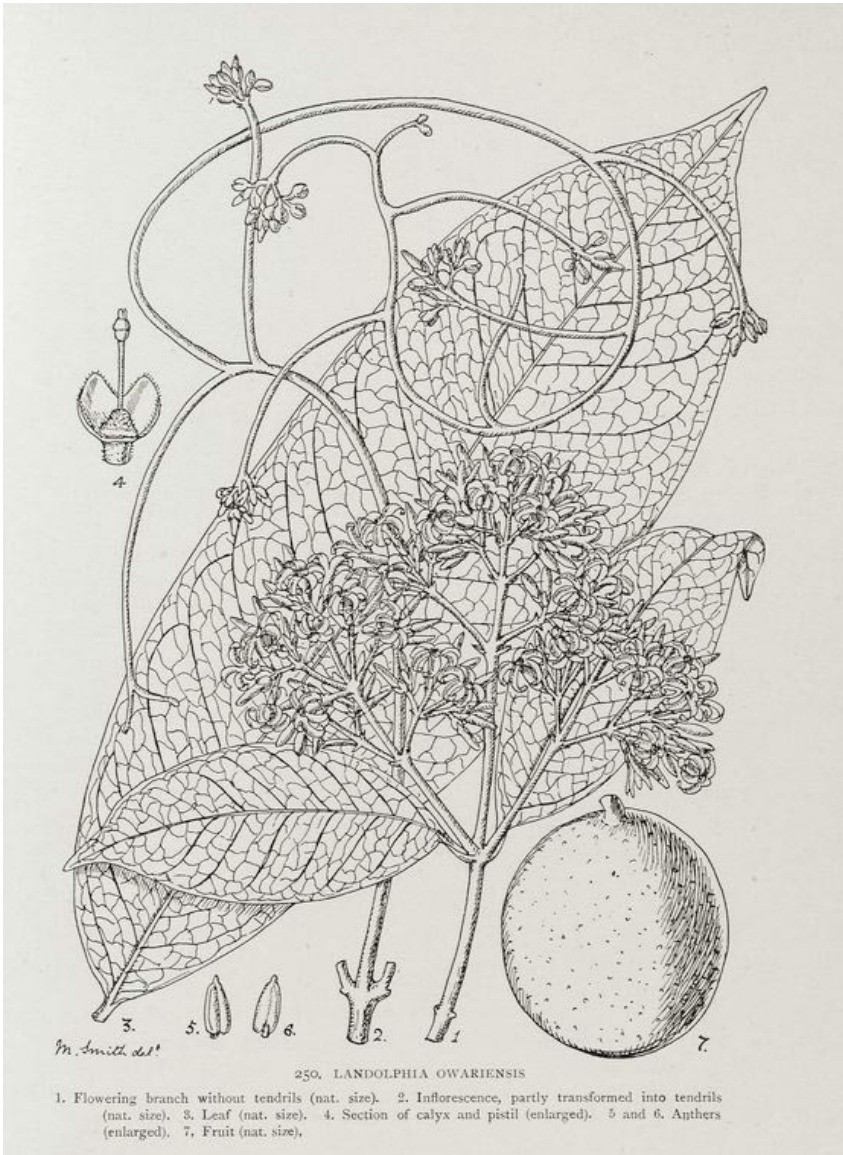
IN THE RUBBER COILS.

SCENE—The Congo "Free" State.



IN THE RUBBER COILS.

SCENE—The Congo "Free" State.

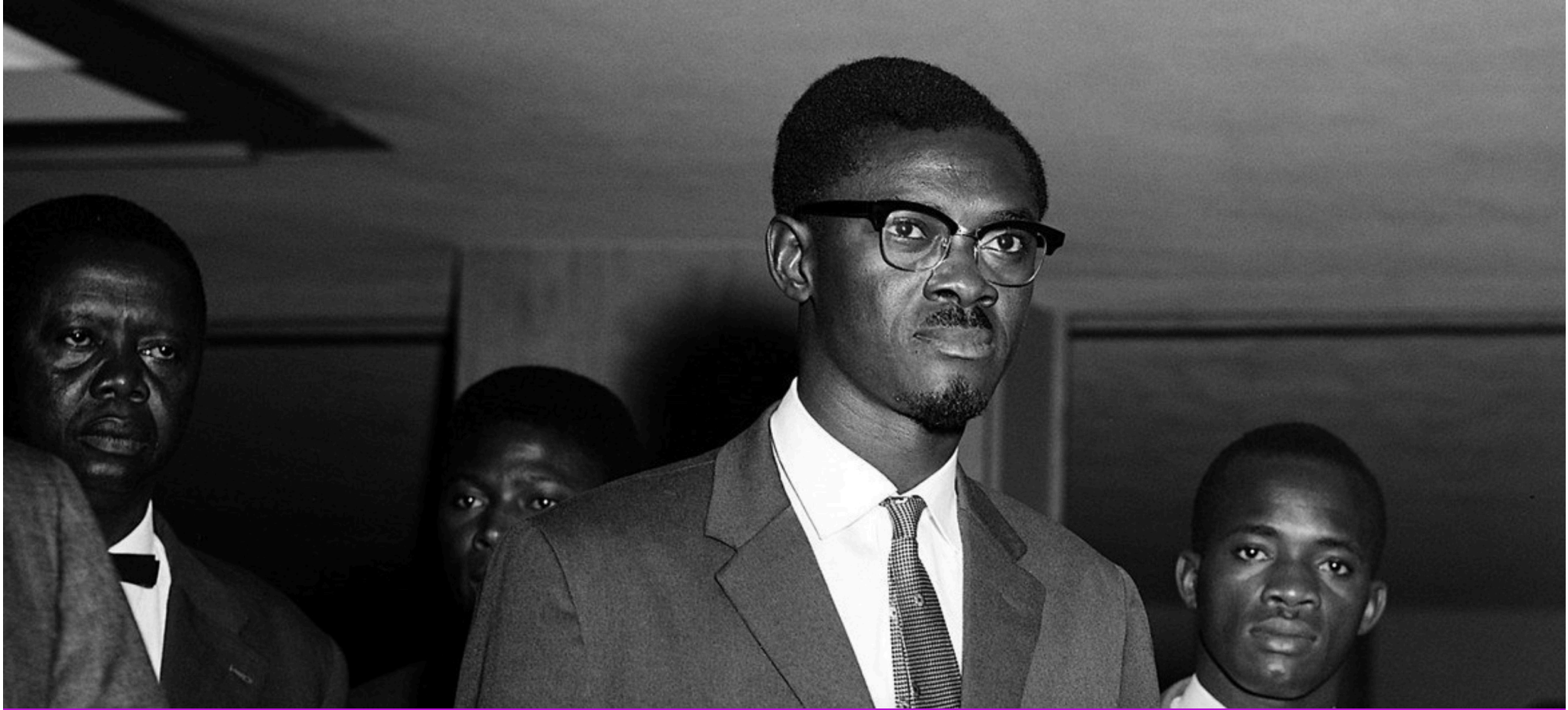


Congo becomes a colony of the state of Belgium instead of Leopold, in 1908.

Congo wins independence from colonial rule on June 30, 1960. Patrice Lumumba was the first democratically-elected prime minister.

He was an intellectual and a hero of anti-colonial movements in Africa and globally.

He was assassinated within months of having been elected. Some say by Mobutu, some say by the CIA.



Patrice Lumumba, first prime minister of the independent Republic of Congo, photographed while visiting the UN in New York in 1960.

Was the postcolonial period a cakewalk?

Not really...

Lumumba, an anti-colonial hero, was promptly assassinated. When Mobutu took power (formally, and definitively, in 1965), he essentially installed an authoritarian form of government (dictatorship).

He pursued a campaign of “authenticité” and reorganized the economy around copper mining.

Mobutu Sese Seko, President of Zaire, came to power in a coup (he was the leader of the armed forces when Lumumba was assassinated in 1961 and later officially took power in 1965).



Mobutu had a nationalist project that, in some respects, resembled the post-colonial dream that people had struggled for, and through his government's policies he sought to embody the post-colonial values of autonomy, a return to African cultural heritage and values, a revival of African culture and cultural memory.

This is part of what was called "*authenticité*."

- In 1966, he changed the name of Leopoldville to Kinshasa (an African name).
- People had to change their names back from European names, if they had them, to names in Bantu languages. Mobutu's own name had previously been Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, but he changed his name to Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu wa Za Banga ("the all-powerful warrior who, because of his endurance and inflexible will to win, will go from conquest to conquest leaving fire in his wake").
- People had to stop wearing so-called European clothes and wear only traditional African clothes.
- In 1971, the former Republic of Congo was renamed Zaire (they renamed also the central river).

But Mobutu was a dictator and a kleptocrat. He skimmed the cream off the top and kept the benefits of the country's economic success for a chosen few. (His friends and family.)

Under Mobutu, there was a hard return to an economy predicated on resource extraction (copper). There was a lot of violent forced displacement of populations, for mining labor. Particular ethnic groups were moved from one region to another because they were considered to be good or bad workers. The entire economy was based on copper mining and, in that respect, had not really changed at all from the colonial model.