

Recaptioning Congo

African Stories and
Colonial Pictures

Afrikaanse woorden
en koloniale beelden

Récits africains
et photographies
coloniales

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In Koli Jean Bofane
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FOMU foto
museum

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introduction

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African Writings and the Colonial Time's Pictures

CAPTION (n.)

kap'shan, n. [L. *captio*(n-), < *capere*, take.]

That part of a legal document which states time, place, etc., of execution or performance; a heading or title, as of chapter or article; description accompanying a picture, photograph, or illustration. -v.t. To write or provide a caption for.

Etymology

late 14c., "a taking, seizure," from Old French *capcion* "arrest, capture, imprisonment," or directly from Latin *captionem* (nominative *capito*) "a catching, seizing, holding, taking," noun of action from past-participle stem of *capere* "to take" (from PIE root *kap- "to grasp").

RECAPTION (n.)

(ri'kæpjən)

The taking back without violence of one's property or a member of one's family or household unlawfully in the possession or custody of another,

1768, "act of taking, reprisal," especially "peaceful extralegal seizure of one's own property wrongfully taken or withheld"; see re- "back, again" + caption (n.).

Recaptioning Congo is the companion book to the exhibition of the same name and brings new narratives—from contemporary short legends to longer creative texts—to selected photographic archives from the country's colonial era. Penned by Congolese contributors and authors, these literary essays, poems, fictions, testimonies, and memories (re-)frame an important number of European and African images made between 1885 to 1960. First born in 2019 as a part of the sixth edition of the Lubumbashi Biennale in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the *Recaptioning Congo* mission was to collect inhabitants' voices about the photographic past of their city and country. That initiative was anchored not only in the recognition that the photographic representation of the Congo—and of Africa generally—has been disproportionately the product of Western gazes since the 19th century, but also in the admission that the postcolonial discourse about the country is still overwhelmingly concentrated outside of the African continent. Both the imperialist discourse sustaining colonial images and the postcolonial reflections circulating about it have predominantly resided outside of the hands of the Congolese. As one initiative among many others seeking to inflect that historical imbalance, the year leading up to the 2019 exhibition in Lubumbashi was devoted to presenting group of colonial propaganda images to city locals of different generations and backgrounds, calling for *their* memories and reactions.¹ That repatriation—or "recaption"—of photography writing to the 21st-century national space of the Congo and its population allowed new "captions" to emerge, and to bring them to bear upon colonial-era pictures of which meanings had been long fixed and filed. Pairing colonial administration's imagery with African photographers'

vernacular images, a series of diptychs then visually unfolded what the renowned African American scholar and civil right activist W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963) called “double consciousness,”² the split sense of self that Black people have historically experienced in racist and colonized societies, divided between their own intimate self-image and self-regard, and the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others”³ and, in this case, of being overrepresented through the camera of others. A convinced proponent of the power of photography to reclaim African Americans’ debased representation in his time, Du Bois is famous for having curated a highly influential exhibition of portraits shown at the 1900 Paris Exposition that finds a tribute in the present book.

The hues of *Recapturing Congo*’s cover and chapters are directly inspired by Du Bois’s groundbreaking uses of primary colors in the sociological data’s graphs created to support the photographs of his “Exposition des Nègres d’Amérique.” With their minimalist and modernist shapes and lines, the maps, charts, and diagrams accompanied the portraits of African Americans as evidence of their “progress”^(fig.1). The adaptation of Du Bois’s work is a bow to his pioneering Black photographic self-fashioning and also to his Pan-African ambitions. A participant in the Second Pan African Congress of Brussels in 1921, Du Bois was a revered and inspirational figure for the Congolese intellectual Paul Panda Farnana (1888–1930)^(fig.2). Both were coorganizers of the Congress and proudly posed for the event’s posterity^(fig.3–4). Honoring and making visible these relations between African and Black American traditions in the past is yet another way of subtling anew the history of photography in colonial Congo. However, here colors are not tools for the visualization of sociological data but rather frames for 21st-century Congolese imaginaries about photography.

Taking its origins in that DRC-based initiative restituted at the end of these pages, the present book project picks up and expands, on that first iteration by extending the writing of captions to fiction and memoirists, essayists, and artists of Congolese citizenship and descent. By inviting authors to engage creatively rather than strictly scholarly with images, the idea is to present literary texts that propose renewed and augmented captions for European and African-made pictures of the colonial era, but to do so by pushing the limits of the word as that which “seizes, captures” or even “arrests, imprisons” a picture’s meaning. Rather than attaching definitive significations, as viewers of colonial photography in Africa have become accustomed to, authors Fiston Mwanza Mujila, Suzanne Freitas, In Koli Jean Bofane, Sinzo Aanza, and Annie Lulu explore the multiple and unruly declinations of photographs’ interpretations to offer a compilation of reimagined or underrepresented stories. Rather than cataloguing the exhibition’s images and replicating its organization, the book invites the reader to penetrate other imaginaries born from the encounters of various authors with chosen bodies of photographs, without seeking any sort of exhaustive coverage.

1 The collecting of the new captions was carried out by the curatorial research assistant of the 2019 biennale, Maguy Watunia Mampasi. Holding a degree in Cultural History from the University of Lubumbashi, she works at the University of Likasi (DRC) as Assistant to the Faculty of Letters and as Associate Dean of Research at the Faculty of Geology.

2 W.E.B. Du Bois. *The Souls of Black Folk. With an Introduction and Notes by Farah Jasmine Griffin* (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2003), 9.

3 *Ibid.*

In all of his worldwide celebrated novels, poetry, and plays, Fiston Mwanza Mujila (b.1981, Lubumbashi, DRC) has developed a unique and dazzling voice in Congolese and international literature. A frequent storyteller of the chaos and violence in present-day DRC and of other debris left by colonialism, Mujila's strong performative quality and the oral resonances in his writings are inherited from a form of Congolese traditional poetry in which Mujila excels: the *kasala*. Part of communal ritual practice, the *kasala* celebrates life and is here used in regard to the images of atrocities perpetrated in the Congo Free State (1885–1908). The poem “Kasala for Myself,” with its deep dives into despair immediately followed by moments of insolent joy, is an inaugural call for all audiences to convene within a cathartic and frank space to bear witness to an unspeakable pain.

Suzanne Freitas (b. 1938, Léopoldville, DRC, then Belgian Congo) is the daughter of pioneering Congolese-Angolan photographer Antoine Freitas (1901–1966). Decades after the passing of the latter, she found in the memory of their mutual fondness and admiration a source to pen a self-published memoir of a few pages about her youth and her photographer father. Usually reduced to anonymity or minimal biographies, early practitioners in Africa have seldom been portrayed by family members themselves. A rare document of first-hand knowledge about the life of Freitas, this contribution is a unique glimpse into the family home of that important Léopoldville studio portraitist.

In his inimitable and percussive style, the much-awarded author In Koli Jean Bofane (b. 1954, Mbandaka, DRC, then Belgian Congo) imagines an irreverent dialogue set in a domestic scene of the so-called “*évolués*,” the Europeanized and educated middle class that socially rose in the wake of World War II in the Belgian Congo. A favorite subject of the colonial administration's propaganda—and condescension—Bofane makes the varnish of that *petit bourgeois*' portrait crack under the dramatization of their incisive *palabre*. With the writer's humorous verve, the “*évolué*”s impeccable suits start bursting at the seams, and the perfect pictures staged by the colonial information service (CID then Inforcongo) eventually reveal all the absurdity of Belgian pusillanimous bureaucracy. The critical gaze of the subaltern turned onto the white colonizers disrupts the habitual veneer of docility meticulously posed by the colonial camera.

As much a young literary prodigy as he is a celebrated contemporary visual artist, Sinzo Aanza (b. 1990 in Goma, DRC) explores in both his creative practices what he calls “the radicality of fiction.” Locally known in his hometown of Kinshasa as *le poète de la ville*—the “city poet”—Aanza rhapsodizes about the eternal “swag” of his fellow citizens on full display in their seventy-year-old portraits by the famous photographer Jean Depara (1928–1997). Aanza recognizes in the images of Depara's city—at that time called Léopoldville—how the country's capital never ceases to attract no less capital dreams of fierce self-reinvention and ostentatious beauty, a quality that he sees as being particularly the prerogative of the *kinois*. Used to dispensing his literary gems to accompany his own pictures of Kinshasa on social media, what the @poete.de.la.ville in fact makes clear is that the city and its inhab-

itants can never be contained or seized in any one caption. Rather, it is the French word *légende*—the almost antonymic translation of the etymology of “caption”—that can only pay justice to the *fabulous*, excessive, popular yet haughty fiction that Kinshasa constantly creates for itself. Under Aanza’s pen, Depara’s Léopoldville is as legendary as is its heiress, Kinshasa.

A Congolese-Romanian writer of French expression, the literary sensation Annie Lulu (b. 1987, Iasi, Romania) continues here her delicate reflection on *métissage*. For long a painful blind spot of Belgian colonial segregation, the existence of the then so-called *mulâtres* has an elusive and unresolved presence in the photographic archive. Against that erasure, Lulu presents a text in poetic prose which literally embodies the mixedness of her subject in an ambitious writing technique that she calls “L’écriture du tissage” (writing as weaving). In a close visual analysis of a couple of old images revealing mixed-race children, Lulu breathtakingly weaves poignant correspondences between minerals and the protagonists of her story. Eschewing all the stultifying binaries on the subject, Lulu beautifully evokes the *metis* as “jaspés,” after stones for which “no color is impossible, what makes its identification difficult.”

For all the long-cherished myth about photography’s products being unmediated and transparent records of the real, they have been almost constantly accompanied by explanatory written words. In colonial Africa, where pictures were usually intended for distant viewers, a few words jotted or calligraphed on the back of a print or in an album, postcards’ subject descriptions, stamps, and epistolary notes, the long or short articles framing pictures of illustrated magazines, the vignettes and documents typewritten by bureaucrats of imperial administrations and more, have shaped the meaning of the colonial photographic archives since the beginning. These constantly reproduced “original captions,” by virtue of being first, close to the photographic event, make them look “superior” and legitimate, because primary. They continue to function similarly to the click of the imperial camera’s shutter, acting “like a verdict—a very limited portion of information is captured, framed, and made appropriable by those who become its right holders.”⁴ Returning the right to write and see Congo’s photographic past through a multiplicity of African voices and lenses has been at the heart of this project,

4 Ariella Aïsha Azoulay. *Potential History. Unlearning Imperialism*. (London and New York: Verso, 2019), XV-XVI.

Editor's note

Historical captions have been kept intact to mark the contrast with the authors' new perspectives. Racist descriptions have been barred to put in evidence their irrelevance.

Noot van de redacteur

In dit boek is ervoor gekozen historische bijschriften te behouden als contrast met de nieuwe perspectieven van de auteurs. Racistische beschrijvingen zijn doorgekruid om hun irrelevantie aan te tonen.

Note de l'éditeur

Les légendes historiques ont été conservées intactes pour marquer le contraste avec les nouvelles perspectives des auteurs. Les descriptions racistes ont été barrées pour mettre en évidence leur non-pertinence.

^{fig.1} Atlanta University & Du Bois, W. E. B., *A series of statistical charts illustrating the condition of the descendants of former African slaves now in residence in the United States of America. Conjugal condition of American Negroes according to age periods.* Paris France, 1900. Library of Congress, 2014645358.

Atlanta University & W.E.B. Du Bois, *Een reeks statistische tabellen die de toestand illustreren van de afstammelingen van voormalige Afrikaanse slaven die nu in de Verenigde Staten van Amerika wonen. Echtelijke staat van Amerikaanse negers volgens leeftijd.* Parijs, Frankrijk, 1900. Library of Congress, 2014645358

Atlanta University & Du Bois, W. E. B., *Une série de cartes et diagrammes statistiques montrant la condition présente des descendants des anciens esclaves africains actuellement établis dans les États-Unis d'Amérique.* Paris, France, 1900. Library of Congress, 2014645358

Conjugal condition of American Negroes according to age periods.

(Condition conjugale des Nègres Américains au point de vue de l'âge.)

Data by Atlanta University

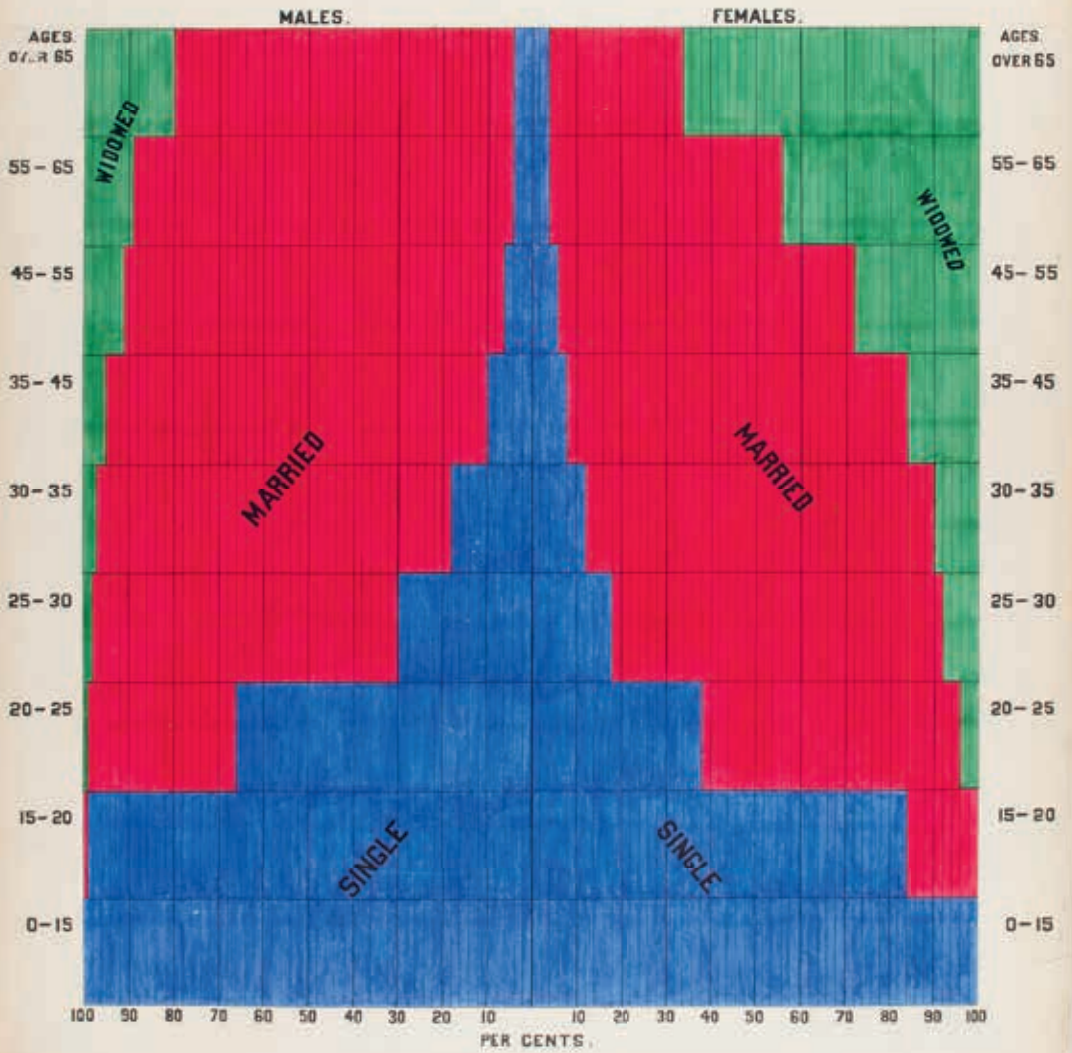


fig.1



fig.2

fig.2 Couprie Benjamin, *Portrait of Farnana and death announcement (portrait 1921)*, 1930. © Collection Mundaneum, Mons.

Benjamin Couprie, *Portret van Farnana en overlijdensbericht (portret 1921)*, 1930 © Collection Mundaneum, Mons.

Couprie Benjamin, *Portrait de Farnana (1921) et avis mortuaire 1930*. © Collection Mundaneum, Mons.

fig.3 Unknown, *Second Pan-African Congress, at the Palais Mondial in Brussels in September 1921, 1921*. © Collection Mundaneum, Mons.

Onbekend, *Tweede Pan-Afrikaans Congres in het Wereldpaleis in Brussel, september 1921, 1921*. © Collection Mundaneum, Mons.

Inconnu, *Deuxième congrès panafricain au Palais mondial à Bruxelles, septembre 1921, 1921* © Collection Mundaneum, Mons.

fig.4 W. E. B. Du Bois Papers. *Pan African Congress. Group portrait of delegates attending the second Pan African Congress in Brussels, Belgium, 1921, 1921*. Robert S. Cox Special Collections and University Archives Research Center, UMass Amherst Libraries.

W.E.B. Du Bois Papers, *Pan-Afrikaans Congres. Groepsportret van afgevaardigden die het tweede Pan-Afrikaans Congres in Brussel bijwonen in 1921, 1921*. Robert S. Cox Special Collections and University Archives Research Center, UMass Amherst Libraries.

W. E. B. Du Bois Papers. *Congrès panafricain. Portrait de groupe des délégués assistant au Deuxième congrès panafricain à Bruxelles, Belgique, 1921, 1921*. Robert S. Cox Special Collections et University Archives Research Center, UMass Amherst Libraries.



fig.3



fig.4

Born in Angola, Jean Depara (1928–1997) arrived in Léopoldville in 1951. His portraits of musicians, bodybuilders and partgoers celebrated those who transgressed the colonial model of the middle-class Christian family.

Jean Depara (1928–1997), werd geboren in Angola en arriveerde in 1951 in Leopoldstad. Zijn fotoportretten van muzikanten, bodybuilders en feestgangers waren een eerbetoon aan personen die het koloniale model van het christelijke middenklassegezin aan hun laars laptten.

Né en Angola, Jean Depara (1928–1997) est arrivé à Léopoldville en 1951. Ses portraits de musiciens, de body-builders et de noctambules célèbrent des personnages qui transgressent le modèle colonial de la famille « classe moyenne » chrétienne.

pg.179–181, 185–191, 195–199

photos by Jean Depara

text by
Sinzo Aanza,
*The Law
of the
Swaggiest*

pg.176–178, 182–184, 192–194

Sinzo Aanza

The Law of the Swaggiest:
We Came into the World
to Be Beautiful,
We Came into the World
to Test the Body!

There is a principle underlying the relationship that the people of Kinshasa, the Kinois, have with the fact of being Kinois: swag! The history of swag in the city is like the history of the city itself. People come to Kinshasa to be the best, the most handsome, the most prosperous, the happiest, the most generous with life. The whole city has always been on the alert for beauty, swag, looks, form, appearance. The whole city knows that, if you fail in Kinshasa, something will be torn from your humanity. So you stay on the alert. Everyone knows the rules. You have to keep yourself informed, you have to be presentable, and you have to arrange the trends so as to get beyond the information because here—as Papa Wemba used to say—it is the avant-garde or nothing. A good Kinois is not only up to date but is also in the future. He anticipates, he goes beyond the trend; his swag is not of this world, it is from Kinshasa. The rest of the world is like bicarbonate compared to the succulence of life—life as we decided it should be in this city: beautiful!

Unlike the other cities in the country—which emerged in the colonial context of the mines, ports, trading posts, and agroforestry estates—Kinshasa is said to have always been a city. That is probably why it is, against all odds, the place where people reach compromises and deals. In Kinshasa, everything ends up finding transcendental ways, because the ancient city was a market, a place where people negotiated the products of their fishing, weaving, hunting, and market-gardening—products to which colonization and catastrophic policies in the postcolonial city would add a very special product: the body. This would involve negotiating with the self, imposing the self as a matter of course in the face of the oppressions imposed by both the colonial agents and the labor carried out for more and more companies, ever more inclined to take advantage of the slave-like colonial context. These are companies that disrespect the humanity of their workers, whose bodies are seen as a machine like any other and whose minds are considered lazy or rebellious, not very bright at any rate. But the worker has not resigned himself. When he is not at work, when he has no work, he parades.

For himself and for others. The Kinois have invented a beautiful expression, “komeka nzoto,”¹ the most beautiful expression in the world, because it sums up the experience of existence and the extent to which an individual manages to rise above life by testing his body. More broadly, it is a way of saying that you are setting out on a path of accomplishment by putting your body to the test of the world.

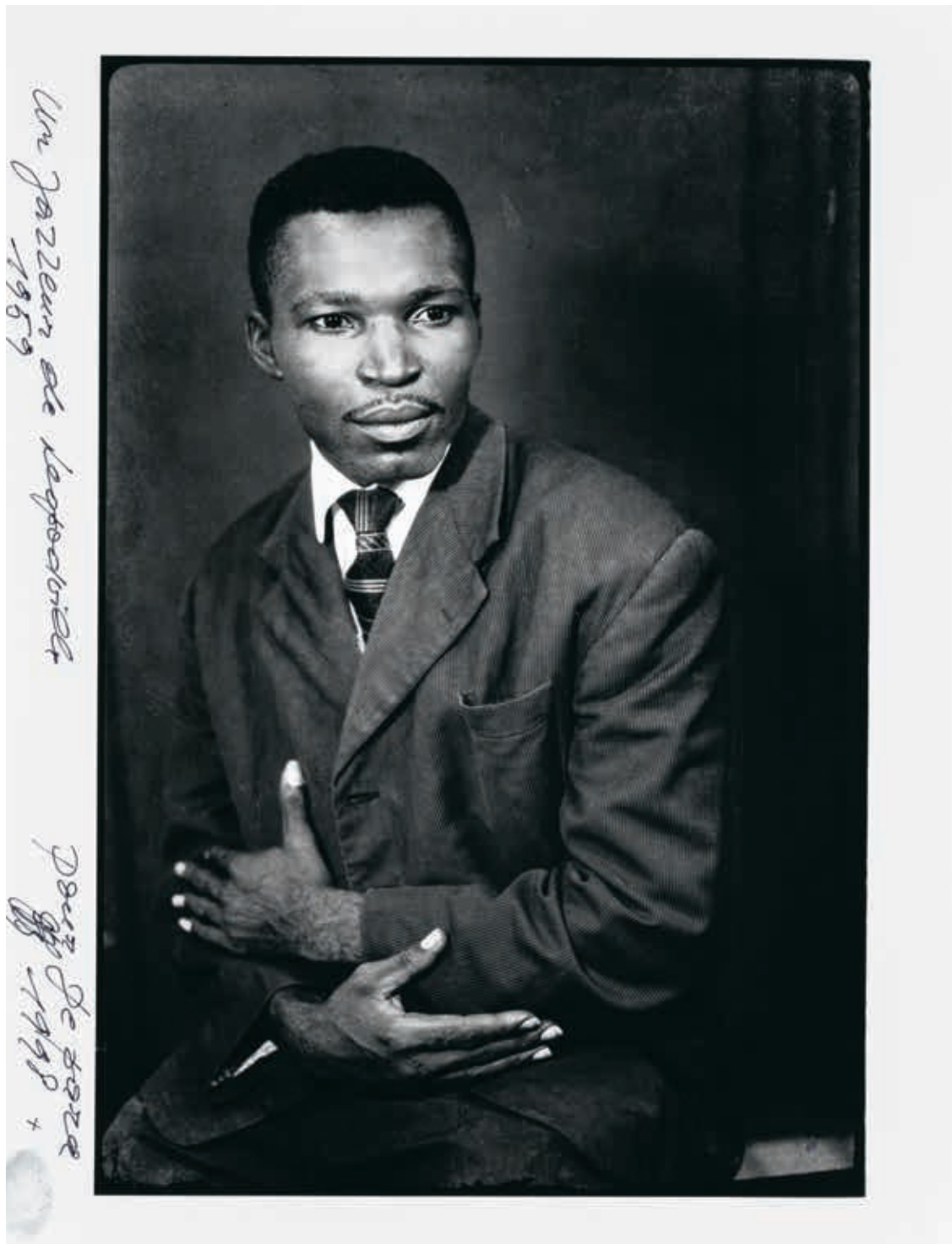
What is striking when one first observes Jean Depara’s photographs is the undeniable fact that the men and women of Kinshasa have always been the same, that life in this city has always been the same, or rather that it has always been approached in the same way. The outdoor photos are the most remarkable, because they always show men and women on the alert. The Kinois appear in full possession of themselves and of life as they have decided it should be lived in the city. For me, the most intriguing people were the cowboys—first of all, because I was not aware of the impact that Westerns had on young people in the late 1950s, but even more because in my eyes this was the first manifestation of the work carried out on the individual’s self-image on the basis of fictional creations. The best known of these manifestations is *sapologie*.² It started in Brazzaville and is rooted in the image that the popular imagination had of the senior executives of the colonial administration and their political and economic power. On its arrival in Kinshasa, however, *la sape* undoubtedly became the greatest expression of the popular celebration of the body, the denied and reified body of the colonized, the subjected body of the citizen peremptorily challenged by Mobutu’s dictatorship, the body ultimately worn out, destroyed, discarded, and forgotten, with the stultifying wearing down of insecurity and the systematic looting of the country. This is where illusions came to an end and therefore where the centrality of all those bodies prejudiced by history and the experience of life in the whole country—of which Kinshasa is the noisy quintessence, the insolent indicator, the solemn measure—is more than ever affirmed.

But, most of all, there are the women of Kinshasa, the Kinois. They too have remained the same. Depara captures their engineering of beauty and of the dance with life in what seems to be a long tradition already, a science that has been renewed many times over, with method, passion, and obstinacy. Depara reveals the Kinois as eternal. Their presence in this world is a matter of course, like beer and like the water of the River Congo. They are beautiful and show their beauty; they have always been beautiful and have always shown their beauty. This has always been, so to speak, the way of reason. Night and day, they own the city. Unlike in many photographs of the time, they do not parade in front of Depara’s lens merely to feel alive and to vividly inscribe the moment in the image that the photographer will have to produce. They are elegant, seductive—as in that photo showing three women sitting on the hood of a car with two men, one of whom has already been knocked out while the other has a rather dumb look on his face, perhaps intimidated by the girls’ confidence, the way they hold themselves, and their triumphant pride. They parade with the

1 Literally, “to try” or “to test the body,” a widely used expression to say that you are going to embark on something which you had been hesitant about or which you were not even considering. The idea is that you are subjecting your body to the unknown.

2 *La sape*, or *société des ambianceurs et personnes élégantes* (the society of ambiance-makers and elegant people), is a cultural and clothing movement that originated from the two Congos. It is akin to dandyism and is expressed through the wearing of luxury brands and the sublimation of the body and beauty.

whole city, with the cars, with modern facilities such as gas stations. They parade with the city's nightlife, its dance clubs. They parade with lovers who are European, young men who are visibly broke, soldiers, native executives. They parade with their girlfriends. But, above all, they parade with their consecrated beauty. So the whole city is like the Kinois. The city parades with something to celebrate, something to show off, something refined. Some are cowboys and carve out a swaggy personality in a fictionality that is borne collectively and, as can be seen from the way they pose, seriously and naturally. Others have worked on their bodies in the gym at La Funa and show them off, while still others—suit-and-tie types, bad boys, cool guys—are already eager to take on the highest political and economic responsibilities, posing with the awareness and charisma required for the responsibilities that await them. Meanwhile, an insidious revolution is seeping furiously through these images: that of the advent of the Sebene, because, along with Franco Luambo Makiadi and OK Jazz, rumba—whose actors appear before Depara's lens—was leaving the salons and chic clubs of Kalina, the city's posh district and business center, to become the swaggy soul of all the people of Kinshasa.



Jean Depara,
A jazzier from Léopoldville, 1959
© Photographie Jean Depara /
Estate Depara, courtesy REVUE NOIRE

Jean Depara,
Een jazzmuzikant uit Leopoldstad, 1959
© Foto Jean Depara / Estate Depara,
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Jean Depara,
Un jazzeur de Léopoldville, 1959
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