

Mining Economy and Military Force: The Legacy of the Katangese Secession in Congolese Politics, 1960 – 1998

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Historically, the structures of governance in Katanga have been profoundly shaped by the mining companies. During the Katangese secession, itself intimately linked to the mining economy, this governance extended to the realm of a military force: the Katangese “gendarmes”. While the relative autonomy of Katanga was gradually limited and brought under the quasi direct control of the central Presidency, the political legacy of the secession was transformed into the memory of the secession. It was counteracted from Kinshasa by the skillful co-optation of political leaders into the presidential patronage system. The resilience of the memory of the secession was underpinned and made possible by its military legacy. The Katangese Gendarmes or “Tigres” represented first a real, then after the Shaba Wars a virtual military threat for the central government. Thanks to the “tigres”, Katanga became a body that could not be integrated into the Mobutist logic of cooptation. Ultimately, the “Tigres” were a decisive element in the overthrow of the Mobutu regime; with their integration into the new regime of Kabila however, they lost their political significance. They were instead superseded by the more diffuse heritage of North Katanga’s Balubakat and the Simba rebellion of the sixties. As a consequence, North Katanga was restored in its defense of unitarism and centralism. It was confronted instead with a relatively new type of politics in South Katanga under Governor Katumbi, without military underpinning, but the product of an economic evolution of South Katangan entrepreneurs in the shadow of the Mobutist state. This “new politics” is rooted in history and has multiple links with the DRC-Zambia border region but takes a leap beyond the “cycle of the sixties” symbolized by its political generation with Mobutu and Laurent Kabila as its political figures opening and closing the cycle, and by the “tigres” as a surprisingly central military component.