

Beni's Moment in Congo: A Collective Ownership of Destiny

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ABSTRACT

A proverb says, 'no news is good news.' This proverb intends to reassure or console a person or a group of persons who might otherwise be very worried when there is a delay in the information they expect. However, this proverb involves the danger of giving evil news free rein in the public square since the dissemination of good news occurs in silent mode. My article counterbalances this tendency by highlighting and bringing to broader international attention a significant moment in Beni's and the Democratic Republic of the Congo's history. My argument will proceed in three steps. First, to perceive and understand what happened on the 2018 elections day in Beni, I consider the political background and the security situation before that long-awaited moment. Next, I give a brief account of what happened that I call here 'Beni's moment.' Last, I reflect on the ethical implications of the mobilization of Beni's population on election day.

Keywords: Beni; Democratic Republic of the Congo; Election; Lumumba values; Collective mobilization

INTRODUCTION

Beni is a city located in the northeast of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). While this name is a homonym of the French concept Beni, which means 'blessed,' the recent experience of this city has been very paradoxical to anything related to godsend, blessing, favor, or good fortune. Among words that capture the scope of the dreadful experience of Beni, I count kidnappings, heinous crimes, assassinations, terror, bloody tragedy, barbarism, insecurity, instability, wanton carnage, chaotic disorder, a valley of tears, an abyss of death and hell.

This indescribably unfortunate experience has become the recurrent ordeal, or as John Kiess put it, 'the daily bread' of Beni's people. However, far from falling into despair and lethargy, Beni's people have been nobly struggling or fighting against all the odds to establish peace and security within their lovely city. It is under these circumstances that one day, namely on December 30, 2018, I saw, with great delight, an event that had the ambition or the potential of contradicting the curse inflicted upon the city of Beni and its population. This population organized legislative and presidential elections against the dispositions of the central government in Kinshasa, the capital city of the DRC.

In truth, this action deeply fascinated me. As a result, I thought that Beni's local elections were not miscellaneous news or an anodyne event of history. Nor were they childish entertainment. I believe that those elections embodied a powerful and revolutionary message. I thus intend to unpack and unfold the weighty and profound significance of this message in this article.

My argument will proceed in three steps. First, to perceive and understand what happened on the 2018 elections day in Beni, I consider the political background and the security situation before that long-awaited moment. Next, I give a brief account of what happened that I call here 'Beni's moment.' Last, I reflect on the ethical implications of the action of Beni's population on election day. My goal at this level is to name the action during Beni's moment. Put another way, I envision giving a name to this action. In what follows, my analysis consists in identifying the origin of the curse that has disfigured the beautiful image and nature of Beni [1-6].

LITERATURE REVIEW

The background of Beni's moment

Like many other areas of the DRC, Beni was off the radar for much of its history. Put differently, the city of Beni was unlike

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the better-known regions of Goma and Bukavu in the Kivus. The blessedness of Beni lies in two assets, namely cultural and environmental. On the one hand, Beni is a modern agglomeration of peoples of different origins and cultures. It is a dynamic and multicultural milieu. Moreover, Beni is a religiously and politically pluralist city. On the other hand, Beni has rich fauna and flora and a great diversity of priceless minerals.

Unfortunately, the morbid political atmosphere is the phenomenon that has put a curse on Beni. Many trustworthy voices have addressed different aspects of this heartbreaking issue. Some of them give an idea of the chronology of Beni's ordeal. Others focus on identifying the political actors behind it. Still, others evaluate the factors and toll of this ordeal. It would take too far afield at this point to rehearse all these voices. A few examples will help to shed light on the contours of the background of Beni's moment in December 2018.

Concerning the chronology of Beni's ordeal, I argue that apart from the local dynamic of its experience of this abysmal hell, which encompasses torments, carnage, cruelty, calamity, horror, infernal cycle of killings, slaughter or 'human butchery,' Beni's experience is inextricably linked to that of the DRC overall. Previously I discussed the phenomenon of war in the DRC.

In that article, I argued that, far from falling into exaggerated and pessimistic simplification, it is possible to divide the history of the DRC into five dark periods. The occupation of the DRC by Belgian King Leopold II (from 1 June 1885 to 15 November 1908) and the Belgian colonization (from 15 November 1908 to 30 June 1960) are sweeping features of the first dark period. After the short lived hopes of independence in 1960, the DRC experienced a series of civil wars from 1961 to 1965. These civil wars constitute the second dark period of the DRC. Its third dark period is summed up in the 22 years dictatorship of Mobutu Sese Seko. The long years of agonizing and deadly war (1996 to 2003 or beyond) characterize the fourth dark period of the DRC. After the honeymoon of the first so-called democratic elections in 2006, the DRC began to sink again the abyss of intense misery under the greedy and tyrannical regime of Joseph Kabila. Seen from this perspective, I contend that the experience of Beni also falls within the orbit of these five dark periods of the history of the DRC. Another source that gives insight into the chronology of Beni's horror is the group studies on them Congo (study group on Congo). As it observes, 'the roots of the violence in the area are deep. The use of violence for political ends goes back at least to the 1990's and it is linked to conflicts between customary chiefs concerning the management of lands, and a political culture that saw the economic elite treat with armed groups to obtain advantages in the sector of commerce and the favors in the cross border extortions.' In other words, political and economic purposes constitute the rationale behind the violence that has imposed constant mourning on Beni. In this context, I also emphasize the role of Uganda and Rwanda in plundering mineral resources in this area during the second Congo war and long after. Moreover, another insight that emerges from this report relates to the continuity and complexity of Beni's ordeal. According to its analysis, the violence that was perpetrated around Beni since October 2014 is

considered as one of the deadliest, but it is also considered as the opaqueness of the recent history of the country. It is proving to be very difficult to discern the culprits, their motives, and the chains of commandment.' This report underscores two illuminating factors. First, it draws attention to the recent history of violence in Beni. Second, it highlights the mysterious complexity of the violence inflicted on Beni. For example, about the actors who perpetrate this violence, the group studies on them Congo states that 'it is highly probable that the violence involves local, regional, and national actors.'

Before unfolding this discussion of the actors of the violence in Beni, my analysis acknowledges that this violence did not begin and end within the time frame considered by the group studies on them Congo, that is, from October 2014 to February 2016. In addition to this critical analysis, the Groupe d'étude sur le Congo also provides a good infographic (worth a thousand words) on the massacres around Beni between October 2014 and December 2015. This infographic gives the dates of the massacres and the number of assassinated people. Furthermore, the analysis of the Office French of Protection often Refugees Apatrides (OFPRA) focuses on the same period that caught the attention of the international community. It thus investigated 'the events from June 2014 up to February 2017 in Eastern DRC. However, the fact that the incumbent president of the DRC (Felix Antoine Tshisekedi Tshilombo) has declared the state of siege in the region of Beni accounts for the continuity of horror in that part of the DRC [7-11].

As regards the perpetrators of violence and repeated wanton massacres in Beni, the Congolese government and the UN stabilization mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) have easily and conventionally singled out the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF). In a similar vein, recognizing the year 2016 as the climax of Beni's horror, the analysis of Mustafa MULOPWE of agency France press pinpoints the ADF as the main perpetrator of this horror. He acknowledges the responsibility of the Congolese army for the casualties during its offensive against the ADF.

Unlike these voices, several accounts show that in addition to the ADF, many other perpetrators are executing their dirty job in Beni. To illustrate, the group studies on them Congo states that 'more than ever, the ADF represent today a tree that hides a forest and behind which other actors attempt to escape their responsibility.' This report points out several categories of perpetrators when it says, 'our preliminary investigation indicates that the responsibility of massacres cannot be attributed solely to the ADF. In addition to military commanders who strictly belong to the ADF, certain members of the DRC's armed forces, former rebels of Rassemblement congolais pour la Democratie-Kisangani/Mouvement de libération (RDC-K/ML) as well as members of community militias is also involved in the attacks against the civil population in Beni [12-16].

Put differently, this account identifies at least four categories of perpetrators that wreak havoc in Beni. It also considers the Congolese army and the United Nations' mission as indirect perpetrators of this havoc given their "amazing ill-considered initiatives and lack of thorough investigation." In other words, the reprehensible slowness of the Congolese army and the

MONUSCO lead people to suspect them as possible actors in the horror in Beni. It is under these circumstances that Godefroid Ka Mana expresses his frustration in terms of a thought-provoking question: 'How is it possible that the cooperation between the FARDC (Forces Armees de la Republique Democratique Du Congo) and the troops of the MONUSCO cannot, thanks to the armament and the new modern strategies of combat, defeat in the field or deter barbarians who are armed with machetes and bludgeons?'

The report of the OFPRA identified two national armies (the Congolese army and the Rwandan defense forces), the MONUSCO, and seventeen armed groups as perpetrators of massacres in Beni and its surrounding areas during the period between June 2014 to February 2017.

There is more. During the outbreak of Ebola in the Eastern part of the DRC in 2018, social science in humanitarian action platform offered its service by providing useful information about the situation in that region. For example, concerning security, Juliet Bedford recognized the presence of many armed groups in the region of Beni. As she observes, 'The ADF (Allied Democratic Forces) operate in the Grand Nord in addition to multiple "Faux ADF" and other armed groups.' This observation helps to persuade that many armed groups carried out their agendas with the 'badge' or 'tag name' of ADF given that the latter has chosen to operate in the silent mode. Those armed groups that use this badge of ADF is what Bedford calls Faux ADF (false or fake ADF). She adds that 'some local associations, political figures, and officers from the national army (Forces Armees de la Republique Democratique Du Congo, FARDC) have covert relationships with armed groups around the area.

Let us return once again to the analysis of Ka Mana. First, he draws attention to the fact that there exist 'inexhaustible explanations of the (Congolese) government for the macabre events and the contradictory analyses of experts at the national level and at the international level.' Without a doubt, these issues do not negate what happened in Beni. Second, Ka Mana observes that different opinions have identified several perpetrators of massacres in Beni. Among these actors, he mentions the ADF, local clans fighting for local leadership, the FARDC, former Congolese president Joseph Kabila trying to secure a third term, and international jihadists. Ka Mana questions these usual views about the perpetrators of havoc in Beni. He then underlines three causal factors of this havoc. He believes that "the basic problem is the global order that governs the politics, the economy, and the culture of peoples of the Great Lakes region." For example, he observes that "the politics of hard or soft authoritarian systems in the Great Lakes region makes possible the causes which people present to explain the situation of Beni." Next, he notes that the distinctive characteristic of the economy of this area is predation and nepotism (tribalism). Lastly, authoritarian regimes and the economy of chaos have established "a traumatic culture and the weight of destructive mentalities." As Ka Mana expresses it, "There exists today a murderous identity that spreads and regenerates itself to the point of becoming the most virulent basis of personal experiences of individuals and communities.

We find in all the circles this dynamic of the murderous spirit." In a word, the never-ending experience of atrocities and massacres has established a culture of violence that conditions human life in Beni. The last observation concerning the actors of horror in Beni revolves around the point of view of the Pole institute. It concludes its analysis with a lachrymose or woeful note about the anonymity of violence in Beni. By all means, this anonymity of the perpetrators does not negate all the horror that Beni has been through. To put it in inescapable terms, the mystery of the perpetrators cannot serve as an excuse to undermine the loss of any human life that has occurred in Beni. Because of its sacredness and uniqueness, human life including residents of Beni is beyond any price. In addition to the chronology and actors of Beni's ordeal, an analysis of some factors helps recognize the relevance of Beni's choice or initiative for voting against the dispositions of the central government. These factors can be fivefold. First, before elections day, following the series of massacres, Beni had visits of all colors and forms. The local population was visited by official delegations including statesmen, religious leaders as well as representatives of civil society and non-governmental organizations. And yet, nothing changed afterward. Secondly, the local population of Beni does not experience peace and security even though its environment is hyper-militarized. The permanent horror in Beni has thus debunked the myth of militarism. Thirdly, Beni's people decided to take control of its well-being because the Congolese government and the international community, especially under the aegis of the United Nations' military force MONUSCO, revealed themselves powerless to protect them. This state of affairs powerfully and cogently explains the demystification of militarism and the powerlessness of the FARDC and the MONUSCO in Beni. Fourthly, as mentioned above, the economy of chaos is the characteristic of the state of affairs in Beni. As Ka Mana observes, when people live in a climate of chronic insecurity, it is difficult to see which is the true cause of what we live and who is its conductor. Those who benefit from the economy of chaos transform it into the dictatorship of terror.' He continues, 'the economy becomes a permanent economy of war, with all that this involves including crimes, carnage, massacres, and permanent destabilization. It does not mean that it is the economic chaos which is the cause of massacres, but that it is largely its catalyst whose furies can set ablaze other sources of insecurity and instability.'

Fifthly and lastly, the logical consequence of all the above factors is a multi-layered trauma. This fact is tantamount to what Ka Mana calls 'the dynamic of the murderous spirit.' As he observes, 'despite multiple conferences, symposiums, panels of reflection, and seances of education, nothing succeeds in breaking the impulses of hatreds and will of annihilating the human. This means that communities and people have undergone traumatism which has completely changed them, mentally contorted them, and radically made them immoral.' Ka Mana's observation may seem overstated, but it painstakingly articulates the depth and breadth of the trauma of Beni's population. In addition, when someone considers this observation at first, he or she may think that this population is a lost case; there is no more hope for Beni's people. But instead,

there is hope. As Martin Luther King said, ‘we know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.’ Seen from the perspective of Beni, the initiative of peace has to come from the local population. If the multiple conferences, symposiums, panels of reflection, and seances of education have failed, it is, I argue, because they are made elsewhere including New York and Kinshasa, and parachuted into Beni. Sometimes, these events look like soporific activities that convey a message like the following: ‘Beni, keep silence, we are killing!’ As a result, Beni painfully learns this lesson that peace within its borders will not be a gift from the outsiders but it could only be snatched from the perpetrators of horror by its remaining sons and daughters who have not succumbed to the scourge of massacres. The last aspect of the background of Beni’s moment is the toll of the horror that has characterized the experience of Beni over the decades. Put in a summary form, the toll has been both material and human. Lootings, extorsions, and arsons are features of the material level of the toll. As for the toll at the human level, there is first of all the innumerable person brutally and ruthlessly massacred. Next, there is a multilayered trauma for those who are still alive. Kennedy Wema Muhindo reports the testimony of his taxi driver as follows: ‘Those who arrived do not believe us. It is like people have become stoics. By dint of witnessing repetitive atrocities, there is an impression that people are accustomed to them. However, don’t you believe it! as soon as it is evening, the panic installs itself.’ The night should be a time of rest, so this driver’s anecdote reveals the scope of the insecurity and restlessness facing Beni’s people. They no longer sleep restfully because they expect that the assailants will break in. Such daily horror takes its toll on their body, soul, and spirit. Moreover, another layer of the toll is the frustration of Beni’s people about the anonymity of the gratuitous violence that is being inflicted upon them. The lack of truth about the causes, the ends, and the authors of their massacres is an indescribable frustration. The pain can be bearable when a victim knows the root cause. Put differently, the truth about a misfortune allows the person to reconcile with this fact and imagine options for tackling it. From this perspective, in his reflection on the truth and reconciliation in South Africa, Desmond Tutu indicates that truth is essential in the process of healing and forgiveness. As he observes, ‘It is quite incredible the capacity people have shown to be magnanimous refusing to be consumed by bitterness and hatred, willing to meet with those who have violated their persons and their rights, willing to meet in a spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation, eager only to know the truth, to know the perpetrator so that they could forgive them.’ To illustrate his argument, Tutu points out the statement of Babalwa, a daughter of an activist who was killed by the security police, who said, ‘We do want to forgive but we don’t know whom to forgive.’ From this perspective, the lack of truth about the hell of Beni is a very overwhelming and horrendous experience for its people. It is under all these above circumstances that when history gave them the chairs to make choices that could stop the infernal cycle of their horror, Beni’s people could not miss that precious opportunity. The following section reflects on this moment [17-21].

Beni’s moment

To begin with, I reiterate my allusion to blessing regarding Beni. Without a doubt, Beni is equivalent to Beni (blessed) if someone takes into account its population and natural environment. In other words, Beni is a tremendous blessing because of the inestimable values expressed through the many cultures of the local population as well as the inexhaustible rich land and minerals, the flora and fauna of this region of the DRC. Wema Muhindo also acknowledges this natural state of Beni but he notes that its recent history has been a paradox of this state. As he states, Beni should, as a rule, be the synonym or the anagram of a territory that carries the affection of gods, the land blessed by God. But since October 2014, the inhabitants of this area, we could say the loss of the republic, are asking themselves if it is not the reverse that occurs. We could think of a latent curse that endures.’

Along with the above factors, this state of affairs called forth Beni’s moment. What does then Beni’s moment represent?

Taken at face value, this action was illegal because, as I mentioned above, it took place against the order of the Congolese central government. Beni’s population was not authorized to vote on that day.

In due course, my research found that the elections were officially postponed in the region of Beni-Butembo for security and public health reasons. Regarding security, the central government put forward the killings of civilians. Concerning health, it claimed that the Ebola pandemic had killed 360 people at that time. Nevertheless, the opposition and the local population dismissed these claims as false and politically motivated. The opposition protested against the indexation of more than one million voters. Likewise, according to an analyst, Beni’s election unveils the truth about the victims of repeated exclusion and ostracism orchestrated by the central government in the capital city. This perception accounts for the rightful indignation of Beni’s people.

After the elections, RTBF, the news outlet that showed interest in the election of Beni, followed up to know the results by indicating the level of participation and the number of polling stations.

For the interests of this reflection, I shall point out the intriguing fact that in a matter of hours, the same news outlet shifted from considering Beni’s votes as a fictitious election to a ‘symbolic challenge vote.’ On election day, it pointed out what follows: ‘A fictitious vote was improvised in Beni, in the North-East of the DRC to protest against the postponement of general elections which take place elsewhere on Sunday in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Organizations of young people and the population installed a ballot box in the field of Kalinda where many hundreds of persons waited in single file, without any incident with the security forces.’ It continued, ‘At least three offices of the vote were installed in the city. Here, no “voting machines” officially used elsewhere in the country, only paper bulletins that participants filled out by hand for the three elections presidential, legislative, and provincial (state).’ The next Monday (31 December 2018), RTBF changed the description of Beni’s elections from ‘fictitious’ to ‘symbolic vote-

defi.' The French word Defi means a challenge or an act of defiance. Seen from this perspective, Beni's self-organized elections were a form of civil disobedience. Still, is not civil disobedience a terrorist action or an illegal act? According to Edward Leroy Long Jr., 'most clearly, civil disobedience, despite the possible disruption that it may cause, is not a form of terrorism. Especially when, as is usually the case, it is committed to nonviolence, it cannot be even remotely considered to pose the issues that terrorism does. Likewise, "sit-ins, picket lines, walkouts, and other similar forms of protest, no matter how destructive, are not terrorist acts.'" This observation reveals that civil disobedience is a legitimate strategy of protest and claim of one's abused rights. The above report showed that Beni's elections while defying the decree of the central government were orderly and peaceful. There were no disruptions or violent altercations with the law enforcement officers. In addition, Beni's moment and its challenge to the central government echo the timeless reflection of Martin Luther King, Jr. (King) who once acknowledged the unambiguous legitimacy of disobeying unjust laws. However, its application in the context of Beni may raise some objections. It is not clear how the decree of the postponement of the elections was an unjust law against Beni's people. The above report and the reactions of interviewed people testify that the postponement was purely and merely a mechanism of exclusion. It could not cost the central government heaven and earth to provide the basic security and hygiene precautions that the local population afforded. Moreover, it was pointed out earlier that both the FARDC and the MONUSCO have failed to protect Beni's population over the years. Consequently, it is fallacious to think that they could rapidly secure the city of Beni for its special elections after the postponement. In this context, I concur with King when he says, 'We must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday that "justice too long delayed is justice denied.'" This justice was denied to the great detriment of Beni's people through the decree of election postponement. These people had therefore the right to disobey such an unjust law, for 'law and order exist to establish justice, and when they fail to do this they become dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress.'

The preceding analysis has tried to examine the description of Beni's elections as 'vote-defi.' It remains to delve more deeply into the meaning and the implications of their qualifying as being symbolic.

First of all, it is worth stressing that it would be very misleading to equate the qualifying "symbolic" with something cheap, meaningless, and valueless. For example, Desmond Tutu draws attention to the character of the reparation that had to be bestowed on the victims of apartheid. He emphasized that it was really meant to be symbolic rather than substantial.'

DISCUSSION

Unlike the South African government, by depriving Beni's people of the right to vote with their fellow citizens, its Congolese counterpart deepened and worsened the wounds of horror and repeated massacres this population has suffered. Moreover, different from South Africa, the Congolese nation

and the international community have failed the victims of Beni. As a result, these victims of Beni initiated alone the symbolic action. From this point of view, the significance of 'symbolic' in Beni's context has more weight than what Tutu thought of it. From this perspective, it has both retrospective and prospective dimensions. The retrospective dimension consists in trying to put an end to the source of the experience of horror. The prospective dimension can be grasped by considering the meaning of a symbol. According to the Oxford dictionary, a symbol is 'a mark or character used as a conventional representation of an object, function, or process.' The symbolic elections of Beni were indeed 'a collective representation of a process.'

To express it differently, Beni's symbolic vote has a double pattern consisting of denunciation and annunciation. From one perspective, Beni's vote denounced the callousness and inability of the Congolese government to protect Beni's population from torments and massacres. This vote castigated the grave violation of the covenant existing between those who govern and those who are governed. From another perspective, Beni's symbolic vote announced the rupture of Beni with the dark past. It signaled that the evil of oppression is not and cannot be the yardstick of history. It gave a clue that the good of liberation and freedom brought about through the right and noble struggle will prevail because it fits and falls well within the orbit of what has to be the last word in and of human history.

After describing Beni's moment, the next section of this paper considers its moral implications.

Ethical implications of Beni's moment

To arrive at the accurate significance of Beni's moment, my approach in this last section is heuristic, that is, I explore a few possible meanings of the collective action carried out by Beni's population on 30 December 2018. My research tested a few hypotheses and found that Beni's moment does not correspond to any of them. These hypotheses revolve around secession, self-determination, and revolution. First, what happened in Beni does not represent the proclamation of Beni's secession from the DRC. Next, Beni's moment was not an expression and enjoyment of the right of self-determination or an exercise of the principle of self-determination. Lastly, Beni's moment cannot be even considered a non-violent revolution. What does then Beni's moment stand for? For lack of adequate concepts, I name the action of Beni's moment as "collective mobilization." By collective, I mean an activity 'done by people acting as a group.' As for mobilization, it connotes 'the action of organizing and encouraging a group of people to take collective action in pursuit of a particular objective.' The action during Beni's moment was collective because it was carried out by many inhabitants of Beni. They were self-mobilized to organize the elections themselves and vote to transform their hellish predicament.

I cannot stress enough that it will be misleading to liken collective mobilization to the herd instinct, a sheep like behavior, or the mob's effervescence which dissolves the uniqueness and reason of the individual. This point of view was well documented by Gustave Le Bon. In his analysis of the soul

or the mind of the crowd, he showed that ‘the disappearance of the conscious personality, the predominance of the unconscious personality, the turning by means of suggestion and contagion of feelings and ideas in an identical direction, the tendency to immediately transform the suggested ideas into acts mainly characterize the individual forming part of a crowd.’ On this account, he asserts that when in the crowd, an individual ‘is no longer himself, but has become an automaton who has ceased to be guided by his will.’ He further attests that ‘an individual in a crowd is a grain of sand amid other grains of sand, which the wind stirs up at will.’ In the context of Beni, I am more inclined to agree with Emile Durkheim than Gustave Le Bon. Durkheim argued that ‘collective consciousness is a consciousness of consciousness.’ In other words, the conscience of an individual is illumined by his or her group’s conscience. The activity taking place throughout this whole process is under the influence of rational deliberation and judgment. I see a contrast between an anonymous individual described by Le Bon and Manix and Benshirak Kitonga who participated in Beni’s moment. According to Le Bon, by the mere fact that he forms part of an organized crowd, a man descends several rungs in the ladder of civilization. Isolated, he may be a cultivated individual; in a crowd, he is a barbarian that is, creature acting by instinct. He possesses the spontaneity, violence, ferocity, and also enthusiasm, and heroism of primitive beings, whom he further tends to resemble by the facility with which he allows himself to be impressed by words and images which would be entirely without action on each of the isolated individuals composing the crowd and to be induced to commit acts contrary to his most obvious interests and his best-known habits.

In their interview, both Manix and Benshirak Kitonga made clear that their participation in the elections organized by Beni’s population was a free and rational choice. Their decision to own the destiny of their city was well-reasoned. This admission is verifiable in this way. The option of staying home was a better and safer choice since by deciding to participate in elections; they could have been exposed to both the contamination of the Ebola virus and running into trouble with law enforcement officers who were expected to make sure that the central government’s decree to postpone the elections in Beni was duly obeyed. However, when these people assess the stakes involved in their destiny, they wholeheartedly chose to organize the elections and vote. For them, such civil disobedience was worthwhile. King would have complimented them by saying that ‘Massive civil disobedience is a strategy for social change which is at least as forceful as an ambulance with its siren on full. In fact, notwithstanding the satisfaction that they could get from a good compliment, the people of Beni had relied on something more profound to be able to act as they did. I argue that their collective mobilization was deeply and unshakably rooted in the nucleus that shapes the conscience of the Congolese as both persons and people. To put it another way, the collective mobilization of Beni’s people found its guiding light in the founding documents of the Congolese identity. As I read it, the attitude of the people of Beni expresses the core beliefs written in golden letters and enshrined in the founding documents of the DRC, namely Patrice Lumumba’s speech on the DRC’s Independence Day on 30 June 1960, his last letter to his wife

Pauline Lumumba, and the Congolese national anthem. A few interpretations of some of these golden texts will enlighten my reflection. The common feature of these three texts is the fact that they are directly addressed to the Congolese people. They are meant to shape and shepherd the Congolese conscience throughout its historical itinerary.

Concerning the speech that Lumumba delivered at the ceremony of the DRC’s independence on June 30, 1960, Belgian sociologist, historian and writer Ludo de Witte observes, this speech can be considered as the act of the birth of modern Congo, the country that emerged then from eighty years of colonialism and envisaged its future with confidence. In Africa, this speech is considered one of the key moments that propelled the continent into the international scene. From the West’s perspective, many saw in this speech a call to arms that degenerated in Belgian-Congolese hostilities, which sank the ex-Belgian colony into chaos, a chaos marked by the fall of the Lumumba government in 1960, and by the assassination in 1961 of the one who is considered in Congo as the first “national hero.” de Witte rightly shows here the magnitude and implications of Lumumba’s speech for the DRC, Africa, and the world (including the West as well as other hemispheres). The only implication that draws my attention here is the fact that de Witte considers Lumumba’s speech as the ‘birth certificate’ of the DRC. It is self-evident that a birth certificate is a permanent reference point in life. de Witte is thus right to say that we can consider it Lumumba’s speech as the founding document of the country.’ In this founding document of the DRC, Lumumba teaches the Congolese people including Beni’s population the culture of moral, spiritual, and republican values. Following their order in the speech, these fundamental values include:

- Freedom.
- Full and sovereign independence.
- Peace, including peace of heart and goodwill.
- Prosperity and greatness.
- Social justice.
- Promotion and respect of fundamental freedoms laid down in the universal declaration of human rights.
- Non-discrimination.
- Promotion of human dignity.
- Love of work and devotion to one’s country—the DRC.
- Loyal collaboration with foreign countries.
- Friendship and cooperation.
- Vigilance and respect of commitments freely made.
- Mutual aid.
- Rejection of tribalism.
- Constructive opposition in strictly legal and democratic ways.
- Determination and a sense of self-sacrifice.
- Unconditional respect for life and others’ goods.
- Liberation of the whole African continent.
- National freedom and economic independence of the DRC.
- Independence and African unity.
- Independence and sovereignty of the DRC.

Lumumba believed that the best way to build one’s personality and country consists in the carrying out of these moral, spiritual, and republican values daily. Accordingly, when Beni’s people kept seeing that their daily experience of horror was in

indescribable contradiction with this programmatic Congolese *modus vivendi*, they couldn't but mobilize themselves to act in a way that can bring their existential experience on track or in line with this DRC's founding document. It is fascinating that Lumumba reiterated the necessity of cultivating these transcendent values in his last will before his death. This last will is found in his last letter to his wife Pauline. According to Rodrigue Buchakuzi Kanefu, This letter of Lumumba, written in the jail of Thysville on 8 January 1961, that is, nine days before his assassination, is a veritable last will and testament of the one who will be declared the first national hero. In fact, in this letter of a will, Lumumba seals his determination for the emancipation of his people. In the spirit of this letter, it emerges the determination of Lumumba and encouragement for his people to fall behind him so that the future of Congo becomes radiant.

It goes without saying that among the Congolese who were encouraged to follow the example of determination set by Lumumba are Beni's people. In addition, Lumumba exhorted them to live out the following moral, spiritual, and republican values that his last will expects from his wife, his biological children, and all his fellow Congolese. These values are:

- Struggle for the DRC's independence.
- Dedication of one's life to the sacred cause.
- Right to an honorable life, to perfect dignity, to independence with no restrictions.
- Priority of common good over egoistic interests.
- Clearance of foreign and domestic enemies of the DRC.
- Restoration of the Congolese dignity in the pure light of day.
- Optimism concerning the beauty of the DRC's future.
- Fulfillment of the task of reconstructing the DRC's independence and sovereignty.

It emerges from these inestimable values that Lumumba was not only a political hero but also and most importantly a strong witness to the culture of transcendent and sacred values. His following words are piercing and inspirational. He said, 'I want my children, whom I leave behind and perhaps will never see again, to be told that the future of the Congo is beautiful and that their country expects them, as it expects every Congolese, to fulfill the sacred task of rebuilding our independence, our sovereignty; for without justice there is no dignity and without independence, there are no free men.' I argue that these words of Lumumba constitute one fundamental pattern of the backbone of the Congolese consciousness. As a result, when the challenge of these words resonated in the hearts and minds of Beni's people, the latter felt galvanized and summoned to take up this challenge, that is, to struggle for their justice, dignity, independence, and freedom.

In addition to Lumumba's two indispensable writings (his speech that granted the DRC its birth certificate and his last will for the Congolese conscience), another founding venue for the Congolese consciousness is the national anthem of the DRC: *Debout Congolais* (Arise, Congolese). Its words in English translation read as follows:

- Arise, Congolese, United by fate.
- United in the struggle for independence.

- Let us hold up our heads, so long bowed.
- And now, for good, let us keep moving boldly ahead, in peace.
- Oh, ardent people, by hard work we shall build.
- In peace, a country more beautiful than before.
- Countrymen, sing the sacred hymn of your solidarity.
- Proudly salute the golden emblem of your sovereignty, Congo.
- Blessed gift (Congo) of our forefathers (Congo).
- Oh, beloved (Congo) country.
- We shall people your soil and ensure your greatness.
- (30 June) Oh, gentle sun (30 June) of 30 June.
- (Holy day) Be witness (holy day) of the immortal oath of freedom.
- That we pass on to our children forever.

Like the aforementioned speech and letter of Lumumba, this anthem calls the attention of the Congolese people to some critical and indispensable values such as independence, peace, solidarity, sovereignty, greatness, and freedom. In addition, its challenging prophetic message has both a retrospective and prospective tone. The former succinctly but powerfully reports what happened under the Belgian colonization and the latter articulates the vocation, the commission, and the challenge of the Congolese for the future. To be sure, a look at the first word of this anthem is very revealing: *Arise*. The image that helps me to capture the moral weight and responsibility embedded in this summons is the ritual done to a baby in my native Otetela culture. In this culture, after bathing a baby, her grandmother or mother gently rubs a wild fruit all around her body. This fruit is called *Olambatanu*. Not bigger than a tennis ball, *Olambatanu* fruit is yellow. Its skin is covered with painless and harmless thorns. Because of these thorns, the baby reacts whenever she is being rubbed with *Olambatanu*. The grandmother or the mother accompanies this act of rubbing with a little speech to the baby. The gist of the speech is to encourage the baby to have a similar reaction she has to the *Olambatanu* fruit in real life. *Olambatanu* ritual thus teaches alertness, assertiveness, firmness, courage, and resilience to both boys and girls in Otetela culture. Seen from this perspective, every time that the Congolese people sing *Debout Congolais*, they are like being rubbed with *Olambatanu* fruit. This singing ceremony urges them to stand firm and defend their sacred values of independence, peace, solidarity, sovereignty, greatness, and freedom. In this context, the injunction to "arise" is a permanent summons to the Congolese consciousness to firmly reject anything pretending to bend down or subdue the Congolese people. In this respect, Beni's moment was a just and timely response to the call to arise against terror and horror by collectively organizing their elections and voting peacefully and in an orderly manner. Still, someone can argue that he does not see why Beni's people had to be so mobilized to organize their own elections and vote. It was just an act of writing names on pieces of paper and throwing them in boxes. To respond to this objection that threatens to crumble to dust the entire edifice of Beni's moment, I draw significant insights from King. Cynically staunch defenders of segregation saw the Black Americans' demand for the right to vote to abolish this evil system as poor agitators who lacked something worthwhile to do in life. It is to those segregationists that King explains a basic fact. He believed that the right to vote is the number one' civil right. In this

context, he spells out this fact in these terms: Voting is more than a badge of citizenship and dignity it is an effective tool for change. Voting is the foundation stone for political action.' He further acknowledges that 'the right to participate in the most fundamental of all privileges of democracy the right to vote.' This observation sheds significant light on the urgency that Beni's people attached to the elections. Negatively speaking, their self-organized elections dismissed the central government's decree to deprive them of their most fundamental privilege of living in a country whose name carries the seal of democracy (scilicet, Democratic Republic of Congo). Positively speaking, by voting, Beni's people wanted to enjoy their first civil right. Moreover, they considered their ballots as an efficacious apparatus for political and social change in their city. The preceding analysis emphasized that Beni's people were profoundly disappointed by the attitude of the Congolese central government and the international community because the latter were callous to the infernal circle of their misery and death. In addition to considering the right to vote as the primordial civil right and the most fundamental privilege that someone affords in a democratic society, King believed that the right to vote is sacred right. As he observes, 'The denial of this sacred right is a tragic betrayal of the highest mandates of our democratic traditions and it is democracy turned upside down. Seen from this perspective, the organization of the elections and the peaceful vote in Beni were a collective effort not to profane the sacred right of a democratic regime in the DRC.

Interestingly, the Congolese central government was not as lucid as Beni's people about this matter. Using King's words, each participant in Beni's elections could state, 'So long as I do not firmly and irrevocably possess the right to vote I do not possess myself. I cannot make up my mind it is made up for me. I cannot live as a democratic citizen, observing the laws I have helped to enact. I can only submit to the edict of others.' In a word, choosing to vote was a symbolic way of owning one's life and having minimal control over it collectively, members of Beni's society were mobilized to vote to own their destiny. In a sense, it was a positive response to their patriotic vocation which, as pointed out above, asks them to arise.

CONCLUSION

The overarching goal of this article has been to fathom the meaning behind Beni's self-organized elections on December 30, 2018. My analysis deduces that the symbolic elections of Beni's people constituted a collective mobilization to own their collective destiny. To reach this inference, my analysis proceeded in three steps. First, I considered the political background and the security situation before that long-awaited moment. Next, I accounted for what happened which I call here 'Beni's moment.' Last, I reflected on the ethical implications of the action of Beni's population on election day. In what follows, I point out three points that emerge from my foregoing reflection. The first point of my conclusion relates to the conception of trauma. This article has rethought the impact of trauma, especially at the collective level. The pervasive belief handed down in trauma literature is that devastation triggered by trauma is possibly incurable. In this context, trauma is classified in the negative

side of the human experience. This doom-laden perception often reduces a victim of trauma to either a state of lethargy or reactionary aggressiveness. However, drawing insights from the wisdom of a proverb of my native Otetela culture, I argue that a traumatic experience has some value. As the proverb states, *Onto lakahomo oluyi katolawoka okodi*, that is, 'the person who was bitten by a snake is the one who can avoid an unidentified rope.' The context here is the circumstances of darkness. This proverb shows how the trauma of being bitten once by a snake in the dark or by inadvertence thus teaches the victim values of alertness, caution, foresight, and Phronesis (prudence or practical wisdom).

It would be misleading to think that I give the impression that people look for trauma themselves. By all means, trauma is always an unwelcome guest in life. Nevertheless, if it invites itself and one has to cope with it, there is room for dealing with it in productive ways. These productive ways can bring about something worthwhile including moral and spiritual values. It is from this perspective that I view the action of Beni's 'community of wounded actors.' When these wounded actors realized that they were being again asked to wait and endure more horror, they arose together to own their destiny peacefully and non-violently. Their trauma taught them the values of resilience and resolve. The second point of my conclusion is connected to the life of Beni after Beni's moment. I cannot see direct links between Beni's moment and the current state of affairs in this region of the DRC. Following the incumbent Congolese president's decree on the state of siege in Beni's region, the US government has supported this initiative by sending US special military forces. From my perspective, I argue that Beni's martyrs and Beni's moment have been the fertile seed of glimpses of hope for security and stability in that long and overwhelmingly tormented area of the DRC. The third and last point of my conclusion appertains to my sense of duty as both a scholar and a Congolese citizen. As a scholar, not analyzing and recording Beni's moment runs the risk of consigning this meaningful event to oblivion. As a Congolese, this paper fulfills my duty of solidarity with my fellow Congolese who live in Beni. It is a token of love for those whose lives were wasted by wanton cruelty. It is also my very modest expression of sympathy to those whose lives have not recovered from the multi-layered trauma they undergo in Beni. Finally, this paper is a sign of my highest esteem to those who participated in Beni's moment. This reflection thus adjures the human species not to be indifferent when suffering is not within one's abode. Instead, humans should show solidarity with and give adequate support to those who are nobly fighting or struggling for flourishing, truth, freedom, justice, integral peace, or Shalom.

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