



DRC: Bring Patrice Lumumba Home

By Ira Dworkin



For much of the past year, there have been plans for the sacred human remains of the Democratic Republic of the Congo's first post-independence prime minister, Patrice Émery Lumumba, to finally be returned to his children in Belgium, and then repatriated to the Congo. Originally scheduled for a ceremony on June 30, 2021, the 61st anniversary of the country's independence passed with Lumumba's remains still in the custody of Belgian authorities. The ceremony with Belgian King Philippe, current Prime Minister Alexander de Croo of Belgium, and Congo President Felix Tshisekedi, was then planned for January 17, 2022, the anniversary of the assassination. Last week, Tshisekedi [announced another delay](#)—this time until June 2022. The official reason for the delay was [the rising number of COVID-19 cases](#) in the Congo, but the pandemic crisis is deeply entangled with [a series of other political maneuvers](#) and other [crises](#) that are undoubtedly factors in the decision.

At the center of this story, Lumumba's family continues to be victimized. As [Nadeen Shaker recently reported](#), his children were forced to escape to Cairo during their father's house arrest, never to see him again. The disturbing fact that the remains of Lumumba spent another Independence Day in Belgium may provide opportunities for metaphor and analogy, but, amid the widespread complicity in this ongoing desecration, the most important outcome must be to respect the ethical and legal claims of his children, which daughter Juliana Lumumba described in an [open letter to the Belgian king](#) last year.

The story of the execution and its aftermath is well told by Ludo de Witte in [The Assassination of Patrice Lumumba](#). On January 17, 1961, Lumumba was killed along with comrades Maurice Mpolo and Joseph Okito by Belgian authorities, with the support of neocolonial Katangan separatists and the US. Two days later, Gerard Soete, Belgian police commissioner of Katanga, and his brother exhumed the body to chemically eradicate all physical evidence of their crime in order to prevent the kind of mobilization which its identification would inspire. Though the execution was kept secret for nearly a month, its announcement inspired exactly what his executioners feared, as African people throughout the world engaged in protest and other revolutionary acts of remembrance—from [the well-known demonstration at the United Nations, and other cities throughout the world](#) to [a legacy in a visual, musical, and literary culture](#) that continues to this day.

In February 1961, while the Cultural Association of Women of African Heritage organized a major protest at UN headquarters in New York, Lumumba's widow Pauline Opango Lumumba led a march of family and supporters to the UN offices of Rajeshwar Dayal in Kinshasa. There, she requested that the UN help her receive the remains of her husband for a proper burial. After Ralph Bunche offered "apologies" for the New York protest, Lorraine Hansberry ["hasten\[ed\] publicly to apologize to Mme. Pauline Lumumba and the Congolese people for our Dr. Bunche."](#) Meanwhile, James M. Lawson of the United African Nationalist Movement and other Black activists organized a [wake](#) for Lumumba at Lewis Michaux's Harlem bookstore. When Pauline died in Kinshasa in 2014, she was still waiting to bury her husband. She, and her iconic demonstration, are memorialized in Brenda Marie Osbey's poem ["On Contemplating the Breasts of Pauline Lumumba,"](#) which is part of a long line of African American efforts to uplift the Lumumba family. The immediacy of Pauline's demands remains after 6 years.

While Lumumba's body was dissolved in sulphuric acid, Soete, [like the US lynchers of Sam Hose](#) and so many others, kept trophies of his victims as he traveled from the Congo to Belgium, often displaying them for friends and journalists. After Soete died, his daughter Godelieve continued her father's tradition, culminating in [a bizarre 2016 interview](#), during which a reporter found the remains in her possession. (In her efforts to defend her father, Godelieve further revealed that his brutality was visited upon his children.) The Belgian police intervened and, for the past five years, Lumumba's remains have been held by the Belgian government responsible for his death. In September 2020, a court finally ruled they should be returned to the family.

These most recent delays are occurring at a time when the ongoing mistreatment of human remains is receiving public attention. The case of the Morton Collection at the University of Pennsylvania led activist [Abdul-Aliy Muhammad](#) to uncover the ongoing desecration of the remains of Tree and Delisha Africa, who were killed when the city of Philadelphia bombed their family's home on May 13, 1985, leading to the discovery that the city held [additional remains](#) of the victims of its violence against the MOVE organization.

Since 2005, in South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) created the Missing Persons Task Team to identify the remains of the Black victims of the country's apartheid era. Drawing on the expertise of researchers with experience in similar initiatives in Argentina and elsewhere, this government project has been deliberate in its efforts to include the families of the missing at all stages, while seeing their work as integral to the larger mission of the TRC, and further representative of [a larger model of repatriation of human remains and possessions](#). As different as these cases of violence may be, government sanction—at multiple levels and taking different forms—remains constant.

In [an October 2021 program](#) hosted by *Friends of the Congo*, Juliana Lumumba explained that for her, as the daughter of a martyr, repatriation and memorialization of her father's remains were not finite events to be completed like items checked off of a to-do list. Rather, the return must be part of

a wider and ongoing process: “I told Belgium, that if we want a reconciliation we need reconciliation of memories because we can not make a reconciliation when our memories [are] so different and so contradictory.” Juliana’s words carry a particular weight at a time when the Special Parliamentary Commission on Belgian Colonial History has received [a sharply critical historical report](#) that may or may not lead to meaningful action of the sort that the family has demanded.

Lumumba’s son [Guy-Patrice Lumumba](#) opposes Tshisekedi’s efforts to exploit the repatriation for political gain. Tshisekedi himself is familiar with some of the political challenges of memorialization after the remains of his own father, longtime popular opposition leader Etienne Tshisekedi, spent more than two years in Europe before their return in 2019 after Felix’s election. Felix is quickly losing whatever claim he had on his own father’s mantle (see [Bob Elvis’s song “Lettre à Ya Tshitshi”](#) for a recent indictment of the president’s abandonment of his father’s mantle). He may find value in an association with a revered nationalist icon amid political protests from opponents concerned about [his overreaching efforts to control the country’s powerful electoral commission](#) as the 2023 election cycle approaches.

Meanwhile, the younger Tshisekedi’s international standing has been consolidated through his position as head of the African Union, where his responsibilities include negotiating for the provision of COVID-19 vaccines for member states. He recently [met with President Biden](#) and made [an official visit to Israel](#), the latter of particular concern given [its historical involvement in mercenary efforts against pro-Lumumba rebels](#) and [its ongoing role in the plunder of the Congo’s resources](#) (to say nothing of [Tshisekedi’s support for Israel’s occupation of Jerusalem](#) and its status as an observer at the African Union). Such actions highlight the extraordinary distance between Lumumba’s legacy and Tshisekedi’s leadership.

For decades, the Lumumba family has made a series of unanswered demands through formal inquiries and [legal appeals](#). A [group of scholars and activists](#) have also asserted the return of Lumumba’s remains must not be an occasion for Belgium to congratulate itself, but rather an opportunity for a full accounting of the colonial violence that led to the assassination and its subsequent coverup.

Hopefully soon, Lumumba’s family can mourn on their own terms and have all of their demands for justice met immediately and without equivocation.

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