

Disappointed Expectations of Independence: A Postcolonial Reading of Comics on the Congolese and Zambian Copperbelt (1960–2000)

Enid Guéné

ABSTRACTS

The Copperbelt mining region, straddling the border between Zambia and DR Congo, has long been known as a hub for diverse forms of popular art. Among these, comics have remained comparatively under the academic radar. Yet not only were they an integral part of life on the Copperbelt by the 1950s, but they also became a major channel through which to vehiculate “messages” and hold public conversations. While such magazines were often commissioned by institutions – such as Congo’s mining company Gécamines, and Zambia’s Ministry of Education and Franciscan Mission –, they provided aspiring cartoonists with the opportunity to appropriate and transform the medium. Crucially, this artistic reappropriation unfolded amidst rapid economic, political, and social transformations, particularly following the copper price slump of 1974–75. As a result, these magazines constitute a valuable historical source to investigate changing expectations of independence across two regions which, though neighbouring, are attached to two different nation-states. As the article will show, an examination of three decades’ worth of magazines reveals a comparable sequence on both sides of the border: one that starts with institutions working to encourage children to participate in the general project of “modernity” and ends with increasingly vivid discussions about the realities of living in a world marked by rising hardships and the failures of expectations of independence to materialise.

Die Bergbauregion Copperbelt an der Grenze zwischen Sambia und der Demokratischen Republik Kongo ist seit langem als Drehscheibe für verschiedene Formen populärer Kunst bekannt. Unter diesen blieben Comics vergleichsweise unter dem akademischen Radar. Doch in den 1950er Jahren waren sie nicht nur ein integraler Bestandteil des Lebens im Copperbelt, son-

dern wurden auch zu einem wichtigen Kanal, um „Botschaften“ zu verbreiten und öffentliche Gespräche zu führen. Während solche Zeitschriften oft von Institutionen in Auftrag gegeben wurden – etwa von der Bergbaugesellschaft Gécamines im Kongo und dem Bildungsministerium und der Franziskanermission in Sambia – boten sie aufstrebenden Karikaturisten die Möglichkeit, sich das Medium anzueignen und zu transformieren. Entscheidend ist, dass sich diese künstlerische Wiederaneignung inmitten rascher wirtschaftlicher, politischer und sozialer Veränderungen vollzog, insbesondere nach dem Kupferpreisverfall von 1974–75. Daher stellen diese Zeitschriften eine wertvolle historische Quelle dar, um die sich ändernden Unabhängigkeitserwartungen in zwei Regionen zu untersuchen, die zwar benachbart, aber unterschiedlichen Nationalstaaten zugehören. Wie der Artikel zeigen wird, offenbart eine Untersuchung von Zeitschriften aus drei Jahrzehnten eine vergleichbare Abfolge auf beiden Seiten der Grenze: eine, die mit Institutionen beginnt, die sich dafür einsetzen, Kinder zur Teilnahme am allgemeinen Projekt der „Moderne“ zu ermutigen, und die endet mit zunehmend dynamische Diskussionen über die Realitäten des Lebens in einer Welt, die zunehmend von Nöten und dem Scheitern der Erwartungen an die Unabhängigkeit geprägt ist.

Comics in Africa, though unevenly distributed, have appeared in a diverse array of formats. They have ranged from street comics magazines with sharp social and political commentary, such as *Jeunes pour Jeunes* in Kinshasa, DRC (1960s–1970s), to superhero comics like *Powerman* in Nigeria (1970s), and political cartoons and strips in newspapers, such as *Madam and Eve* in South Africa (1990s). The Copperbelt, a highly urbanised copper mining region spanning the border between Zambia and the Democratic Republic of Congo, has been a significant consumer and producer of comics. However, this aspect of the region's history of cultural production has been comparatively underexplored. Haut-Katanga, the southernmost province of the Democratic Republic of Congo and home to the Congolese Copperbelt, is better known for a vibrant and colourful genre of figurative art known as “Katanga Popular Painting”. Meanwhile, John A. Lent described the broader region of southern Africa, excluding South Africa, as “hardly a cartoonist's Eden”.¹ In his 2009 review of comics activities on the African continent, he identified only one full-time cartoonist in Zambia: Trevor Ford (Yuss), a Welshman who drew a political cartoon for the newspaper the *Post* between 1991 and 2001.² Yet, as detailed elsewhere,³ oral evidence collected on both sides of the border indicates that comics were an integral part of childhood on the Copperbelt from the early years of independence, aided by the availability of public libraries and bookshops. While further research is needed to map the patterns of comics consumption in Katanga and Zambia during the colonial period, individuals who grew up between the 1950s and 1980s recall

1 J. A. Lent, Southern Africa: Hardly a Cartoonist's Eden, in: J. A. Lent (ed.), *Cartooning In Africa*, Cresskill 2009, p. 220.

2 Ibid., pp. 223–226.

3 E. Guéné, Being a Child of the Mines: Youth Magazines and Comics in the Copperbelt, in: M. Larmer, E. Guene, B. Henriët, I. Peša and R. Taylor (eds.), *Across the Copperbelt: Urban & Social Change in Central Africa's Borderland Communities*, Oxford 2021, pp. 52–76.

having access to a diverse array of comics, including British and Belgo-French comics and photocomics from South Africa. It has even been suggested that the popular painting style in Katanga may owe part of its cultural heritage to *Bande Dessinée* (French for “comics”).⁴

The significant role that comics played in shaping the imagination of Katangese and Zambian youth led key institutions to repurpose them for their own objectives. Already in the colonial period, comics were recognised and utilised on the Congolese side as effective educational tools. For instance, the series *Les aventures de Mbumbulu*, widely distributed in the Belgian Congo from 1946 to 1956, instructed readers on ‘good behaviour’ in a distinctly paternalistic manner.⁵ Post-independence, Katanga and Zambia saw the creation of several locally distributed magazines featuring comic content.⁶ Three notable magazines, each associated with specific institutions, include *Mwana Shaba Junior*, *Orbit*, and *Speak Out!*. *Mwana Shaba Junior* was launched by Katanga’s dominant mining company, *Union Minière du Haut-Katanga* (renamed Gécamines in 1967) in September 1964. In Zambia, *Orbit*, commissioned by the Ministry of Education, began publication in 1971, while *Speak Out!*, a bimonthly magazine produced by the Franciscan Mission Press in Ndola, started in 1984. Each magazine achieved peak print runs exceeding 40,000 copies, with *Orbit* reaching up to 65,000 copies. Not only did these three magazines maintain uninterrupted publication for decades, an achievement few other magazines could replicate, but their distribution also ensured broad access: *Mwana Shaba Junior* was distributed monthly for free to the families of Gécamines employees; *Orbit* was available in schools; and *Speak Out!* could be obtained in churches after services. The longevity and accessibility of these magazines not only allowed many children to engage with the medium of comics over extended periods but also provided local talents with opportunities to create their own works. Analysing the evolving content and appearance of the comics in *Mwana Shaba Junior*, *Orbit*, and *Speak Out!* from around 1965 onwards reveals a process of “re-appropriation” by local artists.

Significantly, this “re-appropriation” occurred within a distinct set of circumstances. It took place amidst the rapid economic, political, and social changes which followed both the transition to independence in the early 1960s, a period when the Copperbelt appeared poised for industrial prosperity, and the stark reversal brought on by the dramatic downturn in copper prices in 1974–75. Although the Copperbelt was far from unique in experiencing disillusionment with post-independence prosperity, the narrative there

4 V. Y. Mudimbe, “Et si nous renvoyions à l’analyse le concept d’art populaire”, in: B. Jewsiewicki (ed.), *Art pictural zaïrois*, Québec 1992, pp. 25–26; B. Jewsiewicki, *Painting in Zaire: From the Invention of the West to the Representation of Social Self*, in: K. Barber (ed.), *Readings in African Popular Culture*, Oxford 1997, p. 107; J. Fabian, *Remembering the Present: Painting and Popular History in Zaire*, Berkeley 1996, p. 305ff.

5 C. Cassiau Haurie and C. Meunier, *La bande dessinée en Afrique à l’époque coloniale: Un art sous contraintes*, Paris 2023; N. R. Hunt, *Tintin and the Interruptions of Congolese Comics*, in: P. Landau and D. S. Griffin (eds.), *Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa*, Berkeley 2002, p. 103.

6 In Zambia, the Catholic Mission Press published the magazine *Icengelo* from 1970 in which a comic character called ‘Ka Tona’ appeared. In Katanga, magazines with a comics content in the 1960s included *Uhaki*, *La voix du Katanga* and *La Dépêche*. See C. Cassiau-Haurie, *Histoire de la BD congolaise*, Paris 2010.

was notably dramatic, as vividly captured by James Ferguson in his *Expectations of Modernity*. At the time of independence in 1964, the Zambian Copperbelt was undergoing such rapid urbanisation and industrialisation that, according to Ferguson, “the Zambian experience captured something in the modernist imagination” and came “not only to exemplify but to epitomize the revolution that was understood to be taking place in Africa”.⁷ By the 1990s, Zambia was classified among the world’s poorest economies by the World Bank, with a significant portion of its population living below poverty thresholds.⁸ Similarly, Congo’s once-thriving *Union Minière du Katanga*, a global leader in cobalt and uranium production and the third-largest copper producer at independence,⁹ had virtually collapsed by the 1990s. The lifespans of the three magazines paralleled these tumultuous developments, also offering a multifaceted local perspective on the era. While these magazines gave local artists expanded opportunities to use comics as a medium, they were commissioned by institutions with vested interests in the post-independence context. These institutions also used the magazines to communicate directly with local populations. This allowed a medium that was initially used to promote an industrial and “modern” future to evolve into a platform where various stakeholders discussed economic decline and, to a certain extent, negotiated strategies to address it. These magazines serve as valuable historical sources for examining evolving expectations of independence in two regions which, despite their shared deep ties to the mining industry and historical interconnectedness, have been part of separate nation-states since the early twentieth century. An examination of three decades of magazines reveals differences in concerns and expressions but also notable similarities in narrative trajectory on both sides of the border: starting with efforts to involve readers in the project of “modernity” and progressing into vivid discussions about the realities of living through a period marked by increasing hardships.

1. The First Rush: Expectations of Modernity in the Immediate Post-Independence Period

The first two magazines to become primary platforms for the youth of the Copperbelt to produce and consume comics – *Mwana Shaba Junior* and *Orbit* – emerged at crucial junctures in the histories of Zambia and Katanga. Both were launched comparatively shortly after their respective countries gained independence from colonial powers. *Mwana Shaba Junior* debuted about a year after Katanga’s brief secession attempt ended – a turbulent period marked by conflicts over Katanga’s mineral wealth but followed by growth in the copper mining industry. On both sides of the border, the mining industry

7 J. Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt*, Berkeley 1999, p. 4.

8 Ibid.

9 R. Lemarchand, *The Limits of Self-Determination: The Case of the Katanga Secession*, in: *The American Political Science Review* 56 (1962) 2, p. 405.

was expected to serve as the economic bedrock for the newly independent nations. As Wendy Bond, one of *Orbit*'s creators, recalled, Zambia was "buzzing with optimism and opportunity" and "everyone was determined to make a success of the new nation [...] and to do it fast!"¹⁰ Both *Orbit* and *Mwana Shaba Junior* were commissioned by institutions deeply invested in maintaining the economic vitality of their respective countries, particularly the mining industry. In Zambia, *Orbit* was developed under the aegis of Valentine Musakanya, then Minister of State for Technical Education, who opposed President Kenneth Kaunda's Africanist models and instead advocated for the use of Western technology.¹¹ As a result, the early issues of both *Orbit* and *Mwana Shaba Junior* shared significant thematic similarities, particularly in their focus on science and technology. Both magazines featured illustrated articles explaining the workings of technological devices such as echo-sounders¹² and motor cars,¹³ and emphasized the importance of education and the importance of preparing carefully for one's professional career. *Mwana Shaba Junior* included numerous editorials on these two subjects,¹⁴ while *Orbit* had a column called *Look to the Future*, offering advice on various career paths, such as in the medical field.¹⁵ The comics in both publications reinforced these themes, albeit through different approaches.

Early issues of *Orbit* featured a substantial number of comics and illustrations, with two series standing out in particular. One series, drawn in a realistic black-and-white style, focused on detective stories, such as *Mark Phiri Investigates*, where the main protagonist alternatively dismantled spy networks,¹⁶ thwarted factory robberies,¹⁷ and prevented poachers from killing lechwe antelopes for their skins.¹⁸ These comics showcased a variety of protagonists, each with a typical Zambian name and a specific job description, as if to highlight the range of careers now available to young Zambians. Besides Mark Phiri the detective, there were characters like Mike Chanda, a "Charter Pilot"; Jenny Moonga, a "Health Inspector"; Peter Nawa, a "Fisheries Officer"; and Judy Mulenga, a "News Reporter". Meanwhile, another series aimed to spark interest in science and technology. Between 1971 and 1974, *Orbit*'s flagship series was a space adventure serial titled *A Space Safari*, starring two young Zambians named Robert and Marion. These two characters worked for an international organisation called the *Pan-African Survey* and traveled extensively, visiting places like Tanzania,¹⁹ the Kalahari Desert,²⁰ and Chile,²¹

10 W. Bond, Mporokoso, Chinsali, Bancroft, Mongu, Lusaka, Kitwe, in: T. Schur (ed.), *From the Cam to the Zambezi: Colonial Service and the Path to the New Zambia*, London 2014, p. 208.

11 M. Larmer, *Rethinking African Politics: A History of Opposition in Zambia*, Farnham 2011, pp. 40–41, p. 163.

12 *Mwana Shaba Junior*, Nos. 209, 210, 211, July–August–September 1976, p. 23.

13 *Orbit*, Vol. 1, No. 5, p. 20.

14 *Mwana Shaba Junior*, No. 154, 15 October 1973, p. 2.

15 *Orbit*, Vol. 1, No. 13, p. 30.

16 *Orbit*, Vol. 1, No. 4, pp. 6–7; No. 5, pp. 6–7; No. 6, pp. 6–7; No. 7, p. 6–7.

17 *Orbit*, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 6–7.

18 *Orbit*, Vol. 3, No. 3, pp. 8–9.

19 *Orbit*, Vol. 3, No. 4, pp. 1–2.

20 *Orbit*, Vol. 1, No. 13, pp. 1–2.

21 *Orbit*, Vol. 2, No. 6, pp. 1–2.

as well as venturing into outer space. In their adventures, they thwarted a planned invasion of Earth by Martians, whose planet's atmosphere was becoming unbreathable,²² and saved Venus from desertification.²³ Throughout these stories, Marion and Robert's technical and botanical knowledge is prominently highlighted. For instance, their ability to solve Venus' desertification problem stems from their extensive knowledge and experience with Earth's plants.²⁴ They even manage to restore Mars' atmosphere "by dropping chemicals in the upper layers",²⁵ which convinces the Martians to abandon their plans to invade Earth. While the detective stories helped young Zambians envision themselves in various careers, *A Space Safari* encouraged them to think of themselves as global citizens from a nation with the technical expertise to assist others, even those from outer space. It is also notable that Marion and Robert's adventures often intertwined science fiction with broader issues that were directly relevant to contemporary Zambia's needs, much like other sections within *Orbit*. By the recollections of Wendy Bond, the department responsible for the creation of *Orbit* received requests from various other Ministries within the Zambian government to include specific topics. One such request was for a series on African history,²⁶ leading to a regular column on African freedom fighters who were also contemporary pan-Africanist leaders, such as Jomo Kenyatta,²⁷ Julius Nyerere,²⁸ and Kwame Nkrumah.²⁹ This resonates with the involvement of Zambia's first independent government under Kenneth Kaunda in the pan-African movement and the freedom struggles of neighbouring countries, such as Zimbabwe.³⁰ Another request came from the Ministry of Agriculture, asking for a *Young Farmers' Page*,³¹ to support ongoing efforts to reduce the country's dependence on imported food. This page provided practical farming advice, like how to keep rabbits,³² and frequently encouraged readers to grow their own food instead of buying it. One issue proclaimed, "We and our country can be proud if we can say to the world, 'We grow our own food!'"³³ *A Space Safari* and its protagonists, Marion and Robert, were used to reinforce this message. In an adventure titled *Trojan Horse*,³⁴ a mysterious spaceship appears in African cities, leaving expensive gifts like cars and tractors. Robert and Marion uncover that these ostensibly valuable gifts were, in fact, a test to gauge whether Earth's inhabitants grasped the significance of mutual assistance and collaboration in achieving a "good life". The commander of the

22 *Orbit*, Vol. 1, No. 3, pp. 1–2, No. 4, pp. 1–2.

23 *Orbit*, Vol. 1, No. 8, pp. 1–2.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

25 *Orbit*, Vol. 1, No. 4, p. 2.

26 Bond, Mporokoso, p. 210.

27 *Orbit*, Vol. 1, No. 5, p. 9.

28 *Orbit*, Vol. 1, No. 9, p. 9.

29 *Orbit*, Vol. 1, No. 8, p. 9.

30 See, for example, R. Rabaka (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Pan-Africanism*, Abingdon-on-Thames 2020, especially chapter 13: Pan-Africanism and the anti-colonial movement in southern Africa, 1950s–1990s.

31 Bond, Mporokoso, p. 210.

32 *Orbit*, Vol. 1, No. 7, pp. 8–9.

33 *Orbit*, Vol. 4, No. 3, p. 22.

34 *Orbit*, Vol. 1, No. 5, pp. 1–2, No. 6, pp. 1–2, and No. 7, pp. 1–2.

alien ship presents Robert with a spade and ears of corn, hailed as the “greatest gift”.³⁵ In another story called *A Shepherd called Nemo*,³⁶ Marion and Robert encounter desperate aliens from an ocean planet facing food scarcity due to overfishing. They offer these aliens assistance but also lecture them on the importance of “breed[ing] fish carefully” and protecting their “animal-life”.³⁷ In this way, science fiction is used to promote the government’s agricultural and environmental agenda.

The theme of agriculture was not as prominent in *Mwana Shaba Junior* compared to *Orbit*, but like *Orbit*, it aimed to inspire youth to envision a future beneficial to the independent nation, ideally involving the mining industry. However, *Mwana Shaba Junior* adopted a different narrative approach, reflecting the broader corporate culture of Gécamines. Known for its distinctive corporate paternalism aimed at fostering employee loyalty, Gécamines provided amenities such as schools and hospitals, while also encouraging specific behaviours among its employees. This included a strong emphasis on family, hard work, and morality.³⁸ As a result, the editorials opening *Mwana Shaba Junior*’s issues consistently underscored these themes. One editorial asserted:

*What matters if you want to achieve anything is discipline, to love the toil, work with perseverance, respect the property of others, observe the rules which are necessary for society to function properly: the rules enforced by one’s school or place of work, the guidelines dictated by one’s religion, the laws of one’s country.*³⁹

In addition, instead of emphasizing the anti-colonial struggle, *Mwana Shaba Junior*’s early issues put a strong emphasis on the importance of ‘vivre ensemble’ (living together or togetherness). This strategic choice likely stemmed from the company’s recent experience with post-colonial conflicts and its diverse workforce, which included Europeans and workers from the province of Kasai.⁴⁰ The inaugural issue featured an illustration of two boys – one African and one European – holding hands in front of a school sign.⁴¹ Another early editorial, published in 1966, lamented humanity’s capacity for destruction but emphasized the positive potential for mutual cooperation: “One day, it will be said: ‘Men can do anything, even get along with each other.’ That is what we want: we, all the young people in the world, of all races and colours!”⁴² *Mwana Shaba Junior* thus aligned with Gécamines’ paternalistic style of corporate messaging, aiming to instill its values in the children of its employees and foster a sense of community with shared interests and aspirations for the future.

35 *Orbit*, Vol. 1, No. 7, pp. 1–2.

36 *Orbit*, Vol. 3, No. 4, pp. 1–2.

37 *Orbit*, Vol. 3, No. 6, pp. 1–2.

38 D. Dibwe dia Mwembu, *Bana Shaba abandonnés par leur père: Structures de l’autorité et histoire sociale de la famille ouvrière au Katanga, 1910–1997*, Paris 2001, p. 86.

39 *Mwana Shaba Junior*, No. 178, December 1974, p. 3.

40 S. Vinckel, *Violence and Everyday Interactions between Katangese and Kasaians: Memory and Elections in Two Katanga Cities*, in: *Africa* 85 (2015) 1, p. 83.

41 *Mwana Shaba Junior*, No. 1, September 1964, p. 1.

42 *Mwana Shaba Junior*, No. 14, February 1966, p. 2.

Reflecting these paternalistic educational goals, the first comics published in *Mwana Shaba Junior* fell into two main categories. The first type consisted of realistically drawn stories set in antiquity, such as *Les derniers gladiateurs* (“The Last Gladiators”). Many of these stories had religious themes, including *L’histoire merveilleuse* (“The Wonderful Story”), a series of one-page comics depicting the lives of various Biblical characters,⁴³ and *Ben Hur* (1965–1967), a serial that broadly retold the story of redemption and Christian awakening, similar to the 1959 Hollywood film of the same name.⁴⁴ These comics were not only historical and educational but also carried a strong moral component. Alongside these realistic stories imbued with Christian morality, *Mwana Shaba Junior* introduced a new humorous character named Mayele (“clever” in Swahili) in September 1965. Mayele became the magazine’s flagship character until its discontinuation in the 1990s. Mayele is a young man living in a city, residing in a large suburban house with his own car and various technological gadgets, which often malfunction and provide the basis for much of the humour in his stories.⁴⁵ For example, in *Pas de chance!*, Mayele becomes stuck between the garage door and the ceiling while trying to show off his new electric garage door.⁴⁶ In another story, he attempts to showcase his vacuum cleaner to his neighbour but ends up accidentally vacuuming all the pieces of his neighbour’s jigsaw puzzle because he does not know how to operate it properly.⁴⁷ In this way, Mayele’s stories have an educational component too, cautioning against dangers such as inattention, pretending to have knowledge one lacks, arrogance, and complacency. They serve as a vehicle to humorously teach good behaviour. In this regard, Mayele’s stories echo both colonial comics, such as the *Mbumbulu* stories,⁴⁸ and the contemporary Belgian comics tradition.⁴⁹ Simultaneously, Mayele’s stories also highlight the newfound levels of affluence that Copperbelt residents could aspire to under Gécamines’ aegis. Owning a car and garage, a house with a lawn, and a range of household electrical goods was portrayed as being within everyone’s grasp.

There were notable differences in the overall tone of the two magazines. *Mwana Shaba Junior* exhibited a distinct didacticism aimed at shaping the future workforce into diligent employees. *Orbit*’s comics were primarily employed to address governmental concerns, particularly in guiding youth toward careers beneficial for the country’s march toward “modernity”. As one editorial from the early 1970s emphasized, these careers could range from “a top government official or a teacher, a farmer or a factory worker!”⁵⁰ Essentially, both magazines, launched during an era of envisioned industrial prosperity, aimed to steer youth towards emerging employment opportunities. To achieve this, they

43 For example, *L’histoire merveilleuse*: Samuel, in: *Mwana Shaba Junior*, No. 82, April 1970, p. 5.

44 *Mwana Shaba Junior*, No. 14, February 1966, p.7.

45 *Mwana Shaba Junior*, No. 82, April 1970, p. 1.

46 *Mwana Shaba Junior*, No. 126, May 1972, p. 1.

47 *Mwana Shaba Junior*, No. 86, June 1970, p. 1.

48 Hunt, *Tintin*, p. 103.

49 Delisle, *Bande dessinée*, p. 6.

50 *Orbit*, Vol. 3, No. 6, p. 5.

drew upon narrative and aesthetic elements from diverse sources, including contemporary global popular culture. *Mwana Shaba Junior*'s comics set in antiquity were produced in the waning years of Hollywood's golden age of big-budget historical epics like *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and *Ben Hur* (1959). In contrast, *Orbit* emerged during an era marked by the moon landing (1969) and the success of science fiction films and TV series. For instance, the title *A Space Safari* echoes Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), while one of Marion and Robert's adventures, titled *The Game*, has similarities with the storylines of *Planet of the Apes* (1968).⁵¹ Comics in both *Orbit* and *Mwana Shaba Junior* also borrowed elements from contemporary Belgo-French and British comics cultures. Comics in *Orbit* bore stylistic resemblance to those published by *Fleetway Publications*, a British comics publisher known for adventure comics spanning various genres, including science fiction.⁵² Meanwhile, *Mayele* and the antiquity-themed comics in *Mwana Shaba Junior* reflected influences from the two prominent contemporary Belgian comic "schools". One school, associated with *Le Journal de Spirou*, specialised in wholesome, slapstick humour, while the other, linked to *Le Journal de Tintin*, focused on detailed, educational, history-themed adventures.⁵³ This correlation is not coincidental: *Mayele* was originally conceived by two Belgian Union Minière engineers, Theo Roosen and Paul Baeke, while *A Space Safari* was crafted by Sydney Jordan and Martin Asbury, two professional British cartoonists hired by *Fleetway Publications* for the task.⁵⁴ In this manner, both Gécamines and the Zambian Government leveraged imported talents and storytelling techniques to bolster their vision of a prosperous industrial future. However, this dynamic was poised to change as Zambia and DR Congo entered a new phase of their postcolonial histories.

2. The Crux: Appropriating the Comics Medium Amid Emerging Economic Decline

The decades between approximately 1965 and 1985 were eventful for DR Congo and Zambia. Congo saw both the nationalisation of the copper mining industry and the establishment of a one-party-state under President Mobutu Sese Seko in 1967, followed suit by Zambia where the same two events happened in 1972–1973. These changes also marked shifts in state ideologies. In 1971, Mobutu initiated his 'retour à l'authenticité' campaign, during which Congo was reinvented as a new nation called "Zaire".⁵⁵ Concurrently, Zambia embraced a socialist ideology known as "Zambian Humanism", in-

51 *Orbit*, Vol. 2, No. 7, pp.1–2, and No. 8, pp. 1–2.

52 See J. Chapman, *British Comics: A Cultural History*, London 2011.

53 P. Delisle, *Bande dessinée franco-belge et imaginaire colonial, des années 1930 aux années 1980*, Paris 2008.

54 Martin Asbury, email communications, 18 and 23 July 2023.

55 S. Van Beurden, *Authentically African: Arts and the Transnational Politics of Congolese Culture*, Athens OH 2015, p. 193.

roduced by President Kenneth Kaunda as the national philosophy in April 1967.⁵⁶ While these ideologies differed in content and expression, they shared a common goal of breaking away from the colonial past and establishing a national identity rooted in African values. Both countries also witnessed the emergence of personality cults around their leaders: Mobutu's cult, one of the most pervasive of the twentieth century, gained prominence from the early 1970s onwards,⁵⁷ while Zambian politics increasingly focused on President Kaunda and the idealisation of the nationalist struggle from the mid-1970s.⁵⁸ This ideological and political context was palpable in both *Mwana Shaba Junior* and *Orbit*. Photographs of Mobutu now occasionally appeared in *Mwana Shaba Junior*, such as on the cover of the November 1970 issue.⁵⁹ In Zambia, the new party ideology prominently featured in the October 1974 issue of *Orbit*, which included a special comics insert depicting how the "people of Zambia" embraced political freedom "under the leadership of Kenneth Kaunda", culminating in the formation of a unified nation on October 24, 1964.⁶⁰ Meanwhile, the crash in copper prices following the oil crisis of 1973 marked the beginning of a period of relentless economic decline for both countries. Zambia's terms of trade declined by 54 percent between 1974 and 1975, and by 1984, its real per capita income had plummeted by approximately 67 percent compared to 1975.⁶¹ Against the backdrop of politically charged "Africanisation" and the onset of economic hardship, both magazines increasingly relied on local African talents.⁶² This shift led to a subversion or reversal of previously established comics conventions, while the content and outlook of the comics produced during this era also reflected the historical context in which they were created.

An early example of this subversion, influenced by the historical context, can be seen in the adventures of 'Mwana' and 'Shaba', two new characters introduced in *Mwana Shaba Junior* in 1972. Their first two adventures, *Echec aux Espions* (1972–1974) and *Le Trésor de Targaz* (1975–1977), retained many characteristics of the Franco-Belgian comic tradition, including aesthetics, slapstick humour, and heroes portrayed as moral paragons. However, the usual template was reversed in significant ways. Whereas Africa had often been depicted as an "exotic" destination in Franco-Belgian comics, here the two "Zairian" protagonists travel to faraway locales like New York, save the day, and are celebrated as heroes by the "natives". Elements of Authenticité-era Zaire are evident throughout, with

56 J. Yuzhou Sun, *Historicizing African Socialisms: Kenyan African Socialism, Zambian Humanism, and Communist China's Entanglements*, in: *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 52 (2019) 3, p. 362.

57 See inter alia the fourth chapter titled "From Congo to Zaïre: Mobutu's Production of an 'Authentic' National Identity" in K. C. Dunn, *Imagining the Congo: The International Relations of Identity*, New York 2003.

58 Larmer, *Rethinking African Politics*, p. 167.

59 *Mwana Shaba Junior*, No. 93, November 1970. This was accompanied by an editorial focused on "L'amour patriotique" ("Patriotic Love").

60 *Orbit*, Vol. 3, No. 7, p. 5.

61 V. Seshamani, *The Economic Policies of Zambia in the 1980s: Towards Structural Transformation with a Human Focus?*, in: G. A. Cornia, R. Hoveen and T. Mkandawire (eds.), *Africa's Recovery in the 1990s: From Stagnation and Adjustment to Human Development*, New York 1992, pp. 116–134.

62 With the exception of *Mayele*, which continued to be drawn by Paul Baeke until 1987. See Cassiau-Haurie, *Histoire de la BD*, pp. 37–38.

characters referring to each other as “citoyen” or “citoyenne” and Mwana and Shaba using ‘Air-Zaire’ for their travels. Comics in *Orbit* also began to change during this period. By the mid-1970s, *Orbit* had replaced Marion and Robert with a new character named Fwanya, a young Zambian schoolboy whose two-page stories were both humorous and educational. In *Fwanya Learns That Laziness Does Not Pay*, for example, Fwanya loses copies of *Orbit* he was supposed to deliver to his teacher because he stopped along the way to take a nap.⁶³ This aligns with the tenets of Humanist ideology, as expressed by Kaunda in his May Day speech of 1972, which condemned laziness and other irresponsible behaviours detrimental to society’s proper functioning.⁶⁴ This marked a shift towards a new brand of moralistic didacticism in *Orbit*, becoming a staple of its comics. From this point on, the magazine frequently featured stories about mischievous young boys like Fwanya, who commit minor transgressions and are lightly mocked or punished for them.⁶⁵ Another nod to the changing socio-political environment was a new emphasis on “traditional” or “precolonial” values, reflected in the appearance of comics set in rural settings. In these stories, such settings are presented as the “point zero” of African culture. For example, in *Time Machine*, published by *Orbit* in 1977, two young Zambian men travel back in time to explore what Zambia was like before colonialism.⁶⁶ Similarly, in a *Mwana Shaba Junior* story titled *Le sceptre de Tshipaya* (1985), two city dwellers visit a village and describe rural populations as the “guardians of our secular values”.⁶⁷ In this way, the codes of comic-making were updated for a contemporary Zairian or Zambian audience and imbued with new values, reflecting the changes in the political context. As time progressed, the comics published in *Orbit* and *Mwana Shaba Junior* began to make more direct references to real-life situations and themes specific to life in Katanga or Zambia. An early example of this trend appears in publications other than *Orbit*. In an interview published in the Zambian Copperbelt-based newspaper *Mining Mirror*, retired cartoonist Banwell Mumbo Chola described creating a series of characters for newspapers circulating in mining towns, such as the *Miner in Zambia*, *Nchanga Drum*, and *Bancroft Copper Post*, which he used to mock typical behaviours observed in mining towns. Examples dated to 1970 featured one such character, named Katumpa, engaging in behaviours like convincing himself he had won the lottery and borrowing money from friends, or opening a bar where he allowed friends and relatives to drink on credit. This led to him getting beaten up in the first instance and finding himself without money or goods to sell in the second. These stories resonated so well with real-life behaviours that Chola described facing trouble with disgruntled mine-town dwellers who attacked

63 *Orbit*, Vol. 4, No. 3, p. 10.

64 K. Kaunda, *The Dignity of Labour*, Lusaka 1972.

65 For instance, a two-page story published in 1982 features a boy named Mande who pretends to be sick to avoid going to school. When he learns there is a party planned that day, he miraculously recovers and rushes to school, only to find a normal class in session and everyone laughing at him. See *Orbit*, Vol. 8, No. 10, January 1982, pp. 2–3; Interview, Light Musonda, Kitwe, 18 July 2019.

66 *Orbit*, Vol. 6, No. 6, pp. 14–15.

67 *Mwana Shaba Junior*, No. 313, March 1985, p. 6.

him.⁶⁸ In *Mwana Shaba Junior* and *Orbit*, meanwhile, the late 1970s and 1980s saw a noticeable increase in references to rising hardship and insecurity, particularly in urban spaces. A significant percentage of the stories and comics in *Orbit* in the 1980s featured theft as a theme.⁶⁹ Even a one-page comic meant to serve as a French lesson – where all dialogue is written in both French and English – tells the story of a boy who is robbed of his money at the market.⁷⁰ Similarly, stories depicting characters struggling against crime and corruption became more common in *Mwana Shaba Junior* from the late 1970s (e.g., *Le complice malin*, 1978–1979, and *Un espion à Kalemie*, 1979), with the tone becoming more strident in the 1980s. For instance, *Pauvre Kadi* (1982–1983) features a young man named Kadi who accidentally kills a diamond thief with his car. Kadi decides to keep the diamonds and remain silent about the circumstances of the man's death, leading to a series of events that ultimately cost him his life. In another story, *Le salaire d'une vie* (1987), a young woman accidentally kills a stranger who threatened her. The man turns out to have just committed a burglary, and a policeman comments that “the atrocity of this death is the salary they received for their dishonest lives [...] they should have worked normally like everyone else.”⁷¹ There was, therefore, a growing tendency to depict urban spaces – once symbols of hope for a prosperous future – as morally ambiguous and places of danger.

In fact, another prominent theme that strongly emerged in *Mwana Shaba Junior* and *Orbit* from the late 1970s is the evolving relationship between “village” and “town”. Written stories published in *Orbit* during the 1980s tended to depict the city as a centre of moral decline: a setting where young men are distracted by frivolous pursuits, abandon their strong work ethic, and show disrespect towards their elders.⁷² Concurrently, there are narratives of rural relatives making unreasonable demands on their urban kin.⁷³ In other words, both urban and rural spaces now carry a measure of moral ambiguity. An illustrative example in comic form is found in a 1977 *Orbit* story where a chief's daughter hastily marries “a successful young man from the city”, only to discover he is actually a bewitched goat.⁷⁴ This narrative critiques both city dwellers for their hollow promises and villagers for their naivety and desire for material wealth. This thematic development parallels shifts in Zambian literature, as noted by Giacomo Macola, who argued that, whereas the earlier tendency had been to assign moral superiority “either to the urban or to the rural space as a whole”, the decline in social expectations of urban life led both social spheres to be increasingly perceived as “fundamentally deficient and unappealing”.⁷⁵ A similar progression is evident in *Mwana Shaba Junior*. In 1987, a new comic character

68 Mining Mirror, 30 September 1983, p. 12.

69 See inter alia *Orbit*, Vol. 8, No. 20, February/March 1985, p. 10; *Orbit*, Vol. 9, No. 1, September/October 1985, pp. 3–4; *Orbit*, Vol. 9, No. 2, July/August 1986, p. 5.

70 *Orbit*, Vol. 8, No. 20, February/March 1985, p. 22.

71 *Mwana Shaba Junior*, No. 338, April 1987, p. 13.

72 *Orbit*, Vol. 8, No. 20, February/March 1985, pp. 8–9.

73 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

74 *Orbit*, Vol. 6, No. 6, October 1977, pp. 22–23.

75 G. Macola, *Imagining Village Life in Zambian Fiction*, in: *Cambridge Anthropology* 25 (2005) 1, pp. 6–7.

named Mafuta was introduced. Unlike Mayele's jokes, which portrayed a life of abundance and middle-class aspirations, Mafuta's humour focused on highlighting the daily struggles of life and the irritations of societal and family obligations. His stories find humour in situations such as village relatives demanding an unreasonable number of gifts from their urban kin, based on the false assumption of affluence⁷⁶; Mafuta trying to evade social pressure to offer drinks to vague acquaintances merely because a child has been born into his family⁷⁷; or Mafuta's sister placing a curse on him because he refused to give her money.⁷⁸ Urban life was further de-idealized in *Le Masque de la Tortue* (1989–1990), where a young villager named Sadiki travels to the city to join his cousin, only to confront the harsh realities of crime and poverty. Despite these challenges, Sadiki decides to stay and face them head-on, conveying a message that mutual support between urban and rural residents can strengthen their resilience together.

John A. Lent, in his survey of African comics, noted that “the dilemma of the peasant recently arrived in the city has [...] been a favourite theme” in comics produced across the African continent.⁷⁹ Indeed, several of the earliest fully developed comic albums created by Congolese authors in the 1970s and 1980s centred around this very theme. One example is Tchibemba's *Cap sur la capitale*, published by the Centre Culturel Français of Lubumbashi in 1985.⁸⁰ Like *Bingo en ville* (1982), a comic album created by the prominent Kinshasa comic artist Mongo Awaï Sisé, *Cap sur la capitale* features characters from rural backgrounds who journey to a large city in search of better opportunities, only to encounter a harsh reality characterised by corruption, poorly paid jobs, and a prevalence of con artists, fraudulent marabouts, and criminals. Tchibemba, an artist born in Katanga, based his narrative on observations from Lubumbashi, a city experiencing rapid population growth at the time, partly due to significant rural-to-urban migration.⁸¹ Reflecting on this, he remarked:

*It is just like now: people who come to Europe thinking it is going to be paradise. They do not expect that they will have to spend the night at the station or on the streets. Yet, those are the realities. And it was the same with the city back then.*⁸²

Kika, another artist based in Katanga who created comics for *Njanja*, a magazine associated with the Zairian railway company, also emphasized the dichotomy between “city life” and “village life” as a recurrent theme in his works. He commented: “Everyone wants to live in the city. But when they come to the city and the situation begins to de-

76 Mwana Shaba Junior, No. 372, March 1990, p. 5.

77 Mwana Shaba Junior, No. 366, August 1989, p. 5.

78 Mwana Shaba Junior, No. 362, April 1989, p. 5.

79 J. A. Lent, *African Cartooning: An Overview of Historical and Contemporary Issues*, in: J. A. Lent (ed.), *Cartooning in Africa*, Cresskill 2009, p. 11.

80 Cassiau-Haurie, *Histoire de la BD*, p. 66, p. 171.

81 M. T. Lootens-De Muyck, J. C. Bruneau, M. Lootens and F. Malaisse, *Lubumbashi en 1980 et ses relations avec son environnement régional*, in: *Geo-Eco-Trop* 4 (1980) 1–4, pp. 3–29.

82 Interview, Tchibemba, Mons, 14 July 2023.

generate, what option are they left with? Just to beg.”⁸³ Comics addressing such themes have been argued to possess a subversive quality. Véronique Bragard argued that Bingo’s stories, which utilised Hergé’s “ligne claire” style with clear, precise lines, diverge from Tintin in that Bingo does not serve as a mouthpiece for any civilizing mission but rather grapples with the repercussions of colonial legacies. In this regard, they exemplify what she terms “a re-fashioning of the genre’s form and themes, leading to new engaged post-colonial aesthetics”.⁸⁴

However, a crucial aspect that distinguishes comics in *Mwana Shaba Junior* and *Orbit* from others is their publication in magazines owned by the very institutions whose shortcomings could be perceived to have created the crises and hardships criticised in these comics. This is an important point to underscore because aspiring cartoonists had limited avenues for publishing their work beyond company magazines, making *Orbit*, *Mwana Shaba Junior*, and later *Njanja* to a lesser extent, vital for their livelihoods. This situation compelled authors to work within the guidelines set by these institutions. While Gécamines did not typically dictate specific themes in advance, the editorial office of *Mwana Shaba Junior* had the authority to reject proposals it did not approve of.⁸⁵ Why, then, would an institution like Gécamines agree to publish stories that drew attention to issues like poverty and widespread unemployment? In essence, comics from this period appear to have served similar moralizing purposes as their predecessors but adapted to reflect new realities. They aimed to highlight moral failings such as theft and discourage readers from engaging in such behaviour – a new form of morality tailored to contemporary circumstances. When submitting comics to Gécamines, Tchibemba recalled,

*We had to offer advice to the employees, to make them aware of what they could or could not do for the smooth running of society. One could not show up there with adventure stories in which the hero was a thief or a murderer [...] they would never accept it.*⁸⁶

For instance, Tchibemba remembered submitting a story to *Mwana Shaba Junior* that highlighted the risks of using someone else’s identity card to access Gécamines’ hospitals, which were reserved exclusively for Gécamines employees.⁸⁷ Similarly, Kika recalled that *Njanja* sought stories focusing on security and educating people to prevent theft.⁸⁸ Thus, the changes in themes and content of comics during this period illustrate how aspirations for independence had soured. Institutions could no longer confidently promise a prosperous future but instead urged their readers to maintain strong moral values, practice self-discipline, and demonstrate resourcefulness. Moreover, the fact that individual

83 Interview, Kika, Lubumbashi, 21 August 2019.

84 V. Bragard, *Belgo-Congolese Transnational Comics Esthetics: Transcolonial Labor from Mongo Sisse’s Bingo en Belgique to Cassiau-Haurie and Baruti’s Madame Livingstone: Congo, la Grande Guerre* (2014), *Literature Compass* 13 (2016) 5, p. 332.

85 Interview, Michel Bingo-Liz, Lubumbashi 30 July 2019; Interview, Tchibemba, Mons, 14 July 2023; Interview, Kika, Lubumbashi, 21 August 2019.

86 Interview, Tchibemba, Mons, 14 July 2023.

87 Ibid.

88 Interview, Kika, Lubumbashi, 21 August 2019.

authors chose to submit stories highlighting insecurity, economic hardship, and challenging urban-rural relationships reflects a time of declining living conditions. This shift also marked a transformation in how these institutions interacted with the populations they aimed to reach through popular media. Initially guiding readers towards lucrative careers and various forms of loyalty, the magazines evolved into instruments aimed at addressing emerging crises by encouraging people to avoid harmful behaviours. As the mining industry faced collapse in the late twentieth century, this shift towards addressing societal issues became even more pronounced.

3. The Slump: Comics During a Period of Collapse

The final decade of the twentieth century marked another significant turning point in the post-independence histories of the Copperbelt and its host countries. During this period, Presidents Kaunda and Mobutu stepped down from power in 1991 and 1997 respectively, coinciding with the near-total collapse of the mining industry. The Kamoto mine collapse near Kolwezi in 1989 led to a staggering 90 percent drop in Gécamines' production between 1989 and 1993. Both nations entered into an era of reforms driven by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), including economic liberalisation and eventually, the privatisation of the mining sector.⁸⁹ This period also ushered in a new chapter in the history of comics in the region, characterized by a noticeable shift towards more overtly critical content. In Zambia, this critical shift did not originate from *Orbit* but from a new competitor: *Speak Out!*, a bi-monthly youth magazine launched in 1984 by the Franciscan Mission Press in Ndola. *Speak Out!* emerged amidst growing discontent with the one-party state. The Catholic Church in Zambia, through its ownership of independent media outlets and perceived moral authority, had become a vocal critic of the ruling party.⁹⁰ In Katanga, this critical shift takes perhaps its most vivid expression in the work of Pia Tshibanda, then employed by Gécamines as a psychologist, who collaborated with graphic artist Nsenga Kibwanga to publish two comic albums around the turn of the 1990s.⁹¹ The first, *Alerte à Kamoto* (1989), depicted the collapse of the Kamoto mine and its emotional aftermath from various perspectives. The second, *Les refoulés du Katanga* (1994), portrayed the expulsion of the Kasaian population from Katanga in the early 1990s. This narrative included pointed critiques aimed both at the former colonizers who forcibly brought labour from Kasai to Katanga, and at Mobutu's

89 B. Rubbers, *Le paternalisme en question: Les anciens ouvriers de la Gécamines face à la libéralisation du secteur minier katangais* (RD Congo), Tervuren and Paris 2013; P. Mususa, 'Getting By': Life on the Copperbelt after the Privatisation of the Zambia Consolidated Copper Mines, in: *Social Dynamics: A Journal of African Studies* 36 (2010) 2, pp. 380–394.

90 M. Hinfelaar, *Legitimizing Powers: The Political Role of the Roman Catholic Church, 1972–1991*, in: J. B. Gewald, M. Hinfelaar and G. Macola (eds.), *One Zambia, Many Histories: Towards a History of Postcolonial Zambia*, Leiden 2008, pp. 141–43.

91 Interview, Pia Tshibanda, Wavre, 14 July 2023.

Zaire with its oppressive regime marked by “gaols and hangings”.⁹² Comics published in the final issues of *Mwana Shaba Junior* until its discontinuation in 1992 did not reach this level of direct critique. Yet, two developments are noteworthy. Firstly, depictions of poverty and the impacts of rising unemployment became increasingly pronounced, exemplified in the story *Les tribulations de Mashaka* (1990–1991), where a chronically unemployed character faces repeated job rejections that lead him to contemplate suicide. Secondly, there was a noticeable rise in comics that appeared to be efforts by struggling institutions to grapple with, or even mitigate, the effects of their economic collapse. Certain stories published in *Mwana Shaba Junior* during this period directly addressed the real challenges faced by Gécamines. In *Msumbuko le Syndicaliste, les Victimes de la Tentation* (1989–1990), the protagonist, Masumbuko, is the chief trade unionist for a textile company called I.T.M. – a stand-in for Gécamines –, which struggles because employees pilfer equipment. Masumbuko convenes a meeting to chastise his colleagues but is faced with workers blaming the company directors for paying them salaries that are too low to make ends meet, prioritising profits over improving workers’ living conditions, and being complicit in the exploitation of labour.⁹³ Masumbuko agrees, indicating that the primary message of the story is the importance of workers, trade unionists, and leadership coming together for an open and honest discussion. In this way, the story of I.T.M. may have functioned not just as an outlet to express frustrations but also as an initial effort to tackle these issues by fostering dialogue. While it is unclear if this comic was directly commissioned by Gécamines’ leadership, it is noteworthy that Gécamines used another form of popular art, theatre, to deliver bad news to its workers and ask for their understanding, for example, when announcing delays in paying salaries.⁹⁴ A more recent example of a company using comics for active action comes from *Njanja*, the magazine produced by the railway company *Société Nationale des Chemins de fer du Congo* (SNCC). In the 2000s, amid a challenging context marked by the war in Eastern Congo, a national budget deficit of 7.7 billion Congolese francs, and pervasive social tension, the SNCC revived its magazine. The revamped *Njanja* and its comics had a clear objective: to support the magazine’s efforts in regaining and consolidating the trust of current and potential investors. This included promoting its strategies for navigating through adverse circumstances. One strategy was “ferroustage” (“piggyback transport”), which entailed replacing trains with buses and trucks in critical areas like between the cities of Mwene-Ditu and Mbuji-Mayi, ensuring uninterrupted transport of goods, including diamonds, across southern Congo.⁹⁵ The comics in these issues, titled *Fokoloko* after the main character overseeing the “ferroustage” operation, painstakingly depict this

92 P. Tshibanda and N. Kibwanga, *Les refoulés du Katanga*, Lubumbashi 1994, p. 37.

93 *Mwana Shaba Junior*, No. 376, June 1990, p. 9.

94 E. Guéné, “Shangwe Yetu”: Popular Theatre as a Site of Encounters of Power on the Central African Copperbelt, in: F. Bernault, B. Henriët and E. Kalema (eds.), *Textures of Power: Equatorial and Central Africa in the Long 20th Century*, Leuven (forthcoming).

95 *Njanja*, No. 002, January 2001, p. 6, p. 12; *Njanja*, No. 003, February 2002, p. 17.

initiative as highly successful.⁹⁶ When Fokoloko conducts a press interview, it resembles an advertisement for SNCC:

*First and foremost, I encourage all rail users to support SNCC's efforts in promoting ferroustage [...]. Trust your goods to our extensive ground transport network, which offers preferential pricing and even home delivery, all made possible by ferroustage!*⁹⁷

In this way, the use of comics by Gécamines and SNCC to mitigate collapse or bolster belief in the company's survival marks the peak of the medium's instrumentalisation. Meanwhile, on the Zambian side, a different process was unfolding. By the 1980s, *Orbit* was declining, creating an opening for a new competitor, *Speak Out!*. Similar to later editions of *Mwana Shaba Junior*, *Speak Out!* aimed to stimulate dialogue, albeit of a different nature and with a more confrontational approach. Produced by the Franciscan Mission Press during a time when the Catholic Church served as the primary voice of opposition to the government, *Speak Out!* also addressed issues relevant to Zambian youth, particularly those on the Copperbelt where it was published. *Speak Out!* aimed to educate its readership, but took a markedly different approach from *Orbit* to do so. In stark contrast to *Orbit's* heavy focus on educational articles centred around science, technology, and history, *Speak Out!* allocated significant space to subjects like love, sex, and gender relations. It repeatedly emphasised, for example, the risks associated with promiscuity, especially in the context of the AIDS epidemic.⁹⁸ *Speak Out!*'s first issues in the 1980s predominantly featured opinion pieces, both stories contributed by readers and scripted dialogues where friends debated various topics. These dialogues often carried pointed political critiques. A notable example is a piece titled *Free Education?* where two friends engage in an imagined conversation about the government's accomplishments – or the lack thereof – in the field of education. One argues that despite claims of free education, parents still bear financial burdens like buying uniforms, compounded by inflation and stagnant wages.⁹⁹ The other defends the government's initiative, asserting that “the present Party and Government” deserve credit for providing any form of free education and that “you can't build a nation of beggars and hope to make any progress”.¹⁰⁰ However, the final word goes to the opposition:

*With the salaries our people are getting we cannot be anything but borrowers and beggars [...]. Look at Europe. Look at America. Even school children go around on Hondas. All we have here is “Zam-footing”!*¹⁰¹

96 Njanja, No. 003, Février 2002, p. 22.

97 Ibid., p. 30.

98 *Speak Out!*, May–June 1985, pp. 3–4; January–February 1986, p. 4; November–December 1987, p. 16.

99 *Speak Out!*, March–April 1984, p. 10.

100 Ibid.

101 Ibid.

Employment was another frequently discussed topic in *Speak Out!*. While many articles stressed the importance of self-initiative and working to make oneself “marketable”,¹⁰² criticisms of “Zambian Humanism” also surfaced. In a poignant 1986 piece titled *My life as a loafer...*, an unemployed young man expressed frustration upon discovering that his friend had secured a job through family connections. “Tribalism is probably the best word we could use to describe it”, he lamented. “Hardly humanism”.¹⁰³ Such narratives illuminated perceived governmental shortcomings from a deeply personal and localised viewpoint. However, *Speak Out!* also explored broader aspects of the postcolonial context, examining urban life, evolving social norms, and navigating an economically challenging world. These were also the themes explored in its comics.

The comics featured in *Speak Out!* during the 1980s, created by Ndola-based artist Michael M. Nkaka, echoed the conversational style of the magazine’s written articles. Typically, they depicted two characters, often a man and a woman named Friday and Frida, engaged in discussions on various contentious topics. These ranged from issues such as sexual harassment of younger girls by older men who pressure them for intimacy,¹⁰⁴ to debates on whether markers of colonial inheritance should be discarded. For instance, in the strip published in the March–April 1984 issue, Friday asserts that “Gregorian chant” is the only appropriate music for church, prompting Frida to counter, “It seems you’re another one of those old colonials who can’t sever their ties with Europe. It’s about time you became African!”¹⁰⁵ Roles reversed in the strip published in the May–June 1985 issue, where Friday criticizes the use of European names in Zambia as an imperialistic ploy to perpetuate ties with the oppressor, while Frida argues that names like John, Francis, or Mary are simply Christian names and everyone should have the freedom to choose their own.¹⁰⁶ Among other topics frequently explored in these comics are evolving gender relations and the dynamics between “village” and “town”. In *Speak Out!*’s inaugural 1984 issue, Friday expresses frustration about being expected to perform manual labour when he visits the village, feeling it beneath him because he is the top student in his class. Frida, naturally, disagrees.¹⁰⁷ These examples are just a glimpse into the broader range of discussions depicted in comic form throughout the 1980s. Some of these comics adopted a direct and moralising approach. For instance, Nkaka illustrated the perils of drunkenness by showing a drunken Friday slipping on a banana peel and breaking his leg.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, admonitions against premarital sex were coupled with warnings about the risks of abortion and AIDS.¹⁰⁹ However, in most cases, the dialogue format facilitated the expression of a variety of critical viewpoints on complex debates without appearing openly subver-

102 *Speak Out!*, January–February 1986 p. 2.

103 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

104 *Speak Out!*, March–April 1984, back cover.

105 *Ibid.*, pp. 12–13.

106 *Speak Out!*, May–June 1985, p. 18.

107 *Speak Out!*, January–February 1984, pp. 12–13.

108 *Speak Out!*, January–February 1985, p. 20.

109 *Speak Out!*, May–June 1987, p. 20.

sive. The comics themselves were visually simple, drawn in black-and-white, featuring a series of interchangeable characters who functioned primarily as conduits for discussing societal issues. In this regard, *Speak Out!*'s comics marked the culmination of a transformation where a medium once used to advocate for an industrial and "modern" future became a vehicle through which to discuss the failures of modernity, the pervasive effects of economic decline in daily life, and the realities of living amidst the instability shaped by postcolonial contexts.

Evolving patterns of comics production and consumption in *Mwana Shaba Junior*, *Orbit*, and *Speak Out!* thus also offer insights into shifting historical contexts and power dynamics in the area. For example, changes in comics and other contents within *Orbit* and the passing of the baton to *Speak Out!* parallel the rise and fall of Zambia's first independent government, highlighting the narrative strategies it employed to maintain power and spotlighting the Catholic Church as an important source of opposition. In neighbouring Katanga, the comics in *Mwana Shaba Junior* and *Njanja* illustrate how "state-like" companies initially exerted, but ultimately lost, significant control over their employees' lives. For urban populations in these contexts, the evolving patterns of comics consumption suggest efforts to navigate shifting structures and a loss of certainties. Eventually, the disappearance of *Orbit* and *Mwana Shaba Junior* underscores the decline or diminished power of the institutions that created them. It also marked a significant break in regional comics production and consumption patterns. In Katanga, the end of *Mwana Shaba Junior* left a void for comics consumers and producers, exacerbated by widespread looting in Congolese cities from 1991 to 1993, which depleted libraries, and the interruption of international cooperation, which curbed the importation of new comics. The region also suffered from the departure of key comics artists and writers, such as Tchibemba and Pie Tshibanda, who left Katanga in 1986¹¹⁰ and 1995 respectively.¹¹¹ Others, like Kika, transitioned to other artistic pursuits, such as painting and creating copper relief panels.¹¹² Similarly, in Zambia, comparatively few comics were reportedly available in the 1990s and early 2000s. The exceptions were some political cartoons in newspapers and a limited selection of superhero comics from the United States, occasionally found in supermarkets and gas stations. One informant also recalled reading a South African football-themed comic magazine, called *Supa Strikas*, in the early 2000s.¹¹³ None of the informants who grew up in the 1990s and 2000s, however, had heard of *Orbit*. Instead, they now navigate very different, much more digital, and global worlds.

In the twenty-first century, Zambian and Congolese comic artists have had to find creative ways to overcome adverse publishing conditions and circulate their work. Most have operated internationally, online, or both, often working on commission and adapting

110 Interview, Tchibemba, Mons, 14 July 2023.

111 Interview Pie Tshibanda, Wavre, 14 July 2023.

112 Interview, Kika, Lubumbashi, 21 August 2019.

113 Interview, Lord WaPi, Lusaka, 20 July 2019.

their styles to resonate with global audiences.¹¹⁴ Tchibemba and Pie Tshibanda, now based in Europe, have adopted a flexible approach, accepting commissions from specific institutions but infusing assigned topics with personal angles. In 2022, their collaboration on *L'aventure Coloniale: Traces d'une histoire dérangeante à Mons*, commissioned by a museum of Mons, Belgium, explored themes such as the *Black Lives Matter* movement and debates over colonial statues in European cities, while also examining Euro-African relations in Katanga and the history of Gécamines.¹¹⁵ On the Zambian side, a new generation of artists emerged in the 2010s, leveraging online platforms to promote their work. London Kamwendo and Benny Blow, for example, launched *The Mundane Kid* on Facebook in 2013, depicting a child with an overactive imagination who “turns everyday activities into great adventures”.¹¹⁶ Mwelwa Musunko founded his own comics label, *Foresight Comics*. He has also produced a superhero comic about climate change on commission from the German State.¹¹⁷ Therefore, despite having been disenfranchised from continuous institutional support or the fluctuating fortunes of the mining industry, twenty-first-century comic artists still must operate within constraints and respond to the demands of clients upon whom they rely for publication. Nonetheless, like their predecessors, they persist in creating diverse comics within these constraints. Their work resonates beyond local confines, exploring themes like climate change and drawing from a broad pool of stylistic and thematic influences. Zambian comic artists born in the 1980s and 1990s, for example, reported influences from Marvel and DC comics, TV cartoons, manga, the internet, and even images on T-shirts or school bags. The early twenty-first century marks the culmination of the pluralisation, appropriation, and reinvention of comics, signaling a new phase in the region's dynamic histories. This era is defined by liberalisation, digitalisation, and, as Massimo Repetti describes it, “a transnational fluidity of people and images”, empowering artists to “make formal and stylistic choices from a panoply of ideas which are neither localized nor confined”.¹¹⁸

4. Conclusion

Comics represent intricate and ambiguous historical artifacts. In recent decades of comics scholarship, they have increasingly been viewed as cultural forms shaped by the social and popular contexts in which they emerge.¹¹⁹ On one hand, they have been recognised as tools of social influence, especially since they often target the youth, frequently used by various actors to impart societal norms, values and behaviours. On the other hand,

114 See, for example, the analysis of Congolese comic artist Barly Baruti's recent work in Bragard, Belgo-Congolese Transnational Comics, p. 333, p. 336, p. 338.

115 Interview, Tchibemba, 14 July 2023; Interview, Pie Tshibanda, Wavre, 14 July 2023.

116 Interview, London Kamwendo, Lusaka, 5 July 2019.

117 Interview, Mwelwa Musunko, Lusaka, 19 July 2019.

118 M. Repetti, African Wave: Specificity and Cosmopolitanism in African Comics, *African Arts* 40 (2007) 2, p. 19.

119 See, for example, J. P. Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books*, Jackson 2010.

perhaps more so than other forms of popular art, comics must respond to the cultural preferences, interests, and social ideals of their audience to be effective. In this reading, comics function as a two-way street, an interactive platform. They are both products of social processes and mediums through which social processes are influenced and new social values are constructed. They act as both a “mirror” to society and active participants within it. Comics produced and consumed on the Copperbelt through magazines like *Mwana Shaba Junior*, *Orbit*, and *Speak Out!* exemplify this tension. These magazines were designed to appeal to their targeted audience and thus had to resonate with their tastes and interests. At the same time, they were also consciously instrumentalized by the institutions which commissioned them. Their longevity was largely due to their affiliation with specific institutions, each with its own positionality within the post-independence period, which used comics to influence or even manipulate readers, inculcating carefully chosen values and ideas. At first glance, therefore, these sources might appear to reveal more about how specific institutions wanted their readers to envision the future than about the readers’ own visions. Yet, a closer examination of such magazines across several decades reveal significantly more. Three factors must be considered: the target populations were not passive consumers; local cartoonists used these magazines to discuss aspects of life they knew, that is to say life in the Copperbelt in the twentieth century; and the institutions approached the medium of comics as a locus of dialogue as well as propaganda. This makes comics, and the magazines that contained them, a dynamic source, offering valuable insights into the imaginations of multiple local actors and discussions surrounding changing expectations of independence within the postcolonial nation.

What, then, do the comics and general contents of *Mwana Shaba Junior*, *Orbit* and *Speak Out!* reveal about the expectations of independence of the Congolese and Zambian Copperbelt(s), and do they highlight differences across the border? Both regions were crucial mining areas, with their mineral wealth constituting 90 percent of Zambia’s exports and 70 percent of Congo’s exports at the time of independence. Consequently, it is unsurprising that there should be commonalities in the regions’ trajectories and in the formulation of their post-independence narratives. It is also unsurprising that these commonalities emerge in the content of the magazines discussed here. On a broad level, the magazines reflect a journey from the anticipation of an industrial and prosperous future to the harsh reality where these expectations went unmet. They also illustrate how two key institutions – a quasi-state mining company and a state government – initially promised to lead this future but eventually lost so much power and control that they had to exhort local populations to rely on their own resourcefulness and hard work. In terms of the population’s lived realities, the progression of comics in *Mwana Shaba Junior*, *Orbit*, and *Speak Out!* reveals a rising preoccupation with unemployment, crime, insecurity, and poverty. The magazines particularly focus on the “city” as a locus, which initially represented progress and the foundation of a modern, postcolonial nation but increasingly came to be seen as an ambiguous space marked by moral uncertainty, rampant crime, difficult gender relations, and pervasive poverty. Examining similar materials produced

on both sides of the border also reveals divergences in concerns and political trajectories at several points. *Mwana Shaba Junior* emphasised the importance of “living together”, reflecting its tumultuous early independence history and the tensions arising from the heterogeneity of its African workforce. In contrast, *Orbit* placed a stronger emphasis on agriculture and Africanist narratives, mirroring some concerns and orientations of the Zambian government at the time. Overall, however, the magazines reveal societies grappling with strikingly similar issues: how to survive amid rising hardships and how to navigate human relationships in such a context. In that sense, they are a testament to how, as Ferguson put it, “the script of the Copperbelt’s ‘emergence’ via industrialisation and urbanisation was confounded by the years of steep economic decline which followed the fall in copper prices of the mid-1970s”.¹²⁰ They illustrate both the institutional efforts to shape societal values and the dynamic, interactive role of local artists and audiences in discussing and negotiating the complexities of life in the postcolonial nation.

120 Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity*, p. 6.