

# COLONIAL EXTRACTIVISM AND EPISTEMIC GEOLOGIES IN THE CONGO

## A CONVERSATION WITH SAMMY BALOJI



Untitled #17 from the series *Mémoire* by Sammy Baloji (2006). Courtesy of the artist and Imane Farès.

**Whether for its rubber, its copper, its uranium, its coltan, or its lithium, the Congo has seen and continues to see its earth continuously looted by European colonial powers. For the last 16 years, Sammy Baloji has been dedicating his artistic practice to the literal and historic stratas his research has led him to excavate. Caroline Honorien and Léopold Lambert talked with him about what decolonization would signify in this context.**

**LÉOPOLD LAMBERT:** Could you talk about your relationship to geology? On the one hand, your photographs often capture the literal geology of the earth of the Congo, an earth that billions of us carry every day in our pockets or handbags, which is a vertiginous reality to consider in the exploitation of the country's resources. On the other hand, your work in the archives also has something to do with geology in the way you exhume historical layers to explain the top one, which is the present.

**SAMMY BALOJI:** Sure. I was born in Lubumbashi, which is the second largest city in the Congo, and it is a mining town. What I want to underline by calling it a mining town is the impact or the importance of mines, both in the structuring of the city, of society, of work and of how the mining industry plays an important role in this territory. Even daily life in the 1980s was punctuated with the mining industry.

I'm not necessarily talking at the level of labor, but even the sound of the mine's siren actually played a marker in the rhythm of life, the rhythm of society. So, we had a rhythm of life, which had several layers and which are all linked to a single element: extraction.

We're talking about extraction, but we're not talking about transformation. Since the creation of the city until today, and even if we are talking about all this ore, it is because in the Congo, there is no processing company for this raw material. There is just this extraction, and then there is the ejection of this raw material outwards, which creates an imbalance. And even the action of extracting consists in going to the lower stratas and bring the ore back to the surface. The slag heap of Katanga that we know very well, that we see in all the images, even on the currency, has become both a political and economic symbol. The slag heap is an important symbol which is in fact a product of the waste resulting from the extraction or even washing of the commercial slag heaps which is very present in the Katangese landscape. And so, whether it's culturally or even organically, I'm influenced by all these elements, which brings about this perception, this sensitivity.

My work is also informed by the political events that occurred in history. I was talking about the 1980s, on the one

hand, but you should know that in the 1990s, there was an economic crisis and a political crisis happening in the Congo, and in particular in Lubumbashi. And this crisis is very much linked to the question of the end of the Cold War, quite simply. The dictatorial power, that of Mobutu in any case, could no longer be and could no longer be supported, whether by the United States or by Belgium. One of the reasons for the support to this dictatorial power was the protection of uranium, which had been used for the first atomic bomb. And the Congo was also surrounded by quite a few countries that were communist. And so, it was much more important to keep the Congolese state under control, hence Mobutu being kept in power throughout this period from 1965 until the 1990s. Then, it was the end of the Cold War and suddenly, Mobutu was no longer relevant as a character in the new setting, which was considered to be a "democracy" somehow. So from the 1990s, there was an economic and political crisis set in the Congo and in Katanga, which caused the mining sector to decline, and which made it subject to a neoliberal transformation. On the one hand, there could be artisanal extraction because of unemployment, and on the other hand, investors could come from everywhere else to exploit the minerals. All this homogeneity that I was talking about in the 1980s disappeared during this whole period of transition which goes from 1990 to 1997, when there was a coup d'état. These years built a landscape that is no longer the regular one, it is now a fairly capitalist or quite devastating universe, always in search of this mineral, but with a social composition which is completely unequal.

When I started to be interested in mines, my work consisted of trying to understand this failure or this change of periods, that is to say what was happening during the 1980s and the 1990s. The discovery of archive images gave me a rather interesting strata on the constitution, on the very construction of the city, on how it was thought out, how the workforce was at the base of this extraction, how communities were dispersed in space, and how the use of space or town planning actually contributed to all these extraction activities. This way, several stratas were thus falling into place. And I think that's what I try to convey in my work: it is all this complexity in which the present itself is only relevant in the way it connects with a series of events or a series of stratas that form a sort of continuum.

**CAROLINE HONORIEN:** Copper, uranium, coltan... Your work often addresses how the Congo, with its natural resources, relates to the history of the world (and of capitalism). Could you expand on that?

**LL:** In your answer, may you also speak about the history of Katanga and Moïse Tshombe's secession of the province

from the newly independent Republic of the Congo, which led to Patrice Lumumba's assassination after Mubutu's coup in September 1960?

**SB:** Yes, that goes back to what I was talking about when I answered the first question. The question of the transformation of the Congolese ore directly links this territory to the rest of the world. And indeed, we have to put that in a historical context. A few days after the independence in 1960, Katanga claimed to be secessionist and detached itself from the rest of the country. But you should know that this secession was entirely financed by the mining industry. The State was not really a State but, rather, the mining industry itself. The Haut-Katanga Mining Union was considered as a State within a State as it had its workers camps, its training centers, its sports centers, its cultural centers... the companies subcontracted the railroad companies, everything was structured around mining. And so, it was a lot of capital that wanted to keep its autonomy because the investors were in Belgium or London. We were already in a system that went beyond the notion of metropolis or country. It is a capitalist system, and shortly after the Congo's independence, the industry wanted to keep this autonomy and suddenly financed this secession and hired soldiers for what was then called the Katangese armed force. It also enlisted mercenaries who came from Belgium, France, South Africa, to form this army around the figure of Tshombe, the leader of the secession. Just like that, Katanga was independent for four years and maintained relations with Belgium. Money was even indexed on the Belgian currency: a Katangese franc was equal to a Belgian franc. This funding was a way for Belgium to be in control of this rebellion.

These elements are not necessarily told in mainstream history or in the history that we are taught at school. These are events that we are beginning to find out about, either in the archives or in the collection of testimonies. It is therefore by carrying out research that we can realize how this territory does not belong to the Indigenous people of the land. It belongs to an extractivist industry, which is operating on site. This means that we are dealing with things that are of international nature, not of local and Indigenous. This is also true when we talk about the enlistment of the workforce. Private entrepreneurs would seek labor in Rwanda, Kasai [Congolese province to the North-West of Katanga], or Rhodesia [former Zambia and Zimbabwe] for example. At the architectural level, a lot of village architecture came from South Africa. The bricks that were used to build the first houses in Katanga come from Bulawayo [in south Zimbabwe]. There was a whole system that was put in place, a whole constitution that was invented and served to return to what the philosopher [Valentin-Yves] Mudimbe





Untitled #6 (above) and Untitled #25 (below) from the series *Mémoire* by Sammy Balaji (2006). Courtesy of the artist and Imane Farès.

calls “the question of the invention of Africa.” All these spaces were invented with this perspective of extraction and connection with the world. Going back to the ore you mentioned, it is clear that copper was closely linked to the history of World War I, uranium was linked to the Second World War and rubber, with Leopold II, was linked to the industrial revolution, and now, with the electric car, lithium in east Congo will be the Far West of tomorrow... The ore therefore makes it possible to no longer speak of the territory alone, but to understand it in all its complexity, both economically and politically.

**CH:** Further on this, can you talk about how ecology and urbanism intersect within the very fabric of the city of Lubumbashi, and how it affects its population?

**SB:** When I started working with the French Institute in Lubumbashi, I worked as a volunteer photographer and one of the missions with the director of the center was to document the architectural and industrial heritage of the city of Lubumbashi. From that moment on, the idea was to develop Heritage Days, accompanied by scientific presentations, whether in the fields of the history of colonial architecture or industrial heritage, etc. This way, I started working with architects to be able to contextualize the buildings in relation to the construction periods: the style, the intention

behind, etc. Very quickly however, I started feeling uncomfortable, because the documentation of the building did not correspond to the use of the building by its inhabitants. It was as if there were two lives that shared these spaces: the life of the past use as intended by the architects, and the life of the occupants who had reappropriated the space to improve it, or else quite simply to destroy it, while the heritage process tried to save it. It raised the question of sharing the inheritance. But it is actually much more complex than that. Lubumbashi was built from 1910 when the Rhodesia Railways railway was linked to that of Katanga. Before, the first point of shipment for minerals was Lobito, in Angola. So there was a railroad that went to Angola, but which was much longer and more detoured, while the railway to South Africa and, in particular, Cape Town, was much more direct. And so there were agreements between these two States to create a junction between both railways to get the minerals out through southern Africa.

From there, the city really started to be built. It was designed in a segregated system. The extractive workforce quarters are built on the basis of the agreements established with the local or Indigenous communities. Indigenous people are not directly hired as diggers or as miners. Before World War I, the labor force was hired abroad or from other parts of the Congo to be brought to the city. This is how

Belgian workers were working alongside Black workers. But after the War, and with the influence of communism or even emergent unionism, the idea was to be able to separate these two communities so that the Black community would not revolt, or attack the extractivist system. This way, a clear segregation between Black people and white people emerged, as well as what they called the “cordon sanitaire”: a physical separation of more than 500 meters that separates Black societies from Western societies.

The neighborhoods that were created in this segregation were called “Native quarters.” They were situated next to the mines and were entirely made up of this workforce which had been hired and which were usually not Indigenous. They could mix with Indigenous societies though, but these quarters were called extra-customary centers and they did not follow the traditional jurisdiction or the villages or pre-colonial jurisdictions that existed in the periphery of the city. Instead, they were under control of a new modern memory that emerged. The large economic centers of extraction are still the same today: Lubumbashi, Kinshasa, Kisangani, and so on. On the other side, the peripheries, which were considered to be under traditional jurisdictions until today, are not able to produce an economy. This is why today there is a strong demography in these large centers which were already built during the colonial era, and they still

operate the way they were meant to operate by the Belgian system or by the colonial administration. The peripheries are inhabited by workers and the centers by the upper-class people. Basically what I mean is that the system that was built during the colonial period still persists today.

**LL:** In a previous interview, you indeed stated that you are “not interested in colonialism as a thing of the past, but in the continuation of that system.” Few parts of the African Continent speaks to this continuation as poignantly as the land of the Congo. As someone for whom the practice of the land seems so important, how do you conceive what we call “decolonial ecologies” in this issue?

**SB:** I noticed that when foreign researchers arrive in Lubumbashi, or more generally in the Congo. Their gateway, of course, remains the colonial history and the colonial archives, that is to say all the scientific production of archive images of anthropology, ethnography, etc. But this is only a moment. These sciences are built gradually and even the colonial system in itself is not established in a homogeneous way. From the start, until the end, it is dilittante and experimental. It copies from other French, English, German, Portuguese systems. There is some competition between them and even espionage between one country and another. When we talk about ethnography

Untitled #12 (above) and Untitled #21 (below) from the series *Mémoire* by Sammy Balaji (2006). Courtesy of the artist and Imane Farès.



and the sciences that were born between the 17th and the 19th century, we are really in this relationship to the Other and how we perceive the Other, how we categorize the Other. I find that these elements are somewhat both limiting, but also constitutive of the thought that we have today on the way in which we can approach the Other.

My work is about finding elements which reveal the ambiguity of these devices. Those categorical studies can be geological or geographical, they can focus on minerals or establish typologies of ethnies... For instance, these studies are at the source of why we talk about 400 ethnic groups in the Congo today. This is not necessarily true because the way pre-colonial societies defined themselves and the way in which they negotiated their territories do not correspond to the way in which so-called "objective" statistical data are established. Earlier, I spoke about Katanga's secession. This secession created a sort of Katangese identity, for example. Yet, this identity that still exists today only emerged in the 1960s and with interests that are external to itself somehow.

Similarly, part of my work has been on urban planning, for instance, and as I was mentioned earlier, on these Native quarters. The streets where they were located used to take the names of ethnies or ethnical groups that were supposed to live in these extra-customary centers. But this was only a nomenclature; in the end it did not necessarily mean that it was these people who lived there. What it does however

is produce an awareness of ethnies as an identification element. This allows the establishment of rules and ability to divide and conquer. It then becomes in the interest of each worker to be affiliated to his community to exist in this stratified space. It is a space of confrontation and still today, we can see it in the electoral sphere. Elections operate based on ethnic identities, but those are colonial inventions! What I'm interested in doing in my work is to underline these elements and this framework that belong to a context of occupation, from which we don't seem to be able to exit. This is why I say that I'm not interested in the colonial apparatus as something of the past. We still operate in the same system.

**LL:** But when we speak about decolonial ecologies, we don't necessarily think of what will happen once we totally overthrow colonialism. Sometimes, such decolonial ecologies can happen at a smaller scale and can annihilate this framework that fabricates Otherness, as you were describing. After all, one component of this framework is also the strict separation of humans from everything else. This is where our question about decolonization came from.

**SB:** Yes, I don't think that I could approach the question of decolonization at a global scale; it has to go through smaller scales. So let's go back to Katanga and to Lubumbashi as we may be able to find ways to talk about restitution at some point. There is a whole process to preserve the heritage of the extra-customary centers. Objects are collected to enter ethnographic collections and so on. The idea

is to preserve what's possible as traditional memory will disappear, but it's important to wonder whether traditional systems have disappeared between these peripheries and these extra-customary centers. Personally, I don't think so. There has always been back and forth movements between the city and the villages or the urban outskirts around Katanga. In all these communities in town centers, we still find today people who combine both traditional knowledge and modern practices. The question, for me, is how one will effectively make a junction between the periphery to the center, knowing that the center was built while the periphery was gradually destroyed by a system of evangelization or education as it was done by the Catholic religion.

We can talk about language for instance. Even today French remains the language through which one accesses the status of someone educated or an intellectual. I think that the Bible is the only book that has been translated in pretty much every language spoken in the Congo. Besides that, there are only three other languages (Kikongo, Tshiluba, and Swahili) that are taught in school, and those are languages that represent each province of the country. So how can we think of an education that would transform the peripheries in centers of reflection, centers of production, etc.?

Or we can talk about borders. If you look at the Congo for instance, we share nine borders [with the Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, South Sudan, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, Zambia, and Angola] but many communities are split by those borders established during the 1884-1885 Berlin Conference. And so you find Lunda people in Angola who were colonized by the Portuguese, others in the Congo who were colonized by the Belgians, and others in Zambia who were colonized by the British. But originally, they're all the same people who speak the same language, share the same culture and embrace their common genealogy. I don't know how we can now deal with these separations that colonialism produced.

**CH:** You have worked on Captain Henri Pauwels' album, which was instrumental to the building of Tervuren's diorama. It is a very interesting piece of archive that allows us to understand how animality, environment and blackness intersect and perform under colonialism. Could you tell us why this particular piece of archive was interesting to you and how it relates more broadly to the colonization of the Congolese territory?

**SB:** Yes, this was a project I undertook after the *Mémoire* series. At that moment, I encountered the colonial archive, in particular the archive of the mining industry in Katanga. After that, I got invited to Tervuren in Belgium to work on

the institutional archive that had already been contextualized. What I wanted to propose was to bring back these archives to Katanga and to redo the Charles Lemaire's 1898-1900 expedition that had brought them to Tervuren. It is this expedition that established the limits of what was then called Katanga. It's very clear in the archive how Lemaire negotiated with local communities (that he calls "ethnies") and how pacts were sealed. He used conflicts between the various ethnic groups to assert the colonial presence on the land in a context where Rhodesia was also looking at this territory. Lemaire established these borders through geodesic boundary stones that we can still find today. For me, it was interesting to confront the colonial archive with collective memory.

I then encountered another archive. I was presenting my work in Malines in Belgium and, at the end of the talk, a lady who owned a gallery came to tell me that she had a large collection of archival photographs that could be of interest to me, given my work on the archives. I examined the archive and nothing seemed contextualized: it was a subjective archive that she assembled according to her own interest. But then I found this Pauwels album which constituted an entire context in itself. This is something in which the photographer (or the owner of the album) establishes an entire writing of his trajectory on a territory. I was interested in it because of his gaze, through which animals, the racial typology, the landscape, etc. are all approached in a horizontal manner. Everything is equal to everything, except for him who poses in the photograph as a conqueror in front of the animal that he hunted, or the group of Natives, or the typology of the outfits, etc. From there I did some research and encountered the story of Pauwels and realized that his expedition was also commissioned by the Tervuren Museum in order to build some dioramas there.

But the history of dioramas does not start with him; it starts with U.S. taxidermist Carl Akeley. He was working for the Natural History Museum in New York, which was a private institution. In the 1920s, he did an expedition in the Congo to build dioramas. He hunted gorillas that he brought back to the United States to create a diorama that is still visible today, and which will even inspire a character like King Kong. And while Carl Akeley was doing this very successful diorama, his wife, Mary Jobe Akeley started writing letters to the Belgium King [Albert I] to be able to protect these animals in the east Congo. This is how national parks were established and, of course, those were created in a way that stripped the land away from Indigenous people. And still today, the populations living around the parks are claiming these territories to which they don't have access. Meanwhile, inside the parks, there is an artisanal extraction of coltan that was discovered during the past decades.

Essay on Urban Planning by Sammy Baloji (2013). Juxtaposition of aerial photos of Lubumbashi and taxonomic table of flies. / Photo by Alessandra Bello.



This extraction is very different from the one in Katanga, where the industry was already operating during the colonial era, while for coltan, the extraction is much more artisanal as these territories have not been industrialized. To these dynamics, we can add the question of the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, which also affected these territories. The borders with Rwanda and Burundi are right there and again these borders are recent creations.

Like I did for the Charles Lemaire expedition, I wanted to bring back Pauwels' album to the east Congo, revisit the places, etc. But when I arrived in Goma [Congolese city at the border with Rwanda], I already knew that these territories were dangerous. I came in touch with a Congolese fixer there; he welcomed me and told me about the territories that could potentially be accessible and those that really couldn't. And this way, I understood very quickly that, as a fixer and an Indigenous person, he brought a decent amount of international journalists to conflicted territories and that, while doing this, he took many photographs that were never published. You know, he's supposed to be just a fixer, a person who is doing the link between the international press and these territories. And so I decided to work with these images. On the one hand, the fixer's photos and, on the other hand, Pauwels' album; how could these two documentation sites inform on the conflicts that are happening in these regions?

**CH:** Photography, archives, dioramas... These practices and dispositives are often tied to the history of colonialism's violence and extractivism. Can you talk about the way your work on memory upsets those technologies?

**SB:** Yes, when ethnography and photography were being developed, we were already in this colonial era in Africa. There was already a form of photographic writing that had emerged, and we're still having trouble getting rid of it today. The way images are made is through an approach and an aesthetic that is not thought of from the inside. I asked myself many questions about photography. Given how it emerged with this colonial and extractive reality, how can I transcend or distort this? I asked myself this question so many times, but it seems that, at the end of the day, it's quite impossible to divert the photographic tool. But perhaps the right question would have consisted in wondering what existed before photography. How did Indigenous people express themselves? How did they contemplate the universe and explain their sense of belonging to the world? This is not just a cosmogonic vision, it is also a physical reality that can become political through an aesthetic that emerges.

For instance, I've been working on traditional scarifications. In ethnographic collections when we find a body with scarifications, the photographs always show the contour more than the person. When we look at them, we may be able to identify them when we look at the body, but the way the photograph operates by displaying these elements on the body render it foreign, and transform the person into a foreigner. I'm interested in diverting the gaze in considering scarifications as a form of writing, as a choice, as a political choice, as a social choice, as a way to embrace a thought that establishes a group of people or a political power for a moment, to be able to regulate life and the community and, ultimately, to belong to a certain identity.

That's what I'm interested in. All these western and colonial sciences emerged to tell the story of the Other's world, but how can we begin from the Indigenous people's knowledge itself? For instance, one thing that I'm examining at the moment are two mnemonic devices created by Luba people. There are Luba people in Katanga and Luba people in Kasai. We share the same basic language, but when living with different cultural groups, languages evolved. And there are proverbs or myths that tell the story of the departure of Luba people from Katanga to Kasai. Part of it might be mythological, but other parts factually describe the pre-colonial migration towards Kasai while the kingdom would remain in Katanga. Luba people thus created two memory devices that allowed transmission from one generation to another.

In Katanga, there is a mnemonic table that we call "Lukasa" which can be read by initiated people only to be able to tell the history of the kingdom. The table is never organized in the same way, but it allows the orator to tell history. As for Luba people in Kasai, there is a *kasàlà* poem which mixes the genealogical dimension with the cosmogonic dimension, the mythological dimension, as well as the relationship with the territory. It begins with the name. When we give a name to someone, a member of the community, this name links this person to other people who carried this name and through that, to an entire epic story. And once this person has the name, they embrace a certain politics and a territory.

I'm working with these two elements to question the way political borders have been created during the colonial era. How can we use this knowledge, not to question the colonial setting, but to integrate the colonial setting within this apparatus to tell history? How do we ultimately appropriate these colonial tools? How do we accept them as being part of a continuity system, not a repulsive one? How do we integrate them to go beyond



**Left.** Lukasa table, a Luba mnemonic device.  
**Right.** *Kasala, The Slaughterhouse of Dreams or the First Human, Bende's Error* by Sammy Baloji (2020). A tactile display mimicking the way the Lukasa operates. / Courtesy of the artist and Imane Farès.

them and tell their story through all this knowledge that has not disappeared and has not been erased? This is why I speak about continuity. I don't think that tradition is the enemy of modernity, I think that there is a continuity. How can both be combined? If we want to keep them apart, I think that we fall into a trap that can be very conflictual. We do what we can and we can proceed to a reappropriation apparatus both for what comes from the tradition and what comes from colonialism.

**LL:** This also allows us to consider time at what we may call a geological scale: considering colonialism as the alpha and omega of the African continent would be forgetting the millennia of history that preceded it.

**SB:** Absolutely. ■

**Sammy Baloji has been exploring the memory and history of the Democratic Republic of Congo since 2005. His work is an ongoing research on the cultural, architectural, and industrial heritage of the Katanga region, as well as a questioning of the impact of Belgian colonization. His use of photographic archives allows him to manipulate time and space, comparing ancient colonial narratives with contemporary economic imperialism. His video works, installations and photographic series highlight how identities are shaped, transformed, perverted and reinvented. His critical view of contemporary societies is a warning about how cultural clichés continue to shape collective memories and thus allow social and political power games to continue to dictate human behavior. As he stated in a recent interview: "I'm not interested in colonialism as nostalgia, or in it as a thing of the past, but in the continuation of that system."**