

Kinshasa must be a strange sight for a Belgian who comes back after 15 years. When it was Leopoldville, it was a neatly planned colonial town sweltering beside the Congo river. Now capital of the republic of Zaire, it is the biggest city after Cairo in all Africa in terms of population, and probably in square miles as well. It is a tormenting, congested, built-up black capital with an air-conditioned skyscraper on every block. But if you look down on the city from one of the tall apartment buildings, you can hardly see the mass of buildings for the jungle which seems to be struggling to take over again from the concrete. The Congolese, for all the neo-colonial wealth, have made Kinshasa an authentic city of new Africa and they run it and enjoy it the way they want. Links with the villages are kept firmly intact and the good things in life – music, beer, football, dancing; the primary Congolese obsessions – are cheap, and the women outnumber the men by eight to five. There are only Congolese officials to deal with and, however obstreperous they get, they are better than the Belgians. The population has swollen to two millions – six times its previous size – since independence because of war and the deprivation and fear it caused in the country, when marauding bands of simbas and mercenaries tore up the land and shot at most things that moved.

The town can hardly take the strain of its excess population and Mobutu is trying to send people back to the country to till the land. The Belgians, for example, installed a drainage system that did a rare honour to white civilisation, but it has not been modified and the smell of overburdened drains hangs in the heat. Water is often in short supply. I expected my ration of lying deliriously in bed, legs churning like a cyclist during a nightmare caused by an affliction of the entrails, and got it.

Tales of corruption and political rumour dominate the gossip. The labyrinthine intrigues that make new African politics into a specialist cult reach a nice intensity in Kinshasa. Given the violence that dominated politics before Mobutu's coup in 1965, there are always traces of old scores being settled behind the scenes. Mobutu hires and fires political aides with increasing rapidity, he makes enemies of old friends and tightens his hold with the help of the *Sûreté*. His endless manoeuvres are the touchstone of the political clim-

KINSHASA NOTEBOOK

by James Fox;

one of an occasional series by our writers abroad

ate. 'Something' is always about to happen in Kinshasa but it never gets further than rumour. That is not to say it never will.

Kinshasa is run on corruption. It is reassuring to know that when all else fails you have recourse to one infallible trick – the magic *makuta*. See the cop's face change from forced anger as he shouts, "*Vous respectez pas les lois du pays*," to grateful smiles as you tip him 50 makutas for a beer. There is no stigma, it is more like a spot fine. The policeman deserves to make a living from his office. His wages are near the breadline. Corruption becomes almost a political solution. The government turn a blind eye to graft and freeze wages at a level that keeps inflation in check. The millionaire Congolese, flashy down to the last gold wrist chain, fat on the fruits of political office, drive Lamborghinis and Mercedes down the Boulevard Trente Juin. The Boulevard is the rapid dual carriage-way festooned with palm trees that leads to the Presidency at Mount Stanley and to Binza – the suburb which used to be for Belgians only but now accommodates the Wabenzi, as the Kenyans call the new African rich, after the cars they invariably buy.

Although reported elsewhere in a more political context, the story of Jean Manzikala, ex-Mayor of Kinshasa and a Minister of State, is worth repeating, while on the subject of Lamborghinis. When Manzikala ordered his, it arrived with two Italian mechanics, to unpack it and tune it up. He afterwards forbade them to leave the country on the grounds they had both come free with the car.

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Corruption is the authentic African way of life – relations have to be provided for, and the more you make the more you have to provide – but it has divided Kinshasa into two nations: millionaires and wage-earning paupers. Income statistics, given the Congo's great wealth, do not bear close examination. Elitist groups, like army officers, politicians, bureaucrats, have wages out of all proportion to teachers, even magistrates. Industrial workers earn a pittance. In the scramble for wealth the Congolese are natural businessmen;

they are imaginative and they have the kind of initiative you do not see in East Africa, for example. Congolese art is found all over the continent, and Congolese music provides black Africa with its modern sounds. When they turn their talents to making a living against all the odds and frustrations of city life, you have to turn yourself, if you are a white man, into a barking monster, you have to play the *patron* to prevent yourself being taken for the most enormous ride. Everyday exchanges in Kinshasa are conducted at a high pitch of decibels, aggression and frustration.

The Belgians seem to be a part of the conspiracy. There was hardly a Belgian left in Kinshasa in the early Sixties after independence, but now they have come back – 55,000 strong – either to farm or to get rich on the pickings of this enormously wealthy town. Often they are hauled up, jailed or expelled for sharp practice, for operating the triangular trade whereby they export all their profits to Belgium, or for playing the black market in money which flourishes at 30 per cent. below the official figure. It makes you weep when you hand your travellers cheques over to the desk clerk who you know is a market shark, but perhaps an informer too, knowing that he is going to cash it round the corner for a 30 per cent. profit. The Belgian restaurants, often of a standard you will find hard to better in Europe, are stuffed with sweetmeats imported from Brussels.

The days are weary for a visiting journalist. Two weeks is not an unnaturally long period to wait to see the Minister of Information, from whom all permission comes. The hours waiting in his office annexe to be told that he has gone away, the days waiting for a telephone call which never comes, can turn the hardest operator into a depressed and broken man. But at night-time Kinshasa can compensate for it all. The Congolese spirit expresses itself through music and you can become infatuated with the mystique of the Congolese experience and their love songs for new Africa and all its politics. Musicians are often political wheels and the creation of political parties before independence turned the musicians to singing political satires full of stinging ridicule in

sentimental close harmonies – like the Everly Brothers transported by African rhythms.

The Cafe Rica, a night club in the *Cité*, is surely the most flamboyant natural floorshow in black Africa. Outside is the shanty town, and inside among the expensive Afro luxury are young girls who are really a marvel to see. There can be nothing to compare to their slim and beautiful silhouettes, all done up like flimsy mannequins interchangeable with the rich black girls of Paris, or dressed in elegant Afro prints, wound round and around to their ankles. In Rica's the Congolese have discovered an infatuation with themselves.

The men of Kinshasa love cool ostentation, but they are deeply conservative too. Anyone worthy of respect is never seen in the street without a briefcase. The magic mixture is conservatism with a wiggle in its tail. Behind the Minister's sober exterior watch for the flash of diamond cuff-links. The young Congolese boys dress like Riviera playboys a few years back, with tight little cotton shirts hugging their torsos, and bell-bottom trousers

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Looking out from the Okapi hotel on the hills above Kinshasa – where the Belgians come for their Sunday lunch and swimming – you get an astonishing view of the Stanley Pool, the waterway sometimes 20 miles across which divides Kinshasa from Brazzaville. The animosity between the two capitals is measured by the number of ferry trips that go back and forth. Before the conciliation pact last year the ferry service had stopped altogether, and now only authorised personnel and football teams are allowed over. Stanley had to carry two river boats here piece by piece on the backs of porters for below here the river is unnavigable. Kinshasa was the Central Station in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and from here the massive Congo river goes upstream to Kisangani, the Inner Station. Conrad describes the Congo river for all time: the water hyacinths floating on its brown surface; its treacherous, shifting sandbanks, and the possibility of getting lost in its islands; the way the jungles close behind you as you round the corner. He never speaks about the savaging that you would get from the mosquitos. It was that which dissuaded me from following his route upstream into the 'Heart of Darkness'. I went by aeroplane instead ●