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BELGIAN CONGO: After 50 Years

Under red, blue, green and yellow lights at a club in Léopoldville's sprawling native quarter, women in grass skirts and men with chalked bodies stomped to the hard rap of a hollow-log drum. Then Gerald Tzinga and his Rock-a-Mambo Band took over, and white-shirted clerks sedately circled the concrete floor with their partners. With dances, military parades, bicycle races, football matches and the mass distribution of medals for faithful service, the Congo celebrated last week the soth anniversary of its annexation by Belgium.*

The half-century has seen the Congo achieve an economic miracle, become the world's leading producer of industrial diamonds, cobalt, uranium, and one of the major exporters of copper and tin. During World War II the Congo even paid the bills for the Belgian government in exile. While Britain and France poured large sums into overseas territories, the Congo colony's \$960 million ten-year development plan has been 70% financed by the Congo itself. Not only whites have profited. For the Congo's African citizens there are 2,468 hospitals and dispensaries; more than 1,300,000 Coagolese children are in primary school (in higher education, the number drops sharply to 12,000).


The colonial government's paternal approach was to give the people plenty of economic benefits to keep their minds off their lack of political rights. One Belgian describes the policy as that of a parent who says to his children at table, "Don't talk with your mouths full."

But the political paroxysm shaking all Africa has even sent tremors into the calm heartland of the Congo. Last year Belgium permitted limited elections for the first time, and 13 black and five white mayors took office. Settled in modernistic offices, well paid, and furnished with chauffeur-driven Opel sedans, the African mayors were supposed to act as agents of Belgian authority. Instead, some assumed the old prerogatives of tribal chiefs and seized firm political control of the native communes. Recently African intellectuals in Léopoldville united to form the Congo's first native political party, with the aim of "independence" but "in a reasonable time and by means of peaceful negotiations." Whites are agitating for more local autonomy and have set up the Union Katangaise with the separatist aim of breaking up the Congo into a number of smaller states, each with control of its own affairs, and responsible to Brussels

instead of the colonial government general.

Yet at week's end Léon Pétillon, Minister of the Belgian Congo, a veteran of 17 years in Africa, was able to say soothingly to a huge crowd in Léopoldville: "Be not upset about your future. Have care for it, but not fear: Belgium is conscious of the needs of your nascent political state. Cast a backward glance at all that has been accomplished during the last 50 years. Why should the future be less generous to you than the past?" The only unanswered question: Would the future be as generous to Belgium?

* From Belgium's King Leopold II. In the 1880s, when Europe was busy dividing up the continent of Africa, he laid personal claim to the largely uncharted Congo Free State. But Leopold's rubber gatherers maimed, tortured and oppressed the natives to such an extent that world revulsion caused the Belgian government to annex the King's domain.

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