

Comparing the Copperbelt Project

Miles Larmer



The Comparing the Copperbelt project, funded by the European Research Council and run by a team of Oxford researchers based at the African Studies Centre and the Faculty of History, came to its conclusion in summer 2021. It has provided new insights into the social history of the Central African Copperbelt, the mine towns of the DR Congo and Zambia, since the 1950s. The project will by the time of its completion have published two books and around eight journal articles, covering different aspects of the region's social, cultural, environmental and intellectual history, all of which are or will be available Open Access.

The project, building on generations of ethnographic, historical and social scientific research in this region, has made the following major contributions:

- It provides a single historical analysis (from c. 1950 to c. 2000) of urban social change in the cross-border Central African Copperbelt, which has normally been understood within the national histories of Zambia and the DRC. By comparing both similar and contrasting aspects of their historical development, it enables understanding of what has led to the contrasting sense of urban identity in the Zambian Copperbelt – marked by a strong sense of cosmopolitan labour militancy – and Haut-Katanga – where social progress is associated with mine company patronage and strong ethnic associational identity.
- It shifts the focus away from the political economy of mining – the study of capital and labour, formal workplaces, parties and unions – and towards the wider analysis of Copperbelt society, encompassing urban agriculture, cultural expression from comic books to painting to music, shared beliefs related to faith and romance, informal economies and illegal settlements, and the environmental effects of industrial mining. This is particularly well reflected in our edited book

Across the Copperbelt: Urban and Social Change in Central Africa's Borderland Communities, published by James Currey.

- The study in general and the monograph *Living for the City* in particular provides an original analysis of the relationship between knowledge production and social history. While Africanist historians and social scientists, most notably James Ferguson in *Expectations of Modernity* (1999) have stressed the problematic construction of modernist characterisations of Copperbelt society, *Living for the City* argues that the production of knowledge, in both official/academic and popular forms, about the supposedly novel and modern nature of Copperbelt society, was central to the meanings made and claims advanced about it by both external observers and by its residents, individually and in associational forms.

Living for the City then traces the interlinked history of the region's social change and knowledge production about it, encompassing economic development, political change, spatial history, gendered identities and relations, national independence and the Africanisation of knowledge production, cultural outputs, the region's linked economic and political crises (linked to declining mineral prices) of the late 1980s and 1990s and the impact of mine privatisation, and the impact of environmental pollution. Throughout this history, generations of academic researchers and external institutions (including national governments, development thinktanks, international finance institutions and environmental analysts) produced new studies of the Copperbelt: once characterised as a hyper-modern capitalist enclave in an otherwise 'backward' rural Africa, it was by the 1990s seen as an industrial dinosaur in need of neo-liberal reform. The documentation produced by companies, states, academic researchers and institutions provided

Music group, mine township church, Zambian Copperbelt, early 1960s (credit: Barbara Hall)





African mineworkers under European supervision, Zambian Copperbelt, early 1960s (credit: Barbara Hall)

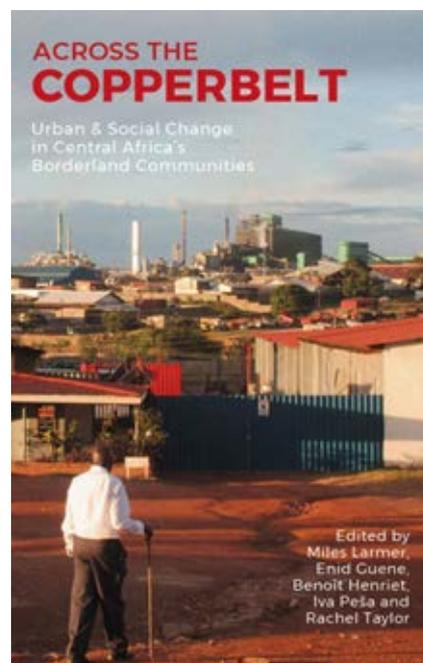
vital sources of information for the project, but these were equally historicised as a central aspect of the region's history of knowledge production: likewise, prominent academic analysts are treated as active participants in the history of the Copperbelt.

Copperbelt residents were themselves equally energetic (if politically less powerful) producers of knowledge about their own society. New arrivals to mining towns were advised by older relatives and kinship networks on how to manage (and to evade) state and company controls, to engage in a cash economy and cosmopolitan culture, and more generally how to live well in town. Labour unions, ethnic associations, and self-consciously elite '*cercles*' provided new ways to belong and to advance one's position and that of one's family and community. These organisations published and circulated documents that, in representing the interests of their members and followers, expressed grievances and advanced claims in ways that amounted to an assertion of an urban 'citizenship', and which have provided, for our research, an exceptionally valuable set of sources.

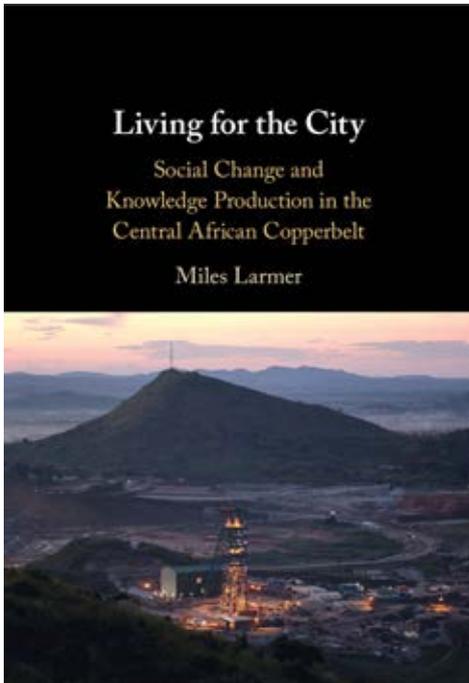
If Copperbelt Africans did not always operate within the framework of modernist thinking, they generally recognised differences between village and town life, and they produced, sought out, and circulated information about these differences. Young men and women sought advice from newspaper advice columns about how to reconcile romantic relationships with their families' understanding of a 'good' marriage. Popular songs, with rural melodies now adapted and played on 'western' instruments such as the guitar, were an ideal vehicle to explore the dissonance between the opportunities provided by a new life in town and the loss of one's established (rural) identity. In Congo in particular, theatrical performances and popular painting provided, both for performers and audiences, ways to understand the nature of 'modern' Copperbelt society and its relationship to both the past and to the 'rural', characterisations of which were often problematically conflated. The project's publications treat

such sources as equally significant characterisations of the Copperbelt's social history as more conventional secondary and primary written sources, and they form a central part of our analysis.

Following in the footsteps of our predecessor researchers, oral historical research was central to the project. As well as dozens of interviews with specific actors in Copperbelt society, from social welfare officers to musicians and visual artists, in 2018 we conducted c. 110 extended interviews with long-term residents of the Copperbelt towns of Mufulira (in Zambia) and Likasi (in DRC). The majority of these, conducted in a combination of Kiswahili, CiBemba, French, English and other languages, made use of a fixed set of open-ended questions to elucidate interviewees' understanding of their



'Across the Copperbelt' book, published 2021. (photo credit: Stephanie Lämmert)



'Living for the City' book, published 2021

lived experiences and of the historical changes they had witnessed. Interviews were not treated as providing self-evident truths about the nature of Copperbelt social history: interviewees are assumed to be influenced by the historical context in which they have lived and the forms of knowledge about it to which they had access and which indirectly framed their experience. They are therefore regarded as performative events in which our interviewees – like their predecessors over sixty years of such research – articulated their understanding of the region's history in relation to their personal experience, their understanding of interviewers' intentions and background, and the potential of the interview process to advance their own circumstances.

As I wrote in the 2020 ASC newsletter, this approach necessarily raises challenging questions about conducting research in a community that has been seeking to explain and represent itself to the wider world for many decades. Participants occasionally liken academic research to the exploitative model of mining companies, extracting the region's valuable social history and leaving nothing behind. We have sought, via our partnerships with the region's universities, and our close cooperation with researchers born and brought up in the Copperbelt, to learn from their expertise and share our ideas and findings throughout the period of research. We hope the fact that all our project publications will be freely available online will enable local communities to read, engage with and criticise our works in a way that has not generally been the case historically. While the project makes no claim to providing a definitive history of a complex region of Africa, linked as it has always been to local and global dynamics and processes of change, we hope it enables current and future generations of Copperbelt residents and researchers with access to a written version of their history, even as they criticise and develop new and better understandings of it.

Comparing the Copperbelt cont.

Rachel Taylor



In 2019 I visited Katanga for the first time to conduct oral historical research into women's paid labour in mining communities. Union Minière, the major mining company in the Belgian Congo, and its post-independence successor Gécamines, were pronatalist, paternalistic companies par excellence. They trained boys to become workers and heads of families, and girls to be wives and mothers. This social engineering, including efforts to train women as housewives, rested on the labour of female employees, such as nurses, teachers, instructors in women's centres. These women workers had been largely left out of historical and sociological writing on the Copperbelt.

One surprise of my interviews with these women, for me, was that – in contrast to Western media and societal discussions about the difficulty women workers faced in balancing domestic and workplace demands, – they did not describe a struggle “balancing” formal labour and motherhood. Indeed, many women had what would, in Britain today, seem large families – five, six, seven birth children, plus wards from their broader family – while simultaneously reaching senior positions at work. From my interviews and broader research, it became clear that company pronatalism facilitated female employees' efforts to combine paid work with motherhood, including single motherhood. Gécamines required mothers of young children – for instance to bring them for weighing and vaccination at company hospitals – but also provided female employees with leave so that they could fulfil such requirements, in addition to paid maternity leave before and after birth. Meanwhile, company creches (and schools) provided convenient childcare, and female workers, like their male counterparts, were paid more for each recognised dependent.

COVID made a further research trip impossible, so I turned instead to old issues of *Mwana Shaba*, the *Union Minière/Gécamines* newspaper. Its representations of women are generally domestic, shown as doting mothers or caring housewives. The late 1950s and early 1960s brought a small rush of articles encouraging young girls to get educated and work as nurses or teachers, corroborating and contextualising what my interviewees had said of their own work trajectories. But these newspaper reports paid little to no attention to working women in their own homes, as mothers, and as wives, or divorcees. It is only through interviews with women themselves that we can see beyond official representations, to how they organised their own families.

Rachel Taylor and Iva Pesa with interviewee, DR Congo



Comparing the Copperbelt cont.

Enid Guene



Banner advertisement for Karindula band, DR Congo

Historical research is often associated with paper archives. Yet working in regions in which, or on topics about which, “traditional” archives are scarce, one has to find creative ways to shed light on the past. This can be done by looking for archives in original places or using alternative forms of source materials. My research into the cultural and artistic history of the Copperbelt has examined songs, artworks, and comics. But the heart of my research has been talking to Copperbelt residents themselves.

In the summers of 2018 and 2019, I had long conversations with about 100 people in Congo and Zambia – mostly musicians, painters, actors, and cartoon artists. This has made it possible to ‘retrace’ the footsteps of artists, who passed away long before I first set foot in the region but left traces behind outside of any formal archive: art pieces preserved in galleries or private homes, influences on local forms of artmaking, and memories of those who knew them. This allowed me to gather information about little-studied waves of southwards migration, which gained momentum as Congo experienced increasing economic and political difficulties in the later twentieth century.

These conversations also provided evocative images; snapshots of a life spent in the Copperbelt. Some evoked the ambiance of “Zamrock” music shows they attended by the Mindolo Dam, where music was to be enjoyed accompanied

by the sizzling sound of meat being grilled on barbecues and the sight of the sun setting over the dam. Some described building their own guitars and learning to play new music styles by reproducing the sounds they heard on the radio, while others preferred Karindula, a giant banjo with four strings typical of the region. Others recalled cutting out comics out of magazines, sharing them with friends at school and keeping scrapbooks. Through such vignettes, the world of central African mining towns in the second half of the twentieth century becomes alive and is given texture beyond labour statistics. They provide the chance of gleaning small glimpses of things that would otherwise fade out of human memory and that physical archives often cannot capture or preserve.