

Profile of the Month

Profile of Dr. Jacques Depelchin: African Bay Heritage

African Bay Heritage: Welcome. We are glad you accepted our invitation to be the first to be profiled on our Newsletter, the African Bay Heritage Newsletter. Could you tell us about your background?

Depelchin: The acceptance of the invitation was not an easy one. I was born in 1942 in Sange about 40 km north of Lake Tanganyika in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. My father is Belgian and my mother, who passed away in April 1960, was Congolese. As colonial systems go, Belgian colonial rule was violent and repressive and as racially stratified as the Apartheid South Africa. In those days, children from mixed race families were not allowed to go to white schools. So when I was 6 my older brother and I were sent on a three-day trip by truck and boat to a boarding school run by the Brothers of Charity in Lusambo in the Kasai Province.

African Bay Heritage: How did coming from a mixed race family affect you as a child?

Depelchin: Coming from a mixed race family was not easy in a colonial context. In high school we were the only mulattoes in a white school. Back home, although all of my friends were black, my family's living conditions and circumstances did not make us part of the village. At school, the discrimination was subtle but indelible. For example, most textbooks were written for white Belgian kids. As a child, understanding the system was not easy and the notion of fighting it never really became an issue. Reading Frantz Fanon's famous Black Skin White Mask many years later helped me understand better what we went through.

African Bay Heritage: Your education, what was it like?

Depelchin: I graduated from high school in June 1961 and went to the University of Kinshasa (then known as Lovanium University because of its links to the University of Louvain in Belgium). My last year in High School (June 1960-June 1961) coincided with Independence, and this traumatic process, which led to the overthrow of Patrice Lumumba, our first and only elected Prime Minister. During those months, the propaganda against him was intense, especially from Belgium and its allies and the Catholic Church. At one point, when he was on the run, a Jesuit priest at the school said that he would give an immediate absolution to anyone who would kill Lumumba. Even though I was not, then, an admirer of Lumumba, I was shocked by a statement like this, coming from a priest, on top of it. It showed you how much hatred there was against Lumumba, just simply because he stood up for what was right. My father was different in many ways from other white folks. For example, among his colleagues, he was the only one who, at the time of the invasion of the Suez Canal in 1956, criticized the English position and actually supported the position of the Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. I finished at the University with a degree in Business Economics in 1965. President Mobutu Sese Seko came to power in November 21, 1965. One of his first visits was to the University and the reaction to him, generally, was very positive. By then, my plans were to continue studying abroad, in International Studies or in Economics. I spent 6 months in France, and then went to the London School of Oriental and African Studies for a year. From there, in 1967-68, I got a scholarship to study at the School for Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University in Bologna (Italy). It was during that year in Italy that I decided I wanted to study African History. I was accepted at Stanford University, and finished my Ph.D. thesis in 1974. As you may or may not remember those were years of turmoil the world over: in 1967, Che Guevara was killed in Bolivia, 1968 saw the assassination of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, students were rebelling all over the world, not just against whatever problems they were facing at home, but above all against the war in Vietnam. Meanwhile in the Congo, Mobutu's dictatorship was being tightened in increasingly bloody ways, targeting, in particular, the students.

African Bay Heritage: Could you recall the reason for the direction your studies took?

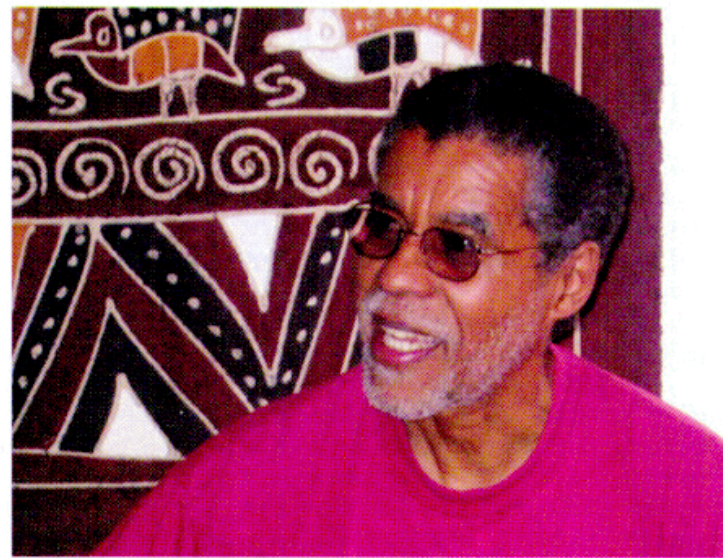
Depelchin: I was born in the Congo and yet knew very little of its history and less still of the history of the continent. I chose African History because I thought that it was something I needed to do not just for understanding the history of the Congo, but the entire continent. My thesis (From Pre-capitalism to Imperialism: The history of social formations in Uvira territory in Zaïre, 1800-1965) focused on the area where I was born. In those days, many historians did what was called Ethno-Histories. The thesis covered the southern part of what is known today as South Kivu Province in the eastern part of the DRC. It is into this area that the Tutsis, who had emigrated from Rwanda because of taxation disputes in Rwanda, had settled sometime between 1860 and 1880. They were cattle keepers and moved up to the high plateau on the western side of the rift valley where they became known as the Banyamulenge after the name of the place where they first settled. They were never allocated an administrative area. The other interesting aspect of this particular group of Tutsis, in comparison to the others who came to the Congo later, they did not come with Hutu. As cattle keepers, they developed with the local population (mostly cultivators) the kind of social relations they had with the Hutu back in Rwanda. The importance of this part of the thesis did not occur to me then, but that is another story. It was during my field research for the thesis (1971 to 1973) that Mobutu introduced changes, which indicated the kind of dictator he was going to be. Under the newly invented ideology of authenticity, the country was renamed Zaïre, a new currency was introduced, called the Zaïre; the three major universities were brought under one centralized administration and stripped of their academic autonomy, people were forced to change their names, a new dress code was introduced. The understanding and practice of politics by those in positions of power was dominated by a complete and total disregard of the wishes of the majority of the population. I will just mention one particular illustration of what we call Mobutism (or Mobutuism). In 1973, people began to murmur against corruption, embezzlement of public funds. Mobutu's response came at a major rally in the largest Stadium in Kinshasa, filled to capacity (70 to 80,000 people).

He advised people to "steal little by little, intelligently" (in Lingala: Yiba moke moke, Yiba na mayele). No wonder then that through the years, people were convinced that the fastest way to make money was to work for the government, preferably at the ministerial level. Politically, socially and economically these changes were devastating and continue to take their toll. Who was Mobutu? People who are interested can go to the numerous books and films, which provide ample documentation about his regime. There are a few things everyone must remember, especially in view of how Laurent-Désiré Kabila came to power and proceeded to carry on Mobutu's practice of solitary exercise of power, when everyone in the country was expecting a continuation of the democratic opening initiated during the National Sovereign Conference in 1991-2.

African Bay Heritage: What Happened after your graduation from Stanford?

Depelchin: I was determined to return to Africa to work. I applied for teaching positions at both the University of Dar es Salaam and at Ahmadu Bello University in Nigeria. I was accepted to both schools but decided to go to Dar es Salaam. Tanzania was progressive and was playing an important role in the fight against Portuguese colonial rule and apartheid. The role of the late Mwalimu Julius Nyerere in providing active support for liberation movements in Southern Africa (Mozambique, Angola, South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe) gave the

University community a sense of being participant and witness to crucial struggles for the future of the continent. My arrival in Dar es Salaam also coincided with Mozambique's independence from Portugal (June 25 1975). It was difficult not to feel that history was on our side, given the defeat of the US in Vietnam.



Dr. Jacques Depelchin

The Tanzanian intellectual and political climate was vibrant and, to a certain extent, still is today. On Sundays, we had what was known as ideological seminars, i.e. discussions on current topics open to students and staff alike. Sometimes discussions could be heated. To this day the History Department's Thursday seminars (begun by Professor T. Ranger in the 1960's) remain one of the most popular manifestations of intellectual and political life of the University of Dar es Salaam. It was there that Walter Rodney wrote his famous book *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. I taught in the history Department from 1975 to 1979. Some of the contemporaries included people like Mahmood Mamdani (now at Columbia University). Among the students was Yoweri Museveni (graduated by the time I arrived). It is not true, as has been stated recently in the *New York Times*, that Laurent-Désiré Kabila attended the University of Dar es Salaam. He did live in Dar es Salaam but did not interact with the university community. After I left, Professor Ernest Wamba dia Wamba joined the History Department.

In 1979 I moved with my family to Mozambique and taught in the departments of History and Education at the Eduardo Mondlane University (EMU). Eventually in the African Studies Center under the leadership of Aquino de Bragança we created a History Workshop to research the history of the Liberated Zones in Mozambique. I hope that one day someone will undertake to write a biography of Aquino de Bragança (he died in the same plane crash which killed President Samora Machel in October 1986). He was originally from Goa (like Pio Pinto an early Kenyan nationalist), a physicist by training, his commitment to African Liberation was such that he could have joined any of the movements in Guinea Bissau (Amílcar Cabral), Angola (Agostinho Neto) or Mozambique (Eduardo Mondlane). He chose the latter. After independence, he cofounded the Center for African Studies with Ruth First (South African member of the ANC and wife of Joe Slovo). The apartheid regime did not like the kind of work the Center was doing: researching and writing on the process of economic, social and political transformation in Mozambique and South Africa. Ruth First was killed in 1982 by a letter-bomb sent from South Africa at the very end of a UNESCO sponsored Conference on the role of research and education in the liberation of Southern Africa. Aquino survived, but it took him a couple of years to recover completely and resume fully his work as a special advisor to President Samora Machel.

Those years in Tanzania and Mozambique were probably my most formative, much more so than any academic program. The death of Ruth in 1982 and Aquino in 1986 were a big blow to the Center. In December of that year I left with the understanding that I would return after taking a year off to complete and write essays on the economic and political history of Joint Stock companies in the Congo. They were published as a book in 1992 by CODESRIA (*From the Congo Free State to Contemporary Zaire, 1885-1974*). I did not return except for a brief visit as a consultant for Oxfam-UK, in 1988. By 1992, I had decided to return home, in great part because it looked like the days of Mobutu were counted. I applied for a grant to research and write on: *Looking for the Healers in the Transition to Peace, Democracy and Justice*. The idea was to uncover what 30 years of dictatorial rule had done to the country, how communities had survived, and to find those key people whose spirit and integrity had come through the Mobutu period intact. I wanted to identify these healers.

As soon as I arrived in Kinshasa in March 1996, war erupted. Mobutu was dying and a year later President Laurent Kabila came to power. Many people thought that Kabila would continue the process of democratization. It did not happen. To some of us, it was like a continuation of Mobutu's regime. For example, he recruited as his media adviser Sakombi Inongo, the key architect of Authenticity under Mobutu. There was a deep sense in the country that Kabila had betrayed the confidence he received. The second war, this time against Kabila, started in 1998. This was the war I was drawn into. To understand how and why it is important you have to understand the national and regional context. In 1994, almost like a spectacle, the Rwanda Genocide unfolded without any of the signatories to the 1949 UN Convention Against Genocide doing anything to prevent it. In 1997, Professor Ernest Wamba Dia Wamba, then at the University of Dar es Salaam, myself and others produced our own Declaration Against Genocide, the basis of which would at least allow us, in conscience, to be faithful to it by doing all that was possible to stop or prevent yet another one. In the August 1998 we joined the rebellion. Our Political Declaration Against Kabila's Dictatorial rule stated that war was a last resort to force Kabila to resolve the crisis politically, and that as soon as he was willing to sit at the table, the war should be stopped. A Ceasefire was signed in July/August 1999 but it took another four years to reach the Global and Inclusive Agreement of April 2003.

African Bay Heritage: Thanks for giving us your time.

Depelchin: Thanks for having me.

