CHAPTER ONE

The Copperbelt in Theory

From "Emerging Africa" to the Ethnography of Decline

Calo cesu cileya pantanshi
Na 'five bantu tuleya pantanshi.

Our country is going forward,
And we the people, too.¹

_Copperbelt popular song (and opening quotation to A. L. Epstein's Politics in an African Community, 1958)_

Car owning remains a dream. A decade ago, young men in gainful employment were able to buy cars of all models. That era is gone, gone never to return again.

_Terence Musuku, "Dreams Are Made of This,"
Times of Zambia, July 21, 1989_

DREAMS ARE MADE OF THIS:
"MODERN AFRICA" TODAY

In the mid-1960s, everyone knew, Africa was "emerging." And no place was emerging faster or more hopefully than Zambia, the newly independent nation that had previously been known as Northern Rhodesia. The initiation of large-scale copper mining in the late 1920s had set off a burst of industrial development that had utterly transformed the country; by the time of Independence in 1964, that industrial growth seemed sure to propel the new nation rapidly along the path of what was called "modernization." From being a purely rural agricultural territory at the time of its takeover by Cecil Rhodes's British South Africa Company in the 1890s, the modern nation-state of Zambia had by 1969 arrived at an urban population of over 1 million (nearly 30 percent of the pop-
ulation), with total waged employment of over 750,000 (of a total pop­
ulation of just over 4 million) (Zambia 1973, 11), and a vibrant indus­
trial economy that made it one of the richest and most promising of the
new African states.

Observers from early on were stunned by the rapidity and scale of
the social transformation that had taken place along the urban, indus­
trial “line of rail” that ran from Livingstone in the south all the way to
the Copperbelt in the north (see Map 1). Within a few short years fol­
lowing the development of commercial copper mining, mining towns
sprang up all along the Copperbelt (Map 2). European colonists settled
the new towns in numbers, while “natives” came by the thousands to
seek work in the mines and other new industries. Africa was having its
“Industrial Revolution,” thought the missionary Sandilands, at a brutal
and blinding speed; the process had “something of the suddenness and
ruthlessness and irresistibility, on the social plane, of what, on the mil­
itary plane, we have become familiar with as the German ‘blitzkrieg’ ”
(Sandilands 1948, ix). The social anthropologist J. C. Mitchell con­
curred: “We in Northern Rhodesia to-day are living in a revolution, the
intensity of which, as far as we can judge, has not been equalled in
thousands of years” (1951, 20).

Already in 1941 Godfrey Wilson had sensed an epochal transfor­
mation:

Over the heart of a poor and primitive continent civilization has laid a finger
of steel; it has stirred a hundred tribes together; it has brought them new
wealth, new ambitions, new knowledge, new interests, new faiths and new
problems. (Wilson 1941, 9)

Thirty-five years later, Robert Bates remained equally impressed:

Less than a century ago, Zambia was exclusively agrarian; in the present era,
it is a society dependent upon large-scale industry. Once characterized by
village society, the territory that is now Zambia contains a score of cities of
100,000 or more persons, and these cities contain over 40 percent of its
population. Where but a little over fifty years ago forests once stood, there
now stand copper mines; and the marketed produce from these mines makes
Zambia one of the world’s leading exporters of this mineral. (Bates 1976, 1)

There was already something a little off here. Wilson’s dramatic vi­
sion of “small-scale society” being suddenly replaced by “large-scale”
industrialism ignored both the shallowness of “the industrial revolu­
tion” (which was largely confined to mining) as well as the way that
Africans in the region had been bound up in large-scale political struc­
tures and long-distance trade for centuries before. Nor was wage labor so new in the 1920s and 1930s as it appeared—Africans from Northern Rhodesia had already been migrating in numbers to work in the mines in Katanga across the border with the Belgian Congo for at least twenty years, and some had gone as far as Rhodesia and South Africa even earlier (Perrings 1979, 14–23; Parpart 1983, 31–32; Meebelo 1986, 19).
Bates’s “score of cities of 100,000 or more persons,” meanwhile, turned out on inspection to be only five. The overdramatic and exaggerated narration of the rise of industrialism and urbanism here reflected the extent to which the Zambian experience captured something in the modernist imagination and came not only to exemplify but to epitomize the revolution that was understood to be taking place in Africa.

It was neither rapid change nor the existence of mineral wealth alone that made Zambia and its industrial core, the Copperbelt, such a good symbol of “emerging Africa.” Africa, after all, had seen plenty of both in the past. Instead, it was the particular character of the social and economic transformation that captured the imagination. Zambia at its 1964 Independence was a highly urbanized nation, and newly so. The mining towns that had sprung up on the Copperbelt symbolized newness in a way that older cities could not. Here, unlike many other parts of Africa, the very idea of cities was a “modern” one. And “urbanization” was understood to involve not simply a movement in space but an epochal leap in evolutionary time. Cooper has explained:
As Africans flocked into cities in ever greater numbers in the 1950s, the dualist approach to urbanization suggested that they were entering the mainstream of history. The key word in the urban anthropology of those years was “adaptation,” and studies stressed how organizations from ethnic associations to trade unions eased the inevitable movement into an urban way of life. The liberal affirmation that the African was becoming an urbanite was an affirmation of modernity. (Cooper 1983a, 12)

Urbanization, then, seemed to be a teleological process, a movement toward a known end point that would be nothing less than a Western-style industrial modernity. An urbanizing Africa was a modernizing one, and there was no place urbanizing faster than Zambia. What is more, the expanding mining economy that was driving the urbanization process was a stereotypically industrial one, whose noisy smelting plants and sooty miners seemed to reiterate a well-known chapter in the usual narratives of the West’s own rise to modernity, evoking particularly the
iconic images of the early period of British industrialization. And everyone knew where that had led. A certain convergence with a familiar Western model thus seemed to be no speculation; it was directly observable in the smokestacks that dramatically appeared on the horizon as a traveler approached the Copperbelt from the south. What was happening along the line of rail, as Max Gluckman and others insisted, was nothing less than “the African Industrial Revolution” (Gluckman 1961; Moore and Sandilands 1948).

Until recently, this vision seemed to many a convincing and straightforwardly descriptive account of what was happening in Zambia. Throughout the 1960s and most of the 1970s, we must remember, Zambia was not reckoned an African “basket case,” but a “middle-income country,” with excellent prospects for “full” industrialization and even ultimate admission to the ranks of the “developed” world. In 1969 its per capita gross domestic product (GDP) was not only one of the highest in Africa (more than three times that of Kenya, and twice that of Egypt, for instance), it was also significantly higher than that of such “up-and-coming” middle-income nations as Brazil, Malaysia, South Korea, and Turkey. Indeed, with what appeared to be a rapidly rising per capita GDP of $431, it did not seem unreasonable to suppose that Zambia might soon reach the ranks of at least the poorer European nations such as Portugal, with a 1969 per capita GDP of just $568, or Spain, with $867 (United Nations 1973, 627–629). Even as late as 1979, Zambia was still being reckoned a “middle-income country,” whose GNP justified a ranking above such countries as the Philippines, Thailand, or Egypt (World Bank 1979, 126).4

Somewhere along the way, though, “the African Industrial Revolution” slipped off the track. The script of Zambian “emergence” via industrialization and urbanization has been confounded by more than two decades of steep economic decline. According to the World Bank, per capita income in Zambia fell by more than 50 percent from 1974 to 1994 (World Bank 1996, 562). GNP per capita, meanwhile, shrunk by an average of 3.1 percent per year from 1980 to 1993, by which time the figure amounted to only $380, leaving Zambia near the bottom of the World Bank’s hierarchy of “developing nations” (only 25 countries ranked lower) (World Bank 1995, 162). As of 1991, the bank reports, about 68 percent of Zambians were living in households with expenditures below a level sufficient to provide “basic needs,” and 55 percent did not have sufficient income even to meet basic nutritional needs (World Bank 1996, 563).
Many causes could be cited for this precipitous decline. Probably the most important is the simplest: a steady decline in the buying power of Zambia’s copper on the world market. Copper is the overwhelmingly dominant feature of the export-dependent Zambian economy and has historically accounted for some 90 percent of its exports. And in the years following the oil shock of the mid-1970s, the terms of trade for copper exporters declined sharply. As the table below shows, the market value (per unit) of Zambian exports fluctuated but remained mostly flat. The decline came about chiefly in relation to the goods that those exports could purchase, the cost of which rose markedly against copper, making exports effectively worth much less. To put the matter concretely, where in 1970 a ton of Zambian exports would have bought a certain quantity of imported goods, by the mid-1980s it would have taken more than three tons to buy the same quantity of goods. Since the volume of Zambia’s copper exports also declined over the period, the buying power of the nation’s exports declined even more rapidly than did the terms of trade. Table 1 (derived from Jamal and Weeks 1993, 84) and Figure 1 (a graphic representation of the last line of Table 1) show how badly the buying power of Zambia’s exports declined in the years that preceded the start of this study.

Not only the terms of trade but copper production itself declined through the period. Average annual production in the decade following Independence (1965–74) was some 672,000 tons (Daniel 1979, 87), but by 1995 several mines had closed, and the others were mostly showing declining yields. Production had dwindled to 327,000 tons and looked likely to decline even further (World Bank 1996, 562). There is no doubt that this drop in production reflected substantial operating inefficiencies, as has often been charged, as well as a declining copper content in the ore being mined (as is typical of aging mines). But, as Jamal and Weeks have pointed out, it is not surprising to see output decline while external prices are dramatically declining—indeed, this is just what classical economic theory would predict, though such obvious external factors have often been ignored by the proponents of a simplistic “African mismanagement” explanation for recent economic contraction (Jamal and Weeks 1993, 15, 84; see also Brown and Tiffen 1992).

Equally important to Zambia’s hard times of late has been the burden of external debt, which continued to grow as the economy contracted, with disastrous results. At the end of 1995 Zambia’s total debt amounted to $6.7 billion, and debt servicing took 41 cents of every dollar earned by exports (World Bank 1996, 562, 565). Long-term ex-