

Congomania in Academia

Recent Historical Research on the Belgian Colonial Past

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The Congo has recently been the subject of much academic research. This article discusses the major trends and developments. It primarily focuses on the Congo crisis of 1960, which was commemorated in 2010 and has been inquired into by many historians, including American, British and Russian ones. A comparison of their conclusions reveals that Flanders has largely come to terms with its colonial past, but that the French-speaking community has a more problematic memory. Belgian academia, by contrast, has left the old controversies about Leopold II and Lumumba behind and embarked on the path of new imperial history. It approaches the Congolese past from new angles and with new paradigms, such as reciprocity, science, exhibition, representation, etc. Congolese academia suffers from the economic problems of the country, but has managed to produce a number of studies, focusing mainly on regions, religion, and resistance. Strikingly, Congolese historians have little criticism of the colonial era.

Interest in Belgium's colonial past has been on the increase during the last decade. It was triggered by two books. First, Adam Hochschild's published *King Leopold's Ghosts* (New York 1998), in which he estimated that Leopold II's exploitation of the Congo led to the death of half of the Congolese population – some ten million individuals – and therefore labeled the King's rule genocide. In 1999, Belgian sociologist Ludo De Witte caused even more controversy, accusing the Belgian establishment of knowledge and active support of the murder of Patrice Lumumba, the first Congolese Prime Minister, in January 1961. A Parliamentary Research Committee was set up, which concluded that a number of Belgian government members and other Belgian players are morally culpable in the circumstances that led to Lumumba's death. A huge party of the country was puzzled. An attempt to give a contextualized and nuanced vision of this colonial past – the exhibition *The Memory of the Congo* in the Royal Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren in 2005, on the occasion of the 175th anniversary of the establishment of Belgium – was fiercely criticized as being part of the Belgian Foreign Minister of the time Louis Michel's attempts to resume ties with the Congo. A change of course by his successor, Karel De Gucht, did nothing to reduce the tensions.

Only the recent anniversaries: 1908 (establishment of the Belgian Congo); 1909 (death of Leopold II) and 1960 (Congo's independence) have provided indications that Belgians are beginning to come to terms with their colonial past. The 50th anniversary of Congolese independence, in 2010, brought about a particular focus of attention, including a dominant narrative and a widely acclaimed author – at least in the Flemish part of the country – in David Van Reybrouck.¹

This archeologist and cultural historian, who left academia to devote his life to writing, published a comprehensive overview of the Congo's past. The book was awarded some of the major literary prizes in Flanders and the Netherlands, such as the AKO Literatuurprijs and the Libris Geschiedenis Prijs. More than two hundred thousand copies of *Congo. Een geschiedenis* have been sold, an impressive number for a book written in Dutch. An English translation from HarperCollins is due to appear in 2012. Van Reybrouck has produced a lucid and compelling volume, combining science and literature and covering a vast array of subjects, stretching from the pre-colonial era to the twenty-first century. The book also appeared at the right moment. Being published in May 2010 and having been announced long before, it profited from the Belgian Congomania. It also served as a catharsis in Belgium's – or at least Flanders' – dealing with the colonial past.

Meanwhile, historical research has not stood still. Both in Belgium and beyond, professional historians have rediscovered the Congo. Their findings have led to historical works outnumbering popular literature on the subject, although remaining in the shadows. These writings rarely reach the broader public, due mostly to their specialized subjects, different languages and publication by international publishing houses.

This review article aspires to give an overview of scholarly historical activity on the Congo during the last few years.² It primarily elaborates on the Congo crisis of the early 1960s, a topic that has recently been the subject of extensive international research. This focus enables a more in-depth discussion, and foreign scholars' interpretations will be compared to the Belgian representation of the facts. In a subsequent chapter, the article gives a broad overview of the other main issues colonial historians are currently working on. Finally, it discusses the main fields of interest of Congolese historians in relation to the colonial past of their country.

1 Geert Castryck, 'Whose History is History?: Singularities and Dualities of the Public Debate on Belgian Colonialism', in: Lévai Csaba (ed.), *Europe and the World in European Historiography* (Pisa 2006) 71-88; Idesbald Goddeeris, 'Congo in onze navel. De omgang met het koloniale verleden in België en zijn buurlanden', *Ons Erfdeel* 54:1 (2011) 40-49.

2 A previous review of the historiography on the Congo is Guy Vanthemsche, 'The Historiography of Belgian Colonialism in the Congo', in: Lévai Csaba (ed.), *Europe and the World in European Historiography* (Pisa 2006) 89-119.



The Congolese decolonization process has not only fascinated Belgian historians. A number of foreign scholars have also published monographs on the events of 1960. John Kent, a Reader in International Relations at the London School of Economics, has examined the role of the US and the UN in the Congo crisis of the early 1960s.³ Sergey Mazov, a chief research fellow at the Institute of World History of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow, has analyzed Soviet policy towards Western Africa and the Congo in 1956-1964.⁴ Bruce Kuklick, retired Professor at the University of Pennsylvania, and Emmanuel Gerard, Professor of History and Social Sciences at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium, and one of the experts in the Belgian Parliamentary Commission on Lumumba in 2000-2001, are preparing a monograph solely on the murder of Lumumba, which is now being reviewed by an American academic publisher.⁵

Lumumba was elected the first Congolese Prime Minister in May 1960, but lost much sympathy from the first day of independence, thanks in part to his critical speech at the celebrations. Without international support, he was doomed to lose control. Some regions, such as the rich Katanga region, even asserted claims to independence. In September 1960, Lumumba was deposed by President Kasavubu, and placed under house arrest by Colonel Mobutu. In late November, he escaped, but was captured by Mobutu's soldiers and imprisoned. On January 17, Lumumba was transported to Elizabethville (Lubumbashi), the capital of Katanga, where he was killed the very same day.

The level of Belgian involvement in the murder of Lumumba remains stunning. Some Belgians, including at the top of the Katanga Gendarmerie,

3 John Kent, *America, the UN and Decolonisation: Cold War Conflict in the Congo 1959-1964* (New York 2010).

4 Sergey Mazov, *A Distant Front in the Cold War: The USSR in West Africa and the Congo, 1956-1964* (Stanford 2010); see also the discussion on *H-Diplo Roundtable Review* 12:28 (2011), 7 July 2011. <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XII-28.pdf> [20 August 2011].

5 Emmanuel Gerard and Bruce Kuklick, 'Death in the Congo: Murdering Patrice Lumumba'. I would like to thank the authors for presenting me with their manuscript. The commission's experts later wrote a monograph in Dutch and French: Luc De Vos et al., *Lumumba: De complotten? De moord* (Leuven 2004) and idem, *Les secrets de l'affaire Lumumba* (Brussels 2005).

◀ The arrested Patrice Lumumba, Leopoldville, 2 December 1960. Lumumba, deposed Prime Minister of the Congo, with his hands tied behind his back with rope, is assisted into a military vehicle on arrival at Leopoldville Airport. ANP/Topfoto.

witnessed Lumumba's arrival at Elizabethville airport. The Military Police, consisting of blacks but led by Captain Julien Gat, took Lumumba and two other detainees, and transported them to the bungalow of Lucien Brouwez, a farmer. Police Inspector Frans Verscheure had designated these temporary whereabouts. After subjecting the convicts to a humiliating visit by Katanga's chief Moïse Tshombe, Gat and Verscheure led them to a spot off the beaten track and gave the orders to black soldiers to shoot them. They would later claim that they thought they were bringing the convicts to a more distant prison and would emphasize that they were obeying black officials' orders. Nevertheless, their involvement was significant. Just before Lumumba's death was made public, on February 13, Gat participated in the obfuscation of the murder: he drove around with three blacks disguised as the three detainees, who subsequently escaped and were allegedly killed by locals in the Kasai. Meanwhile, the real bodies of Lumumba and his companions had been re-buried, and a couple of days later, dissolved in acid by Gerard Soete, the white counselor to the Chief Commissioner of the Katanga police, and his brother Michel.

All of these Belgians were low-grade servicemen. However, higher-ranking Belgians and government members in Brussels were involved in the developments that led up to this killing. First, they supported Tshombe's aspirations for an independent Katanga from the very beginning. They provided him with money, training, weapons, staff and advice. This aid was far-reaching: in November 1960, a delegation of the National Bank of Belgium assisted Katanga in preparing its own currency and a month later, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs (Pierre Wigny) and of African Affairs (Harold d'Aspremont Lynden) hosted Moïse Tshombe at an official dinner on the eve of King Baudouin's wedding. Simultaneously, Belgium 'worked day and night to foster anti-Lumumba activity' in Leopoldville. In September, Wigny, and the even more convinced d'Aspremont Lynden, counseled President Kasavubu on how he could overthrow Lumumba's government without greatly breaching the constitution, and in October they talked Mobutu, the Chief of Staff of the Congolese National Army, into arresting Lumumba. Some of their telegraphs have become iconic quotes: Wigny wrote to the Belgian Consul-General in Brazzaville that Lumumba should be put where he could do no harm ('mettre hors état de nuire', September 6) and in a telegram to the Belgian ambassador in Elizabethville, d'Aspremont Lynden suggested his 'élimination définitive' (October 6).

King Baudouin also crossed the line. In his July 21st National Day speech, just three weeks after Congolese independence, he pointed at the duty to cooperate with those tribes and peoples who wanted to stay friends with Belgium. In early August, he urged Belgian Prime Minister Eyskens to resign or form a new government after the latter, in compliance with a UN resolution, recalled 1,500 Belgian troops from the Congo. In October 1960, he was informed by his Chief of Staff that Mobutu and Tshombe had agreed on

the ‘complete, and if possible the physical, neutralization of Lumumba’. The following day, the King wrote a letter to Tshombe suggesting his support: ‘An association of 80 years, like that which has united our two peoples, has created emotional bonds too close to be dissolved by the politics of a single man’.

Of course, this was the era of the Cold War, and Belgium had not yet come to terms with recent events, such as World War II and the Royal Question. Moreover, Belgium was not the only country involved in the crisis. The Congolese were responsible, too. Young, inexperienced and divided, they made several mistakes from the very beginning. Additionally, there were, of course, the United States and the United Nations.

Their involvement was examined by John Kent, who inquired into the relationship between the US, its allies and the UN. Apart from international studies, Kent is particularly interested in economics. He stretches his study until July 1964, when Moïse Tshombe was nominated Congolese Prime Minister. An extension until the time of Mobutu’s coup in 1965 might have been more logical. More fundamentally, Kent only made use of American and select British sources, and has not worked with UN, Belgian or Congolese material. He consequently sees the Belgian and other perspectives through American lenses, which is interesting, but at the same time one-sided.

Regarding the US, Kent’s conclusions are quite moderate. While he admits that ‘the Americans [...] did little to halt the disastrous road down which Belgian colonial rule had started in the Congo’ (188), he concludes that ‘there is no available evidence [...] to indicate direct CIA involvement in Lumumba’s death’ (33). Regarding Belgium, he does not write a lot about the events of January 17, 1961 and the Belgian involvement, but elaborates more on Belgian (and British) economic interests. Indeed, he argues that

Belgians, acting in Brussels, but more particularly in the Congo, aimed to exercise influence over the future independent state and sought to preserve the economic benefits, both individual and collective, to be gained from settler-dominated enterprises (188).

There are many examples to strengthen the argument. As early as the first months of 1960, senior officials of Union Minière and Société Générale approached the Central African Federation (today Zambia and Zimbabwe), causing rumors that they were preparing for Katangan secession. The Belgian government created a significant debt it was happy to hand over to the independent Congo. In July, the US diplomat in Elisabethville reported that the Belgians intended to relocate all head offices of Congo firms, including Sabena, from Leopoldville to Katanga. This did not happen, but the results of Belgian economic policy in Katanga are obvious. In 1959 the Belgian Congo received \$30 million from diamond exports, but in 1961 the government of Congo received only \$300,000, despite production being more or less the same (101). Also in the years following Lumumba’s death, many Belgians – businessmen as

well as politicians, including Spaak – were reluctant to reintegrate the Congo and support Leopoldville.

These examples support Kent's thesis that business interests lay at the heart of the Congo crisis. The Western world made use of the Cold War framework and highlighted an alleged Soviet threat in order to justify its interventions and to protect its enterprises and income. However, at the end of the day, it was Brussels, not Moscow or Lumumba, who breached international law. It was capitalism, not communism, that was the key element. Kent therefore argues, more generally, that the US played a proactive role in the origins and development of the Cold War, contrary to theories blaming Stalin and the Russians.

Indeed, communism had never been a threat in the Congo, neither materially nor ideologically. Prior to Congolese independence, American diplomats labeled Lumumba an opportunist rather than a Marxist. The events of July forced him to contact the Soviets, but this does not mean that he shared their ideological views. For their part, the Soviets did not develop a global or African strategy, as is stated by Sergey Mazov on the basis of his examination of Soviet archives. On the one hand, Mazov shows that Moscow approached Liberia in 1956 and aided Guinea in 1958. This puts Kent's general argument into perspective, although Mazov also concludes that 'the Soviet plans were poorly conceived and unrealistic, and their implementation failed, mainly due to Soviet miscalculations' (255). On the other hand, he has not come across any new information regarding the Congo apart from that which is already known, such as Khrushchev's protest in the UN against the pro-Western Hammarskjöld and the limited aid to Lumumba in the summer of 1960. Although it is true that Mazov mainly worked in the archives of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and that materials from the KGB and the Soviet military remain classified, his argument that the Soviet Union 'was very cautious in offering aid to Congolese political organizations and leaders' (86) is unanimously accepted.

Communism was a specious argument for intervention in the Congo. However, Western interference provoked huge consequences. Kent phrases them bluntly:

a serious and detrimental effect on the Congo's capacity to translate the political gains from independence into an economically viable state. [...] The immediate successors to King Léopold's regime in the early 1900s, and their organizational structures in the form of Tanganyika Concessions, the Société Générale and the УМНК allowed British and Belgian capital to operate in the Congo with a damaging impact on African society (196).

He calls this 'a neglected aspect of decolonization in the Congo' and argues that classic viewpoints, such as the claim that decolonization came as a surprise, are inaccurate. Even the Belgian military intervention on July 8 was inappropriate, in his opinion: 'The mutiny of the *Force Publique*, and its

unpleasant consequences for some Europeans, was essentially resolved by Lumumba' and 'used as an excuse' (191).

Belgian memory of 1960

The only Belgian historian to recently publish a monograph on the decolonization process, Zana Aziza Etambala, ends his story in July 1960, at the dawn of independence.⁶ He has worked on newly discovered sources, produced by Belgian officials, generals and missionaries (not by businessmen), and he elaborates on a number of Congolese accounts and issues. However, he is very moderate and in the introduction even apologizes for his title, 'The Decline of a Model Colony': 'We certainly do not want to put the Belgian colonial realizations in a negative light' (10). Does this mean that Kent's imputation of neglect is correct? How did Belgian authors write about Congolese decolonization on its 50th anniversary?

At first sight, David Van Reybrouck is quite critical of Belgium.⁷ He calls the economic arrangements on the eve of June 30 'incredibly cunning' (*onwaarschijnlijk leep*, 280), the sending of troops an 'ill-fated decision' (*onzalige beslissing*, 311) and comments that Belgium's will to 'preserve order (and economy) – because what was built in seventy-five years shouldn't break down in a month' was 'understandable but stupid' (312). Van Reybrouck admits that Lumumba's deposition by Kasavubu was 'suggested by many Western advisers' (321) and devotes seven lines to Belgian and American conspiracies to kill Lumumba in October and November 1960. He also mentions the involvement of Belgians in the actual assassination and the annihilation of the body, and admits that 'the decision to transfer Lumumba to Katanga was a common plan of the authorities in Leopoldville, their Belgian advisers, and the authorities in Brussels, but' – he goes on – 'the decision to kill Lumumba was made by the Katangese authorities. Especially Minister Godefroid Munongo' (326).

At the end of the day, Van Reybrouck is indeed less critical of the Belgians than of the other players. This has been illustrated extensively in some critical reviews. Ludo De Witte lists a whole range of details which are absent from Van Reybrouck's account of January 17, and argues that Van Reybrouck reduces the whole crisis to a fight between black pretenders to the throne, in which the outside world played only a marginal role.⁸ Joris Note

6 Zana Aziza Etambala, *De teloorgang van een modelkolonie. Belgisch-Congo 1958-1960* (Leuven 2008). The author was born in 1955 in the Congo, but moved to Belgium at the age of seven and was raised by foster parents in the West-Flemish village Zwevezele.

7 David Van Reybrouck, *Congo. Een geschiedenis* (Amsterdam 2010).

8 Ludo De Witte, 'David Van Reybrouck masseert westerse bemoeienissen in Congo weg' and 'Detailkritiek op tachtig jaar Congo volgens David Van Reybrouck', *Apache*, 18 May 2010. <http://www.apache.be>.

shows how Lumumba is systematically shown in a negative light, and how positive aspects are omitted.⁹ These reviewers have certainly not done their job *sine ira et studio*: Note writes that Europeans today could learn from Lumumba's political virtues of militancy, courage, and fidelity, and De Witte relates the new Belgian interest in colonial history to recent neocolonial aspirations. Nevertheless, their criticism is not entirely wrong. In other places, too, Van Reybrouck is selective and glosses over the Belgians' role. For instance, he quotes from Baudoin's letter to Tshombe (313) but fails to mention that the King wrote this a day after he learned about Tshombe and Mobutu's pact and accordingly neglects to stress the significance of the letter.¹⁰ Van Reybrouck's conclusion is quite moderate for the Belgians: 'nobody in particular, or rather everybody' was responsible (241). It was 'not a matter of reasonable people versus irrational ones, of good versus bad ones, but [...] idealists stood against idealists' (300). This is obviously far too general and neglects the interest of business. In this respect, Van Reybrouck is a Flemish Niall Ferguson, who popularized a more positive and conservative reading of the British Empire's past.

Having written this, one should also emphasize that Van Reybrouck has made a great step forward. In other publications, the Parliamentary Commission's conclusions appear to have slipped into oblivion. In Flanders, an abundance of memories and picture books on the colonial era – 'The Most Beautiful Time of my Life', as one is entitled – appeared in 2010, all of them compiling a benign and nostalgic picture, while leaving out the negative aspects of colonization.¹¹ The bestseller by Peter Verlinden, *The Tragedy of the Colonials*, on their exodus in the summer of 1960, is highly illustrative of the need of the last generation alive to remember their experiences.¹² In Wallonia, memory of 1960 is even more selective. A book on 1960 co-authored by six major French-speaking authorities on the Congo is completely silent about Belgian involvement in Lumumba's murder. Admitting that the circumstances 'were described in various ways, but none of them completely corresponds to the truth', it denies the Parliamentary Commission's conclusions, despite

9 Joris Note, 'David Van Reybrouck tegen Lumumba. Was dat nu wel nodig?', *De Wereld Morgen*, 27 March 2011. <http://www.dewereldmorgen.be/print/42332> (20 augustus 2011). See also this article, 59.

10 Luc De Vos et al., *Lumumba: De complotten? De moord* (Leuven 2004) 532-533. See also pp. 58-59 of this article.

11 Peter Verlinden, *Belgisch Kongo. 50 Jaar koloniale herinneringen* (Leuven 2010); Bob Vanhee and Julien Van Remoortere, *Onze dagen in Congo. Verhalen van oud-kolonialen* (Tielt 2009); Jan Raymaekers, *Congo. De schoonste tijd van mijn leven* (Leuven 2009).

12 Reprinted for the fourth time in 2009: Peter Verlinden, *Weg uit Congo. Het drama van de kolonialen* (Leuven 2009).

one of the Commission's members, Jules Gérard-Libois, being the book's co-author.¹³ Even in the Congo, images are distorted. The established Congolese historian Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem spends only fifteen lines on January 17, giving Congolese details, remaining general about the West ('a methodical policy by Brussels, New York and Washington, supported by associates in Kinshasa'), referring to the Parliamentary Commission, and only denouncing that from January 1960 onwards, the West 'concentrated to hide the truth from the Congolese people'.¹⁴

New Imperial History

Another recent book on Lumumba is completely different. Karen Bower, a South African specialist in African French-language literature now lecturing at the University of San Francisco, approaches the figure of Patrice Lumumba from a gender perspective. She does so in various ways. First, she starts from Lumumba himself, discussing the women in his personal life as well as his theoretical views on the position of women in the independent Congo. Secondly, she introduces us to two female activists in the decolonization process: Andrée Blouin, a writer from what is now the Central African Republic who collaborated with Lumumba, and Léonie Abo, the wife of Pierre Mulele who briefly was a minister in Lumumba's government and led the Maoist insurrection in Kwilu in 1964. Third, Bower analyzes the representation of Lumumba by Aimé Césaire and Raoul Peck, showing how deeply this has been affected by gendered and colonial power relations.¹⁵

Bower takes a challenging approach due to the lack of sources – she regularly relies on male translations. Still, she remains highly original. Leaving old debates behind and shedding a completely new light on Lumumba, she links up with what is called 'new imperial history'. Influenced by postmodernist, feminist, literary and subaltern studies, the postcolonial turn has led to a history of social and cultural aspects much more than (international) political ones. New imperial historians do not start from a nation-centered model, but have illuminated links between metropolis and colonies, cultural and social interconnection, migration and networks.

13 Jules Gérard-Libois, Jean Kestergat, Jacques Vanderlinden, Benoît Verhaegen and Jean-Claude Willame, *Congo 1960: Echech d'une décolonisation* (Brussels 2010) 100. Gérard-Libois died in 2005, but the book reissued some of his articles. The reprint of older texts – also from Stengers – is another illustration of the sticking to old narratives.

14 Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem, *Nouvelle histoire du Congo: Des origines à la République Démocratique* (Brussels, Kinshasa 2009) 484.

15 Karen Brouwer, *Gender and Decolonization in the Congo: The Legacy of Patrice Lumumba* (New York 2010).

They challenge Eurocentrism and highlight the colonized resistance as well as collaboration. They reason that architecture, science, and language were all weapons in power relations and tools in gaining ascendancy. In sum, they refrain from the never-ending debates between advocates and critics of colonialism by transcending them and instead disclosing colonial mentalities, racial imaginings, imperial legacy, and popular memory and representation.¹⁶

A great deal of the latest Belgian historical research is inspired by this new imperial history. Belgian academia has indeed left the old controversies about Leopold II and Lumumba behind, and now looks at colonial history from completely different angles. This is not a refuge from public debate. In their eyes, it is time for new approaches and new debates, the difficult outset and conclusion of Belgian colonialism having been sufficiently explored.¹⁶

A first new paradigm is reciprocity, which opposes to the old view that benefits and influence went only in one direction, from the metropolis to the colony. Guy Vanthemsche has done pioneering work on Congo's economic and political impact on Belgium.¹⁸ He observes little political influence: both parliament and political parties showed no enthusiasm for the colony. Congo was governed by a select group in Brussels and did not even have an obvious impact on Belgian foreign policy. Vanthemsche clearly contradicts the common image that Congo turned Belgium into a major player on the international scene. He rather subscribes to the view that Belgian colonization had been set up to make profits and elaborates on economic influence. Interestingly, Vanthemsche devotes a separate chapter to the independent Congo. However, it largely covers the Mobutu era and approaches 1960 and the subsequent years mainly from a diplomatic angle.

Cultural influence by the Congo on Belgium is discussed in a volume edited by Vincent Viaene, David Van Reybrouck, and Bambi Ceuppens.¹⁹ Some of the chapters reveal a certain impact. The Belgian state's take-over of the Congo Free State in 1908 coincided with a national identity crisis that forged Belgian elites together around the new colonial project. But this was not entirely successful, the 'annexationists' being defeated in the elections of that year. Exhibitions and museums on the Congo propagated an *esprit colonial* fastening the nation to the monarchy and functioned as an exotic refuge from modernity. A number of visual art styles, including art nouveau and art deco,

16 Stephen Howe (ed.), *The New Imperial Histories Reader* (London 2009).

17 This overview is certainly not comprehensive and only focuses on published books. For a more detailed discussion of research at postgraduate level, see *Mededelingenblad Belgische Vereniging Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 30:2 (2008) 8-14 and 32:1 (2010) 8-9.

18 Guy Vanthemsche, *Congo. De impact van de kolonie op België* (Tielt 2007).

19 Vincent Viaene, David Van Reybrouck, Bambi Ceuppens (eds.), *Congo in België. Koloniale cultuur in de metropool* (Leuven 2009).

were partly influenced by Africa. However, many other authors state that there was little exchange and influence. The Congo was given a special, marginal status in Belgian national celebrations and in education. It did not spur much architectural or literary innovation. Emotional and sexual relations did not result in cultural exchange but in hidden mulattos. The Flemish press did not pay much attention to the colony. For the most part, Belgians met with Congolese at forums created by Belgians. They received colonial souvenirs from missionaries in the family, or read advertisements promoting Western products through Congolese references.

The volume includes several chapters on displaying the Congo. Its authors have since continued working on this. Sarah Van Beurden defended her dissertation *Authentically African: African Arts and Postcolonial Cultural Politics in Transnational Perspective (Congo (DRC), Belgium and the USA 1955-1980)* at the University of Pennsylvania in 2010. Maarten Couttenier published a history of the Africa Museum in Tervuren.²⁰ In his doctorate, he had also worked on this topic, linking it to colonial sciences, particularly to anthropology.²¹ Colonial sciences is a separate field within new imperial history. Ruben Mantels analyzed the Congo-related activities of the K. U. Leuven (which established the Congo's first university in 1954; Lovanium, now the University of Kinshasa); the Liège social scientist Marc Poncelet gave an overview of how the colony had an impact on the development of an abundance of university departments, institutions, journals, etc.; Marie-Madeleine Arnold-Gulikers wrote biographies of some major Belgian scientists in the Congo; and Jo Tollebeek coordinated an exhibition and catalogue on the ethnographica collected by the missionary Leo Bittremieux in the West-Congolese region Mayombé, which is now part of the K. U. Leuven heritage collection.²¹ This is an impressive number. Of course, the quality of these books differs. Some authors are rather descriptive and empiric, while others convincingly reveal how the acquisition of knowledge went together with controlling, dividing, and valuing the indigenous. Science was indeed a tool of empire *par excellence*.

Missionary history has chiefly been elaborated upon at the K. U. Leuven. Some works are more traditional, such as Ria Christens' study of the Sisters of the Annunciade, who settled in the Congo in 1931, and later also in Burundi.²³ However, the Kadoc Documentation and Research Centre for Religion, Culture

20 Maarten Couttenier, *Als muren spreken. Het museum van Tervuren 1910-2010* (Tervuren 2010).

21 Maarten Couttenier, *Congo tentoongesteld. Een geschiedenis van de Belgische antropologie en het museum van Tervuren (1882-1925)* (Leuven 2005).

22 Ruben Mantels, *Geleerd in de tropen. Leuven, Congo & de wetenschap, 1885-1960* (Leuven 2007); Marc Poncelet, *L'invention des sciences coloniales*

belges (Paris 2008); Marie-Madeleine Arnold-Gulikers, *Des savants belges en Afrique centrale (1900-1960): Je dirai leur noms...* (Paris 2009); Jo Tollebeek et al. (eds.), *Mayombe. Rituele beelden uit Congo* (Tielt 2010).

23 Ria Christens, *Terra Incognita. 75 Jaar annunciaten in Afrika* (Heverlee 2006).

and Society, which has made the Congo one of its focuses, clearly links up with new imperial history. In November 2010, it organized the conference *Religion, Colonisation and Decolonisation in Congo 1885-1960* (8-10 November 2010), where several new issues, such as the Africanization of European religions – Catholicism and others – were discussed. It also hosted an exhibition displaying a great number of missionaries' pictures.²⁴

Representation of the colony was another extremely subjective matter. This is illustrated in several sets of DVDs of restored colonial films with academic comment.²⁵ Anne Cornet and Florence Gillet (CEGES/SOMA, Brussels) analyzed the imagination of the colony on the basis of 250 colonial pictures. They do not only discuss aspects such as paternalism, fascination, hierarchy and civilization, but also point to absent aspects, from whites' births and marriages to black burials. Moreover, they contrast these images with reality and ponder to what extent this can be called propaganda.²⁶ The latter will undoubtedly also be elaborated upon in a forthcoming monograph by American historian Matthew G. Stanard.²⁷

Most of this research concentrates on the twentieth century. However, the Congo Free State has also preoccupied historians. At the university of Ghent, Jan Vandersmissen wrote a dissertation on the scientific, mainly geographical, societies around Leopold II. By disclosing the networks, he has corrected the image that the Belgian King was a *cavalier seul* in his colonial ambitions.²⁸ Three scholars from the Université catholique de Louvain edited a volume on Leopold II. More than half of the chapters deal with his policy, but nine contributors fit in the new imperial history, analyzing the king's representation and memory in political speeches, education, literature and art.²⁹ A more traditional approach is the discussion of the different law projects and charters preceding the transfer of the Congo Free State to the Belgian state.³⁰

The bulk of these studies look at colonization from a Belgian angle.

24 *Getuigen van een missie. Foto's uit Congo* (Leuven 2010).

25 Patricia Van Schuylenbergh and Mathieu Zana Aziza Etambala (eds.), *Patrimoine d'Afrique Centrale: Archives Films. Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, 1912-1960* (Tervuren 2010); *Belgisch Congo Belge gefilmd door Gérard De Boe, André Cauvin & Ernest Genval* (Cinematek 2010).

26 Anne Cornet and Florence Gillet, *Congo Belgique, 1955-1965: Entre propagande et réalité* (Brussels 2010).

27 Matthew G. Stanard, *Selling the Congo: A History of European Pro-Empire Propaganda and the*

Making of Belgian Imperialism (forthcoming at University of Nebraska Press).

28 Jan Vandersmissen, *Koningen van de wereld. Leopold II en de aardrijkskundige beweging* (Leuven 2009).

29 Vincent Dujardin, Valérie Rosoux and Tanguy de Wilde (eds.), *Léopold II entre génie et gêne: Politique étrangère et colonisation* (Brussels 2009) and *Leopold II. Ongegeneerd genie? Buitenlandse politiek en kolonisatie* (Tielt 2009).

30 Robert Senelle and Emille Clément, *Léopold II et la Charte coloniale, 1885-1908: De l'État indépendant du Congo à la colonie belge* (Wavre 2009).

For a straightforward Congolese perspective on the colonial past, we have to look beyond Belgium's borders. Osumaka Likaka, Associate Professor at Wayne State University, has written an innovative study on how Congolese villagers named their European colonizers. It goes without saying that this analysis of names, symbols and metaphors reveals a great deal about the African experience of colonialism.³¹ The same goes for the latest monograph by Jan Vansina, who has inquired into local news, gossip, customs and material culture, along with more traditional sources such as archives and interviews, in order to study the colonial experience of one particular region, the realm of Kuba in central Congo.³²

This Congolese voice is still very silent in Belgium, although there are differences between the two major regions. The French-speaking part has more interaction, as can be illustrated by an edited volume on *Conscience africaine* (1956), which is considered to be the first Congolese political manifesto. Five of the ten contributors to this book are Congolese. Strikingly, the Belgian authors are all French-speaking, with no Flemish involvement.³³ The Flemish themselves, by contrast, have not yet translated any Congolese historian into Dutch and have only recently begun inviting Congolese historians to scientific (and mainly English-language) historical conferences.³⁴ Also in its post-colonial memory, Belgium remains a Janus-faced nation.

A Congolese Perspective

Congolese historians obviously also study their country's past. However, 2010 has not led to the increase in historical production we could have expected. This is largely accounted for by the poor situation of historical research in the Democratic Republic of Congo. As a matter of fact, the country has a very limited number of history departments. These can be found at the universities of Kinshasa (UNIKIN) and Lubumbashi (UNILU), the UPN (National Pedagogical University) and the ISP (Superior Pedagogical Institute), both in Kinshasa. Other major cities, such as Kisangani and Bukavu, do not have a history department worth mentioning. Moreover, many people in the

31 Osumaka Likaka, *Naming Colonialism: History and Collective Memory in the Congo, 1870-1960* (Madison 2009).

32 Jan Vansina, *Being Colonized: The Kuba Experience in Rural Congo, 1880-1960* (Madison 2010).

33 Nathalie Tousignant (ed.), *Le manifeste Conscience africaine (1956): élites congolaises et société coloniale: Regards croisés* (Brussels 2009). Unfortunately, the book lacks focus and a comprehensive

introduction, with less relevant and extensive chapters being written on 1956 in the world and in Belgium.

34 Good attempts are made by Vincent Viaene, who invited Valentin Mudimbe (Duke University) to contribute to his edited volume *Congo in België*, and several Congolese historians to the abovementioned Kadoc conference.

Congo, including historians, work and live in extremely difficult and poor circumstances. There are no important historical journals and most books are published by the French publisher L'Harmattan, which has a separate collection on Africa and a branch in the DRC.

This is not to say that there are no historians at all. The most famous book written by a Congolese historian is the *Histoire du Congo* by Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem, referred to above. The 2009 edition is an update of an earlier version that appeared in 1997.³⁵ It is a comprehensive, but traditional, overview with many figures and lists of, for instance, (local) rulers, laws and even escutcheons. The main thesis is that, in spite of all the calamities and vicissitudes, the Congo – a country inhabited by disparate peoples – has increasingly become united as one nation. Ndaywel is also co-editor of another voluminous book. Dedicated to Bogumil Jewsiewicki, the Polish-Canadian specialist in the Congo, it collects chapters on a wide range of topics and disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, linguistics and literary criticism.³⁶

In addition, there are some other broader overviews, in which particular topics are studied from a long-term perspective. Not surprisingly, these relate to issues that are very relevant in the contemporary Congo. Alphonse Makengo Nkutu studied the different institutions in the country, as if he wanted to prepare his country for the reconstruction of the government and the state.³⁷ Georges Mpwate Ndaume analyzes the collaboration with foreign powers. Making use of theories of international relations, he elaborates on the choices Congo has faced in exploiting its rich resources with the assistance of Western countries.³⁸ Camille Sesepe N'Sial examined the language of politicians and showed how successive regimes have used particular sets of discourse and vocabulary.³⁹

Most other works, however, are detailed case-studies on particular topics. In general, three fields of interest can be discerned. First, the local studies. Several historians indeed have researched regional identities and histories. The Congo's second city, Lubumbashi, celebrated the centenary of its foundation in 1910, which has led to an illustrated introduction to the city's past.⁴⁰ Kiangu Sindani has studied the Kwilu region and demonstrated that

35 Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem, *Histoire du Zaïre: De l'héritage ancien à l'âge contemporain* (Louvain-la-Neuve 1997).

36 Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem and Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi (eds.), *Images, mémoires et savoirs: Une histoire en partage avec Bogumil Koss Jewsiewicki* (Paris 2009).

37 Alphonse Makengo Nkutu, *Les institutions politiques de la RDC: De l'Etat indépendant du Congo à la République du Zaïre (1885-1990)* (Paris 2010).

38 Georges Mpwate Ndaume, *La coopération entre le Congo et les pays capitalistes: Un dilemme pour les présidents congolais. 1908-2008* (Paris 2010).

39 Camille Sesepe N'Sial, *La politique et les langues: De l'Etat indépendant du Congo à la Troisième République* (Paris 2009).

40 Donatien Dibwe dia Mwemba, Bogumil Jewsiewicki and Rosario Giordano, *Lubumbashi 1910-2010: Mémoire d'une ville industrielle/ Ukumbusho wa mukini wa komponi* (Paris 2010).

its particularities can be considered stages in its increasing integration into the nation.⁴¹ The same conclusion was made by Muamba Mumbunda Philémon, who has worked on the Kasai and stated that ethnic and territorial identities prosper due to the lack of a centralized and powerful state.⁴²

A second principal field of interest is religious studies. A striking number of books examine particular denominations (for instance the United Methodist Church in Katanga or the Catholic Church)⁴³, regions (for instance Mai-Ndombe in the Bandundu province in the west of the country)⁴⁴ or periods, interestingly often crossing traditional boundaries.⁴⁵ Many of these books are written by people involved in these religious activities and mirror the larger means at the disposal of these communities, compared to other social groups in the Congo. They operate on the boundaries of history and theology. Typically, the key debate at a recent conference on the country's major religious leader, Simon Kimbangu, was about the question of whether he was a god or a prophet.

Kimbangu appealed to many Congolese from 1921 onwards, but was quickly arrested by the Belgian authorities and remained behind bars until his death in 1951. The Congolese interest in this personality and his followers can therefore also be considered part of the third major topic of historical research: resistance studies. Another example of this is the short study of Paul Panda Farnana, the first Congolese to receive higher education in Belgium, subsequently becoming a champion of Congolese nationalism and Panafricanism, but who died in 1930 at the age of 41.⁴⁶ Yet, in sum, resistance studies are very poorly developed in the Congo. Even the proceedings of a conference that was held in Brussels in June 2010 on the relationship between the Congo and Belgium, are not very critical, although more than two-thirds of the contributors are of Congolese descent.⁴⁷

41 Kiangou Sindani, *Le Kwilu à l'épreuve du pluralisme identitaire. 1948-1968* (Paris 2009).

42 Muamba Mumbunda Philémon, *Géopolitique identitaire en RDC: Cas de l'identité Kasaienne* (Paris 2011).

43 Jeffrey J. Hoover (ed.), *L'Eglise Méthodiste-Unie à Katanga: Hier. Aujourd'hui. Demain* (Mulungwishi 2010) and Kinata Côme, *Histoire de l'Eglise catholique du Congo: A travers ses grandes figures* (Paris 2010).

44 Jacques Mpia Bekina, *L'évangélisation du Mai-Ndombe au Congo-Kinshasa. Histoire, difficultés présentes et inculturation* (Paris 2010).

45 Flavien Nkay Malu, *La mission chrétienne à l'épreuve de la tradition ancestrale: La croix et la chèvre (Congo belge, 1891-1933)* (Paris 2007) and Jean-Bruno Mukanya Kaninda-Muana, *Eglise catholique et pouvoir au Congo/Zaire: Enjeux, options et négociations du changement social à Kinshasa (1945-1997)* (Paris 2008).

46 Antoine Tshitungu Kongolo, *Visages de Paul Panda Farnana: Nationaliste, panafricaniste, intellectuel engagé* (Paris 2011).

47 Henri Mova Sakanyi and Eddie Tambwe (eds.), *50 Ans de relations belgo-congolaises, rétrospective et perspectives* (Paris 2011).



▲
'One may foresee that the current Congomania will result in new bonds and collaboration between younger generations'. A seminar organized by the two authors at the University of Kinshasa for a number of graduate students. From left to right: Mpunga Muswaswa, Emile Mandjumba Mwanyimi, Kimankata Mayalala, Tamba Malanda, Annette Biwaya Bidia and Freddy Kabosani.

For two reasons, the latter book is illustrative of contemporary historical research on the Congo in general. On the one hand, there is little criticism of colonization, either in Belgium or in the Congo. In Belgium, Flanders has found a common narrative in Van Reybrouck's book; Wallonia still sticks to a Belgian nationalist discourse, and academic historians have left 'old debates' for new imperial history. Nor does the Congo suffer from a colonial syndrome. The Congolese are convinced that the country was better off in the colonial era and tend to blame themselves rather than the imperial powers. The most vocal criticism of the Belgian role in Central Africa can be found in English and American literature.

On the other hand, there is little dialogue between Congolese and Belgian historians. It is true that old networks between the Congo and the French-speaking part of the country have prevailed and that Flemish as well as French-speaking scholars increasingly travel to the Congo for research. However, the Congolese are hardly aware of the Flemish historical production, chiefly due to the different language and the lack of means. Conversely, no Congolese historian has been translated into Dutch and the greatest part of their Belgian collaboration is channeled to the French-speaking part. Fortunately, academia is developing at a rapid pace. The current Congomania may well result in new bonds and collaboration between younger generations. ◀

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