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LABOUR MIGRATION THROUGH THE FIRST STAGES OF COLONIAL CONSTRUCTION IN THE BELGIAN CONGO (c. 1890 — 1940)

Abstract

Labour migration in colonial Africa has been analyzed in terms of linear models which convey the impression of a coherent, homogeneous process being at work, the dynamism of the modern capitalist sector standing in contrast with the (sometimes enforced) passivity of the domestic economy. In fact, the movement of migrations in colonial Congo has known marked fluctuations, as well as being loaded with fantasies and emotions, on the European as well as on the African side. Migrant labour in all cases functioned as a contact zone for transcultural innovations, both in the receiving and exporting regions of the colony.

The period to be considered in the following pages roughly covers the span of two generations. A short time period thus, but also an age which underwent a momentous transition. In a matter of years, various family- and slavery-based forms of production were forced into a colonial order, itself a social formation which was transitory in character, heterogeneous in every regard, torn as it was between contradictory practices and, indeed, between hardly compatible views of its own future.

Nowhere perhaps were these contradictions more blatant than in the field of labour. Throughout the period, while wage employment was gradually taking more importance, it developed side by side with an equally rapidly expanding family-based production. The latter, in fact, remained largely prevalent in terms of both the numbers of people in activity and the value of production. In the interwar period, the perceptions of colonial contemporaries diverged when it came to assessing the consequences of the growing wage sector on the future development of the population. An influential current of thought stressed the need to keep family production as the main foundation on which would ultimately rest the political economy of the colony as a whole, even at the cost of putting the brake on mining and industrial development.

For a vigorously expanding capitalist sector, however, to feed the labour needs of mines, plantations, construction work etc., it was of vital importance to delve into the human resources of rural society. In any case, it seemed that the low intensity of much of African agricultural production ensured the availability of a vast, practically untapped reservoir of semi-idle work force. Hence, in its early stages of development, the reliance of European enterprise on various forms of incitement or coercion to put swarms of unskilled workers on the road for terms of employment on often distant work sites. This held particularly true for certain mining basins which could not rely

on local recruitment to fill more than a small part of their labour needs. Migration then progressively became a structural component of the burgeoning colonial economy.

Yet, from their beginnings, migration and proletarianization had taken a contentious character. Indeed, as early as the 1910's, labour migration was called in question by segments in the colonial hierarchies, in the administration, or in the Churches, who felt that the large-scale displacement of men was threatening the demographic and social foundations of rural society. The same came to believe that colonial society was bound to maintain, or indeed if need be, to foster its dual character, meaning that a healthy "traditional" sector should be allowed to co-exist with a "modern", market-based, economy.

In this view, the aim of "good government" was to contribute to a new social order where each of these two worlds would grow at its own pace, while keeping to its own sphere. "Traditional society" would evolve under the protection of the State and it would be the special responsibility of the administration to ensure a smooth transition to the money economy by introducing local alternatives to wage employment. State agents were nevertheless also required to provide assistance to colonial enterprises, an assignment which prevented the administration to seal off the "traditional" world. At best, they could limit to the minimum the demands brought to bear by modern entrepreneurs while closely regulating connections between the village population and segments of the "modern" economy. Eventually, as the migration flow from the indigenous sector was gathering momentum, and as demands for semi-compulsive labour recruitment did not relent, State agents were in the difficult situation of continuously working out compromises between opposite claims on the African work force.

At the end of the day, however, even as would-be planners were defining intricate procedures and regulations applicable to labour in the colony, the African population eventually adapted on its own terms to the new situation, getting round all efforts at keeping its movements under close control. Against all odds, in the wake of money penetration into the village economy and following improvements in the communication network, labour migration went its own way, outside any organized system of recruited man power. A few mighty streams of migration regulated from above fragmented into a myriad rivulets made up of thousands of individual decisions to emigrate from one's own region.¹

This contrasting picture has not always been fully accounted for by social scientists who have traditionally approached the problem of proletarianization in colonial Africa by seeking to define model situations where the economic and social factors occupied the forefront. One approach which was popular for a longtime had it that we were confronting a dual society, free market developing side by side with traditional economy, and gradually taking it over through the agency of individual initiative and the play of market forces. Another line which had also its days of success stressed

1 The increased mobility of the African population of the Congo can be very roughly gauged by the evolution in the numbers of passengers making use of river and rail transport, thus excluding all forms of road transport. Figures (in 1,000's) are 300 for 1922, 547 for 1929, dropping to less than 200 in the depression years, climbing again and overtaking 1,000 by the end of the war. From Huybrechts, A., *Transports et structures de développement au Congo*, Paris, The Hague, 1970. Two Western and Southern networks, the *Chemin de fer du Congo* (Matadi-Kinshasa) and, from 1928, the BCK (*Bas-Congo-Katanga*) lines held between them the lion's share of passenger traffic in the Congo.

by contrast the violence and the compulsion exercised by market forces on the rural sector, in order to develop at the expense of an aborted African peasantry which was eased away from the more lucrative markets and pushed back into labour-intensive and low-yielding agricultural production. A key element of this model is played by compelled migration of unskilled workers, pumped back and forth, from and towards the impoverished rural sector, its process of underdevelopment feeding the process of development of capitalist enterprise.²

The study of labour migration during the formative years of colonial rule in the Congo shows that similar models can be helpful only insofar as the old proviso is well kept in mind that models point to trends or to projects rather than to facts. For all their beguiling rationality, models do not fully account for contradictory attitudes and world-views as they prevailed in fact, among the colonizers as well as among the colonized themselves. Coercion co-existed with free will, industrialism with utopian views of a modernizing peasantry. For our subject of enquiry, free entry into the migration movement was found side by side with coerced recruitment. Free labour within the family economy coexisted with compulsory cash-crop production. Wage labour coexisted with petty independent enterprise.

In all cases, migration played a part, if only by becoming an ever present option which fostered the interactive character of cultural encounter — one sometimes speaks of *transculturation* — so typical of an age rich in reinterpretations and in reinventions. It is often through the direct or vicarious experience of migration that indigenous societies reconstructed their own world-view through borrowing from other symbols, be they African or European in origin. A fresh view at migrant labour will take this cultural dimension into account, showing that the movement of people as seen from points of departure or of arrival, delineated the contours of major "contact zones" where colonized subjects entered into interaction with other African cultures as well with the dominant colonial society.³ As approached through an African stand-point, this transcultural experience proved traumatic at times, as it was fraught with fantasies and horror stories depicting unknown foreign worlds. When fully developed, transcultural history will also lead out to further study the adaptation by the colonizers to their encounters with subject societies and cultures. Today's historians are perhaps more alert than in the past to such cultural dimensions, a field promising indeed but still uncertain of its methodology and still open to the well-known distortions of appropriating the past of one culture in order to project into it the present of another culture.⁴

In the following pages, we will only broach a subject which deserves much ampler study. For the present purpose, nothing more is proposed than planting a few

2 A recent *status quaestionis* in: Johnson, D., "Settler Farmers and Coerced African Labour in Southern Rhodesia, 1936 — 1946", *Journal of African History*, 33 (1992), pp. 111 — 128.

3 The term "contact zone" may usefully be substituted for the more diffusionist concept of "frontier" to describe situations of cultural and economic contact between "indigenous" and European influences, notably in colonial or semi-colonial contexts. I borrow here from the discussion by J. Clifford of Mary Pratt's *Imperial Eyes*, an important contribution to the subject (Clifford, J., "No innocent eyes. Western travellers as missionaries of capitalism", *Times Literary Supplement*, 11 September 1992, pp. 3 — 4).

4 Vansina, J., "Some Perceptions on the Writing of African History: 1948 — 1992", *Itinerario*, XVI — 1 (1992), pp. 77 — 91.

guide-posts which may be useful for showing the way to a better understanding of labour migration in an age of transition to modernity. We will briefly outline the main stages of the vast migration movements set in motion by the rapidly expanding "contact zones" of the first colonial generations. It will be suggested that colonial society took shape through practices which borrowed simultaneously from two sources. First, it was marked by the violent legacy inherited from slave-trading and from early colonial "contact zones". By contrast, however, with the military experience of primitive forms of colonial conquest, from the 1910's, State-building in the Congo increasingly went hand in hand with an ideological view of modern colonization which saw the necessity of regulating the dynamics of "contact zones", a project which could be made compatible with the stabilization policy adopted by large enterprises as they sought to lessen their dependence on unskilled migrant labour.

The dream of a dual civil society regulated from above represents the second stage in the history of labour migration in the Congo. It proved, however, short-lived in the face of economic development and of a powerful process of transcultural interaction. While the former has received more attention, we are still at the exploratory stage when it comes to explain the reinvention of cultures that took place through the migratory experience of those days. The trail has been blazed but, at this stage, and by way of conclusion, we will not go further than marking some of the outlines of a field which is growing fast.

1. From slave trade to labour migration: the enduring legacy from the past

Migration and the mobility of people and goods are among the best-anchored themes of African history. After all, in the language used by oral traditions, "migration" is the recurring explanation for past developments. By recording "migrations", traditional history thus gave legal title to the occupation of a piece of land or to claims of authority over a group of people. However, "migration" as a version of the past is more accepted today as a metaphor than as a literal transcription of the "truth". Yet, today's "scientific" historical knowledge of the African past has retained colonization of the land as one of its major lines of inquiry. It acknowledges the diversity of migrations both through and around the rain forest as they took many forms, either step by step advances or great leap forwards. It also distinguishes a common heritage that took form through this maze of itineraries, with Bantu languages spreading over practically the whole of sub-equatorial Africa, South and South-East from their diffusion point in today's Southern Cameroon.

Today's historians also retain the mobility of people and goods through the regional and long-distance river and savanna networks as counting among the main avenues to the concentration of wealth and power in the ancient history of central Africa, as is best illustrated by the gathering and trading of slaves.⁵ The ubiquity of various forms of servility is indeed one of the most remarkable features of the African past. African "slavery" under its different guises has, however, long been approached through its

5 For an exemplary illustration of the crucial place of mobility in central Africa cf. Vansina, J., *Paths in the Rainforests. Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa*, Wisconsin University Press, 1990.

market dimension. And indeed slave trade, as a forced migratory movement towards both the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans, is the better-documented chapter in the overall history of African slavery. As a result, European intervention has been seen as the guiding hand, the determining factor of African slavery, often at the expense of a hard look at the "indigenous" factor.

This distortion is compounded by the silence kept by oral traditions on the subject of slavery. This repressed version of the past has been compounded by the willingness of modern africanist historians to side-step an embarrassing issue. Indigenous slavery, in the eyes of liberal or nationalist historians tarnished the comforting image of Africa as a victim of history. More recently, however, fresh looks at the evidence have lifted part of the veil which up to then had concealed a structural aspect of past society. It is now clear that, whenever sources are available, the evidence points to slavery as a major component of the ancient societies of central Africa, as well in savanna as in forest regions.⁶

In ancient central Africa, migration and mobility in fact both entailed coercion. Various dynamics were at work which should be considered as forming part of an ensemble where, for the sake of convenience, we may distinguish between centrifugal and centripetal movements. The push factor calls on people to move out of their context in order to escape from various forms of social or political oppression, or to flee from environmental disasters (drought, famine, disease etc.). This cannot be separated from a pull factor which also ought to be taken into account. Big "houses", big "families", dynasties, all acted as gatherers of people. Either they used force to capture dependents, or they built up clienteles with the contribution of dependent people („slaves") who had been driven away from their homes by oppression or the harshness of natural conditions or both.

These basic dynamics are complementary. They have led a number of africanist historians to apply to servility in Africa the Nieboer theory of slavery, thus seeing it as a response to a situation marked by the abundance of land, as against the rarity of labour. The theory explained that, under these circumstances, labour could only be mobilized through the use of coercion.

At a very high level of generalization, when compared with certain other parts of the world, sub-saharan Africa taken as a whole can indeed be seen as being marked by low human density in conditions of abundance of land. Such generalizations are, however, too ambitious and too broad as to make them usable when it comes to particular case-studies. As applied to African history, the Nieboer theory has nevertheless had the merit of pointing to the part played by social violence in the past movements of people. It reminded historians to constantly keep in mind that the economic factors in circumstances of constant "migrations" (abundance of land, scarcity of labour in a low-density population, eg.) should never be dissociated from their social dimension (for example, dispersal as a response to oppression, abundance of land as a reprieve for isolated small groups, unable to organize on the basis of the division of labour and of reciprocal help).⁷

6 A general survey in: Vellut, J. L., "L'économie internationale des côtes de Guinée Inférieure au XIX^e siècle", *Relação Europa-Africa no 3^o quartel do Séc. XIX*, Actas, org. por M. E. Madeira Santos, I Reunião internacional de História de Africa, Lisbon, Instituto de Investigação Científica e tropical, 1989, pp. 135 — 206 (in particular, pp. 141 — 42, and footnotes 27 — 28).

When studying migration as a transitory stage in the history of early colonial rule in the Congo, the Nieboer theory further proves its utility insofar as coercion long remained the rule in the field even though it came to be gradually superseded by new practices and by new social visions. In particular, the social engineers of colonial society in the 1920's faced the problem of persisting forms of forced labour which strongly reminded of slave trade practices which should have clearly belonged to a past age. The problem was to find ways, in such a context, to leave the past behind and to pass to a free labour market. The migrant labour/coercion syndrome would have to make way for the construction of a stable society, founded on a new ideal type, which would combine an industrial base dependent on its own labour resources, locally reproduced, with an expanding peasant sector able to give full employment to the rural population.

For a time, however, the Nieboer theory continued to apply. Labour remained unobtainable in conditions of over-abundant land, and force was therefore used to forcibly transport people, in continuation as it were of the old slave trading practice, but also in full contradiction with the self-proclaimed emancipatory programme which had given early European colonization its *raison d'être*.

2. Transition to partial proletarianization: the share of mass migration

The first colonial generation in the Congo saw a marked increase in the mobility of at least segments of the population. Communication through the Congo basin became more intensive than before, in particular along the navigable affluents of the big river. Migrations were nevertheless limited in scale, as indicated by the tiny urban population of the *Etat Indépendant* as well as by the absence of large-scale enterprises. The construction of the Matadi-Kinshasa rail-line was an exception, drawing labour from Europe, West Africa, and the Congo region itself.⁸ Despite its small scale in the early days, local recruitment was rightly seen as essential by Free State officials. In 1888, Coquilhat claimed to have engaged the first workers from Equator to send them off to the distant Stanley Pool: "nine were not much, but once the Bangala had seen their young men satisfied in having worked for the whites in far-off

7 Nieboer's theory dates from 1900 and is silent about Africa. Although not always acknowledged, it has nevertheless been seminal in africanist history. On this point, see Northrup, D., "Nineteenth Century Patterns of Slavery and Economic Growth in Southeastern Nigeria", *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 12 (1979), pp. 1 — 16. A recent illustration, tacitly borrowing from that theory: Iliffe, J., *The African Poor. A history*, Cambridge University Press, 1987.

8 20 years after the foundation of the Free State, its European population numbered about 2,500, with its largest urban centres (Boma, Matadi, Leopoldville-Kinshasa and Stanleyville) amounting to a grand total of less than 800 Europeans. Data for 1906, culled from: *Etat Indépendant du Congo, Bulletin Officiel*, 1907. There are no contemporary statistics for the African population in those centres. As an indication, in 1911, more than ten years after the inauguration of the rail line from Matadi, the port of Kinshasa employed 1300 African workers. The town had 24,000 inhabitants in 1924, date of the first available census. The construction of the rail-line began at Matadi in 1890 with 2,000 workers, mostly of West African origin. Mortality on the construction site reached a height of 8.8% in 1892 and a low of 0.75% in 1897. Mortality before reaching the site or after leaving it is not included.

places, they would furnish volunteers by the hundreds." In this way, the State would be freed from having to recruit foreign workers". In the process, the Bangala would create the first "contact zone" of migrant labour, by becoming the first "tribe" of workers of the Free State.⁹ Others would follow, particularly among the thousands of "freed slaves" who, in the ensuing years, would in fact constitute the big battalions of military recruits or general workers at the service of the State or of the concessionary companies.

But is only with industrialization that the demand for migrant labour gathered momentum. Demand for wage labour took up from the 1910's and remained on the ascendant till the late 1920's. Since the beginning, the main employers were the mining basins which had already begun exploitation in Upper Katanga, Kasai and the North-East (Kilo-Moto) before the outbreak of World War I. By that time, public works and urbanization were also underway, particularly in the regions of Elisabethville and Leopoldville-Kinshasa. These were also the great rail-building years, in Kasai, Katanga, as well as in the Uele. In all cases, local resources were unable to meet the demand for labour, and more or less distant regions had to be tapped by recruiters who tried to entice men of working age, or their chiefs. The administration and the main enterprises took an increasing share in this recruitment, and they brought a degree of supervision on operations which at times amounted to a modern form of slave trading. Political considerations played also their part, as the new migration flows were organized within the political boundaries of the colonial State, so as to gradually limit the engagement of "foreign" workers and to lay the basis for a "national" labour market.

World War I can be seen as a watershed in the history of recruitment as a massive operation of labour mobilization went underway during the East African campaign of 1916 — 1918. More than 70,000 soldiers and porters were recruited during these years. This sacrificed levy suffered a mortality rate of 25%. With the benefit of hindsight, it can be seen that this operation paved the way for future large-scale labour recruitment operations.

In the Congo, before the 1920's, mining, urbanization and public works were the main employers of wage labour, while capitalist agriculture was still in its infancy. The cocoa farms in Mayombe represented an early case of capitalist plantation, but their labour was mostly locally recruited. After the war, however, demand for migrant labour grew rapidly throughout the colony. The programme of public works which was launched in 1921 entailed large-scale recruitment operations and it was thus particularly instrumental in the growth in numbers of migrant labour. In some cases, mining basins or newly opened plantations broadened migratory flows as they depended on labour recruited at a distance. Available statistics show that the number of wage workers doubled between 1917 and 1919 (90,000), then again from 1919 to 1923 (177,000), and then again to 1925 (355,000), reaching an apex before the depression in 1927, with 427,000 i.e. 16% of an estimated male adult population of 2.6 millions. Such figures were only found again after the depression, with an aggregate 528,000 recorded in 1938, an increase of 50% over 1935.¹⁰

9 Samarin, W. J., *The Blackman's Burden. African Colonial Labor on the Congo and Ubangi Rivers, 1880 — 1900*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1989, pp. 61 — 82 (p. 69).

10 Data from *Plan Décennal pour le développement économique et social du Congo Belge*,

Of course, migrant labour only constituted a fraction of the aggregate wage labour force of the colony. In fact, employment increasingly drew on local labour resources, including in the case of freshly settled migrant communities which acted as self-reproducing labour reservoirs. It thus comes as no surprise that the rate of increase in proletarianization should have by far outpaced the evolution of mobility if gauged, however imperfectly, by the number of rail and riverboat passengers. The discrepancy is particularly marked for the years following the depression, when the indices for proletarianization and mobility clearly diverged (see following table).

Table 1: Indices of Proletarianization and Mobility in the Belgian Congo

Years	Wage labour	Passengers (rail + river)
1922	100	100
1929	267	182
1939	337	87
1944	489	352
1955	753	455

Source: data reconstructed from *Huybrechts, A., o.c.*

In the field, the relative shares of migrant and locally recruited labour varied, of course, depending on a number of variables, including the fields of activities and the demographic situation of the different regions. Our information is incomplete and depends on soundings or countings (not censuses). Colonial administrative units were as a rule too large to enable us to gauge disparities in the propensity to emigrate, but we may nevertheless mention as an example that, in 1926, 20% of wage labour originating from the Orientale Province was employed outside its district of origin, either in or outside the limits of the province. This relatively low ratio may be explained through the economic activities of that province whose agricultural and mining sectors were relatively independent from migrant labour. For the same year, a third of the wage-labour force originating from the province of *Equateur* was migrant, with a 29% rate for Congo-Kasai (1928). As for Katanga, with its low autochthonous population, by 1928, only one third of the 60,000 work force in the mining district was recruited locally, the remaining two thirds of wage labour being migrant in origin, sometimes volunteers coming from the region itself, but in their vast majority, men recruited in areas, such as Kasai, Angola, Rhodesia or Nyassaland.¹¹

The danger of generalizing assumptions was clearly brought to light by the 1938 inquiry into the labour situation of the Congo. By then, migration was still deemed vital for particular sectors, such as coffee growing in Northern Kivu, or sites in the low lying areas of the Kilo mining complex in the North-East. The poorly capitalized new

Brussels, 1949, p. 526. By African standards, the rate of proletarianization of the Belgian Congo was relatively high. In 1936, the South African Rand, drawing on human resources from all neighbouring countries, employed a wage-labour force of 350,000. Lord Hailey, *An African Survey*, Oxford University Press, 1938, p. 652.

¹¹ Data from *Rapport annuel sur l'administration de la Colonie du Congo Belge pendant l'année (...)* (1927 — 1929).

mines of the Lubutu-Shabunda region in the North-East were also relying on primitive forms of recruitment as late as 1935. By contrast, for many mining or agricultural enterprises throughout the country, paternalistic policies together with mechanization and training of the work force had deeply cut into the needs to seek out fresh migrant recruits. Employment needs were by then mostly met locally, notably through re-engagement of labourers at the end of their term of contracted time.¹²

It took considerations of cost to convince contractors to introduce mechanization on the work sites. For years, however, unskilled labour was lavishly employed and it is only gradually that swarms of porters and of general purpose workers were replaced by mechanical equipment. It gradually dawned upon all that low productivity, high recruitment and transport expenses, high mortality or morbidity rates, high turn-over, all combined to make of this work force a very expensive factor of production, a paradoxical conclusion, when account is taken of the very low level of wages.

The case of portage is illustrative. Strictly speaking, of course, porters were not migrant workers, even though they were employed for weeks on end far from their villages. Side by side with migrant workers, through their sheer numbers, and through their activities en route or back home, porters powerfully contributed to the impact of the "contact zones" spreading to the remotest corners of the country. With the expansion of production, portage threatened at one moment to engulf a substantial part of the available labour resources. Indeed, by the 1920's, when at its height, portage weighed as a heavy load on the population of vast areas, amounting to an "odieuse corvée" in the words of a rapporteur to the *Congrès Colonial* of 1930. In 1924, for example, Kivu needed 800,000 portage-days. In the same year, the Uele basin was linked to the river Congo by 8,000 porters used throughout the year to carry 4,000 T. to and from Aketi, a port on an affluent of the Congo. Such drudgery was perhaps the most vivid symbol of wasteful labour.

Once again, large companies led the way when it came to eliminate bottle-necks through modernization. By 1922, *Forminière* was already maintaining 35 trucks and automobiles on the Charlesville-Tshikapa road. Results of transport mechanization were spectacular. In 1929, with the completion of the first section of the *Vicongo* narrow gauge railway and the end of portage, productivity jumped, as tonnage through Aketi quickly climbed from 4,000 to 22,000 T. p. a. In 1924, for part of the construction work, porters had been employed to carry rails over a 35-day portage route.¹³

However, before replacing porters by trucks, roads had to be built, manually, by swarms of men, women and children. Total road mileage was multiplied by 4.6 between 1920 and 1925, and once again by 6.5 between 1925 and 1940 when it amounted to little less than 80,000 km.¹⁴ This was achieved at a cost. By 1929, the Province Orientale required 23,000 workers on its road-construction sites throughout the year, with a major concentration in the northern districts.

Furthermore, to operate the trucks, drivers and mechanics had to be trained. The question of training was obviously vital. During the construction of the Bas-Congo-

12 "Enquête sur le problème de la main-d'oeuvre", *La Dépêche coloniale belge et L'Essor colonial et maritime*, 8 Oct. — 10 Dec. 1938.

13 As denounced by the governor of *Orientale*, quoted by Northrup, D., *Beyond the Bend in the River. African Labor in Eastern Zaire, 1865 — 1940*, Athens, Ohio University, 1988, p. 156.

14 Huybrechts, A., o.c., p. 383.

Katanga (BCK) rail-line, building techniques on the 200-mile section which ran through the rain forest region were only step by step mechanized, in order to gradually introduce the workers to modern techniques. Over a period of six years (1923 — 1928), it nevertheless employed an overall work force of 1,000 European and 100,000 indigenous workers, with up to 15,000 Africans being employed at any one time. These figures should be seen against the elation at the time that the work had largely benefited from the experience previously gained on other work sites. Other leaders in the field of mechanization were the large mining enterprises of Katanga, the *Union Minière*, and of Kasai, the *Forminière*.¹⁵

To meet the ever growing demand, supply took many forms. Free engagement occurred, particularly among workers who had completed a first contract and who sought to sign up again, though not necessarily with the same employer. Before the recovery which followed the depression of 1930 — 1932, free contracting was, however, insufficient to meet the needs of employers and contractors. Labour migration was therefore organized in earnest. The prevalent organization of the 1920's was that of *Bourses du Travail*, agencies organized by large entrepreneurs acting as stock-owners. These agencies were then supposed to receive the help of local State administration whose agents were expected to exert "moral authority" on indigenous chiefs for the benefit of recruiters. This organized migration system was first inaugurated in Katanga (1910) and later in Kasai and Lower-Congo (respectively 1921 and 1922). In its first stages, it was transportation in disguise, and it entailed important investments, as conveying over long distances had to be organized including the provision of food, rest camps had to be built to accommodate recruits en route as well as to carry out first health evaluations and to regroup workers before their being distributed among prospective employers.

The literature offers conflicting evidence on this period of semi-coerced labour migration. There can be little doubt, however, that through the period of early colonial industrialization, African migrant labour underwent heavy losses, among the highest in the modern history of industrialization, though it should never be forgotten that we have no reliable information on the death rate in the "traditional" sector for the corresponding years. Keeping this caveat in mind, the 1914 — 1926 period, crude death rate among the African personnel of *Union Minière* averaged between 4 — 5%, with crisis rates of 10.6 — 20.2% during the 1917 — 1918 epidemics, rates to compare with the 1.5 — 2% obtaining on the South African Rand (1914 — 1926).¹⁶

Recruiting by the *Office du Travail* (OFFITRA) offers another case in point.¹⁷ The *Office* was set up by the State administration in 1922, in order to organize long-distance recruitment for the contracting companies engaged in the reconstruction of

15 Vellut, J. L., "Les bassins miniers de l'ancien Congo belge. Essai d'histoire économique et sociale (1900 — 1960)", Cahiers du CEDAF (Brussels), Nov. 1981 (p. 7).

16 Comparative data gathered by Fetter, B., "Mortality Patterns in Twentieth Century Industrial Africa: A preliminary analysis", Third World Economic History and Development Group Conference: *Economic Change and the State*, Manchester University, 13 — 15 September 1991. Also *Id.*, "Changing determinants of African Mineworker Mortality: Witwatersrand and the Copperbelt, 1911 — 1940", unpubl. paper (1992). I thank the author for letting me benefit from his current research in the field of population history in the former colonies of central Africa.

17 Kuama Mobwa M., "La mobilisation de la force de travail dans le sud-ouest de l'ancien Congo belge (1910 — 1932)", unsubmitted Ph. D. dissertation (History), Louvain-la-Neuve, 1993.

the Matadi-Kinshasa railway. This project aimed at more than doubling the capacity of this vital rail link. Construction was at first conceived on a labour intensive basis, despite solemn assurances that maximum mechanization would be applied. The contracting firm requested 5,000 workers for 1924, 6,500 for 1925, 10,000 being foreseen for 1926. OFFITRA was indeed instrumental in organizing the immigration into Lower Congo of workers recruited as far as in the Kwango, Equator and Uele regions. Overall statistics as published by the *Office* recorded a mortality rate of 5.45% on the 7310 men present in 1930 on the camps and the working sites. This figure of 400 deaths did not include those which occurred in the course of transport on the way to the camps or back to the home regions. Indeed, all observers of that period were agreed that among the main causes of mortality for migrant labour, conditions of transport played a non negligible part. The long marches with inadequate food provisions were to blame, but also the "utterly deplorable conditions" on board unequipped river barges, a recurring theme among social reformers of the 1920's.¹⁸ Be that as it may, by 1929, after six years of operation little less than 5% of OFFITRA recruits were still dying before reaching their allotted work sites.

Global results gave only part of the story and indeed they could introduce a skewed vision of reality insofar as general results tended to smother the impact of particular cases of neglect or irresponsibility on the part of recruiters or of constructing companies. A case in point is that of the great rail works of the 1920's, both in Belgian Congo and in neighbouring French Equatorial Africa. In the French Congo, for example, eye-witnesses such as Albert Londres gave harrowing accounts of the fate encountered by migrant labour transported from Ubangui-Chari and from Tchad, as far as from Waddai, to land in the "green hell" of the Congo-Ocean construction sites in its sections through the rain forest of Mayombe. In 1925 — 1926, up to 20,000 men were recruited and employed at any one time on construction and services on the notorious sites of the *Société des Batignolles*. Cases of transportation by caravans of men roped to the neck were still known as had been the case for centuries of slave trading. The lack of food and of medical provision, the absence of the simplest tools, supervision by brutal military guards, all led to disastrous consequences. For 15 — 20% of those who left for the far-distant work sites, death occurred on the road, even before reaching their assigned site. For the survivors, the mortality rate on sections of the works fluctuated between 30 — 60%.¹⁹

Though scandals occurred on a smaller scale, migrant labour also took its toll on the Belgian side of the border. Through the 1920's, authorized voices from State and Church multiplied warnings on the far-reaching consequences of forced recruitment

18 In 1919, the 3rd Session of the *Commission permanente pour la protection des indigènes* had issued a protest against the sordid conditions imposed on African travellers onboard river steamers. For 1926, the *Rapport aux Chambres* could not but take note that the situation had not improved.

19 Construction really got underway in 1925. The inauguration took place in 1932. The account of the notorious work sites by Albert Londres (1928) was republished as a part of his *Oeuvres complètes*, Paris, 1991. See also, dating from 1926, the observations by L. Buell, vol. II, p. 261 — 263. In 1925, André Gide witnessed the forcible recruitment of migrant labour in Ubangui-Shari. Porters and hostages were roped together and led away under military guard. A well-documented status questionis in: Toso, C., *La Guerra del "Congo-Warra" 1928 — 1931, I perché di una rivolta*, Milano, Dott. A. Giuffrè Editore, 1991.

for distant work sites, but the most telling indictments came from observers who chanced upon practices which were usually withheld from official reports or simply passed unnoticed. They all point to the permanence of slave trading practices inherited from the past. During his journey through colonial Africa, L. Buell came upon a number of such vivid incidents. At one point, at Kirundu, on the Lualaba, he thus came across a group of old people, tied by the neck. Fleeing from their chief, they had been gathered by a State official who was conveying them to Stanleyville where they would be delivered to a private entrepreneur.²⁰ In 1928, it took the acumen of a clear-sighted observer to cull from official reports information on casualties in "concentration camps" where migrant labour underwent examinations and elementary training before being delivered to employers. Mortality in those transit camps came close to 15% in Katanga as well as in those run by OFFITRA. To this last figure had to be added a further estimated 10% who died on the road on the way to the camps, or back to the home country after being discharged for medical reasons. In short, up to a quarter of OFFITRA recruits died within the four months following their departure from the home village. The same author had his attention awakened after being personally witness to the sad fate met by miserable recruits from the Yaka country in Kwango, led over a six-week walking ordeal to camps, where half would be dismissed for their poor health, and turned back to their villages. With what chance of reaching them alive? The dramatic conclusion of this discussion was that, over a period of one year, contingents of more or less forcibly recruited Congolese workers underwent a mortality rate which represented double the rate suffered by the Belgian army in the four-year campaign of 1914 — 1918.²¹

It would be tempting to extrapolate from such particular indictments and to cast a picture of gloom over the whole process of migration in the Congo of the 1920's. It should be kept in mind, however, that, sometimes through their African experience, these first-hand observers and critics had become engrossed by humanistic convictions which made them particularly alert to trace and document such deviations from the letter of the colonial books. This distortion is compounded by those historians who, in true filiation to the practice of Whig history,²² organize their narrative around an epic story of wrong-doing and then extrapolate from painful descriptions which are the only ones they care to cull from the sources. After all, isn't this the first chapter in the social history of Central Africa for which social wrongs can really be documented?

Ideology thus enters all accounts of colonial labour migration in the Congo, be they first-hand, or later day reconstructions, coming from a more recent past. In fact, we are relatively well documented about the dark pages of migrations because there

20 L. Buell, private correspondence (1926), quoted by Northrup, D., *o.c.*, p. 134.

21 Orts, P., *Le Congo en 1928*, Bruxelles, 1930. The author dramatized the situation by pointing that, in World War I, the Belgian army had incorporated 328,000 men and that there had been 41,000 recorded deaths in the troops, representing a mortality rate of 12.6%. *Ibid.*, p. 14. P. Orts was a prominent board member of a colonial holding who, on his return from a journey to the Congo, presented his conclusions to a select audience.

22 The Whig historian seizes upon parties, personages, and events which evoke the closest response to his own feelings and he sets them in contrast with the rest of the stuff of history. Through this selection, he thus "has his organization and abridgement of history ready-made and has a clean path through the complexity". Butterfield, H., *The Whig Interpretation of History*, Penguin Books, 1973, p. 28.

were critics of these social movements who wanted to document their case and warn off what they perceived as a trend fraught with dangers. From their point of view, behind the poor conditions inflicted upon migrant labour, loomed disastrous consequences upon the population as a whole.

Such considerations, loaded with ideology as they were, combined with hard economic reckoning to impose a review of labour policies. Its avowed aims were to keep the demand for migrant labour under control and, in the longer run, to construct a stable society, where migrations would be permanently kept to a bare minimum.

3. Mass migration on trial: the economics and the ideology of "modern colonization"

Throughout the 1920's, the challenges to labour migration developed apace with growing proletarianization, a process which seemed to carry with it the ever increasing dependence of capitalist enterprises upon recruited man-power. All efforts at setting strict procedures seemed of little avail, at the end of the day, recruitment remained synonym with wasteful and costly management, irreconcilable in the end with colonial welfare on the long run. As a result, there arose a motley coalition against large scale migration. Accounting clearly played its part, but so did expediency. Social vision provided inspiration, but there were also the tactical needs to compromise between particular interests in the field. The ensuing slowing down of emigration from the rural homelands owed, however, a lot to an unexpected contingency, the great depression. Migration would resume later, henceforth on its own, responding to industrial development as well as to the relative decay of "traditional" agriculture. New social visions would then take over from the dualist utopias which had inspired many colonial thinkers and social engineers of the earlier generation.

It should be first realized, however, that theories or decisions coming from above never held an undisputed sway. Indeed, it can be argued that would-be theoreticians and planners more often than not tried to run after a changing reality and that many decisions were in fact taken from below. For the history of migration, the great depression provides a case in point.

In 1931 — 1932, mobility of labour rapidly decreased as there were massive lay-offs. *Union Minière* was at the forefront with 75% of its African labour being placed in redundancy. But at the same time, African-owned agriculture vastly expanded, tying labour to its home areas, and putting a brake to economic migration. By 1938, the cotton societies were buying the production of 700,000 planters, a figure more than 30% in excess of the aggregate number of wage workers in the whole colony.²³ To the distress of some industrial or plantation employers, the agricultural alternatives of cotton, coffee, palm-oil as well as food-crops determines the temporary slow-down of long-distance migration. In the absence of reliable data on revenue induced by cash-crop planting in various regions, it is a moot question to assess the relative parts played by compulsion and profit in the rapid development of African agriculture. All

²³ Aggregate data and competition for labour between cotton planting, food production, and mining employment in: *La Dépêche coloniale belge et L'Essor colonial et maritime*, 22 Oct 1938.

indications are, however, that this entry of the "bush" in the money economy took place on widely different terms, depending on the wide range of profitability for particular crops, a measure which varied with vastly different natural soil and climate conditions, and with contrasting transport conditions. All factors which still hold true today.

Aside from myriads of individual decisions, however, policies from above clearly also played their part. Not unexpectedly, profit considerations weighed heavily at all stages, but that they often did not come alone, as illustrated by the labour policy of the large mining companies in the Congo as compared with the same sector in neighbouring countries. At first sight, one might be tempted to seek parallels between the experiences of mining in the Congo and in Southern Africa. To begin with, in both cases, entrepreneurs found it necessary to invest in the costly organization of labour markets where migrant labour would play a decisive part. The parallel extends to the difficult problems of coming to grips with an ill-known health environment, of training an African labour force, of coping with the consequences for remote rural areas of an absentee male population employed in distant mining districts. Indeed, particularly in the field of public health, through their early years of experience, mining companies in the Congo borrowed extensively from the South African experience which they tried to emulate, first at a distance, but then successfully.²⁴

Yet, the strictly colonial character of the Belgian Congo economy set it clearly apart from South Africa where political power rested in the hands of an indigenous white population. In the Congo, colonial enterprises were freer to draw on African labour and to operate strictly on considerations of cost, a consideration which led them to dispose whenever possible of migrant white labour, more costly and more easily prone to organize vis-à-vis business. These factors played a decisive part in hastening the training in the Belgian Congo of a skilled African labour force, a decision which carried with it as a consequence the "stabilization", in the vocabulary of the day, of permanently settled African families. This policy went hand in hand with a diminished reliance on migrant, unskilled, labour.

The first steps were taken in the 1920's by the leading mining companies in the diamond and copper basins, respectively in Kasai and Katanga, and later, in the early 1930's, in the tin district of Manono in Eastern Katanga. In the meantime, mixed formulas were adopted in the Kilo-Moto gold mines of the North-East. There, a contrasted milieu determined the solutions which were adopted. Some mining sites were under operation in a low-lying, humid, forest region and they were forced to seek complementary labour in similar ecological environments, notably in the Uele basin. By contrast, other sites were situated in plateau districts, and had to draw on labour from high altitude regions as far as Rwanda. In the Kilo-Moto complex, as a result, migrant labour coexisted through the 1930's with a "stabilized" working force.

24 Until the 1930's, crude mortality rates in industrial Katanga trailed at a distance between figures obtaining in the Rand. From then on, however, mortality rates were lower in Katanga than in the mining basins of South Africa or the Rhodesias. Cf. Fetter, B., "Mortality Patterns", *loc.cit.* There is an extensive literature on the subject of labour migration in Southern Africa. For example, cf. Mühlberg, F., *Wanderarbeit in Südafrika. Ursachen eines Arbeitsmarktpänomens dualistischer Wirtschaftsgesellschaften*, Stuttgart, Gustav Fischer Verlag, 1967, also Marks, S. and Rathbone, R., *Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa. African class formation, culture and consciousness, 1871 — 1930*, London, Longman, 1982.

As a rule, however, mechanization was less advanced in that publicly-owned enterprise than was the case in the other main mining districts of the colony.

Immigration into mining districts did not, therefore, lose its preeminence everywhere at the same time. The first migrant workers to be hit were those coming from farther away, as was shown for both African and European workers of "foreign" origin. In all places, the white component of the working class had already been gradually phased out from the early 1920's onwards. This was particularly true of non-Belgian workers, for reasons where political and business considerations combined. The case of Katanga was illustrative. There, South African and English-speaking personnel from various national origins had occupied a majority position in the pioneering days of the copper industry. Through expirations of their contracts, this group rapidly from the scene beginning in 1920.

„Foreign" African workers who had immigrated into the Congo met a similar fate. This was the case of West Africans in Western Congo where many had been recruited by the first rail company, the *Chemin de fer du Congo*, or by the army and who had settled in the country at the end of their term of contract. In the early 1920's, there was mounting pressure by the administration and the petty white middle class to replace them whenever possible by indigenous labour, cheaper and allegedly more easily cowed into docility. Simultaneously, in Katanga, employers of labour from Nyassaland, Mozambique or the Rhodesias were inspired by similar motivations. The deteriorating rate of exchange of sterling vs. the franc contributed to making imperative the reliance on local sources of labour. In the meantime, the turn-over of "foreign" African labour had been high. In 1921, the majority of African personnel employed by *Union Minière* in Katanga were still of Rhodesian origin, a proportion which by 1924 had fallen to 50%. Recruitments in Rhodesia were finally interrupted in 1931. Over 15 years, a total of up to 80,000 Rhodesians had by then served the company, but only 900 of these had voluntarily returned to Katanga at the end of their contract.²⁵ Conversely, through these years, migrant labour from South-Eastern Congo was seeking better-paid employment in Rhodesia, in particular when the Northern Copperbelt mines were put in operation.²⁶

By then, migration to Katanga exclusively originated from the Congo itself, but this only came as a transitional measure as the company began to fix its work force close to the mining basins. The turning point which took symbolic significance came in 1928 when the company granted an award to its workers from Lomami at the end of their contract in order to enable them to marry in their home region. The proviso was that they would re-contract with *Union Minière*, and settle definitely with their wives and children in Katanga. From then on, mortality among the African personnel of the company decreased spectacularly, being lowered from 1.6 to 0.5% between 1930 and 1940.

25 Data from *Union Minière du Haut-Katanga, Evolution des techniques et des activités sociales, 1906 — 1956*, Brussels, 1957, p. 217.

26 The social history of the border region adjoining the Copperbelt has been studied in depth by L. Verbeek through a number of monographs based on oral and written unpublished material. For example, Verbeek, L., "L'histoire dans les chants et les danses populaires de la zone culturelle Bemba du Haut-Shaba (Zaire)", *Enquêtes et Documents d'Histoire africaine* (Louvain-la-Neuve), vol. 10, 1992. Border regions present a rich field for migration studies as workers moved, and still move, across the boundaries following political or economic circumstances.

This measure marked the beginning of "stabilization" and, indeed, after a few years, one talked of a "new race" being born and carefully nurtured in the company's townships. The political and economic background to that policy is fairly well-known. Its underlying ideology has been studied for *Union Minière* whose model paternalistic policy even inspired some historians to use it as a testing ground for an application of the amorphous concept of totalitarianism.²⁷ But the whole colonial context of "stabilization" still deserves more scrutiny. Suffice it here to suggest a few lines of inquiry.

Criticism which was levelled at labour migration ran deeper than mere considerations of cost and profit. The discussion took a human rights dimension as migration was clearly fraught with breaches to the law of free labour as engraved in the *Charte Coloniale*, the founding document of the colony which read in its Art. 2: "nul ne peut être contraint de travailler pour le compte ou au profit de particuliers ou de sociétés". These general principles took a new urgency in the inter-war period as a general assault was launched from the metropolises as well as from burgeoning international organizations against the still prevailing conditions of coerced labour in Africa. This was shown by the L. Buell survey, by the Orde Browne inquiry in East Africa, or by several League of Nations documents.²⁸ In the Belgian Congo, the case was made more pressing by arguing that there was a link between labour forced migration and the alleged depopulation of the country. After all, beyond suffering high casualties, migrants were absentee husbands and fathers and the slow attrition of the indigenous population could be traced to their absence.²⁹

It should be realized that this case was mostly based on local soundings, and impressions, then extrapolated to larger regions, rather than founded on solid demographic evidence. In the repetitive arguments which appeared on this subject, it is sometimes hard to distinguish between fact and ideology. Facts were, of course, more readily available for burgeoning urban centres, with their gross sexual imbalance and an ensuing low reproduction rate. As an example, it could be shown that, by 1924, the urban population of Kinshasa counted 18,000 men, but only 5,500 women and 3,500 children, or that the *Union Minière* compounds sheltered in the same year 12,152 men for 1,715 women.

Figures were, of course, less reliable for some rural areas, often deemed to lose population due to low fertility and a high infant mortality, by contrast with villages under the close influence of a mission station. In this case, available figures showed that fecundity was high and population on the increase. Despite the uncertainty of figures, the local State administration was assigned for years the unrewarding task

27 Fetter, B., "L'Union Minière du Haut-Katanga, 1920 — 1940. La naissance d'une sous-culture totalitaire", Cahiers du CEDAF (Brussels), 1973 (p. 9 — 10). After all, Hannah Arendt had traced the roots of totalitarianism to German colonialism in Africa. By contrast, "class struggle" is at the heart of the more recent monograph on labour in Katanga: Higginson, J., *A Working Class in the Making. Belgian Colonial Labor Policy and the African Mineworker, 1907 — 1951*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1989.

28 For example, Geneva Convention of 1930 on Forced Labour.

29 The available colonial expertise of the day was unanimous in denouncing "depopulation" as the major threat facing the Congo, as shown by debates and resolutions in all colonial consultative assemblies, on the spot as well as in Europe. See the *Commission pour la protection des Indigènes*, in particular in its 1919 session, the various *Commissions de la Main-d'oeuvre* in the 1920's, the sessions of the *Congrès Colonial National*, as late as 1930 etc.

of imposing a ceiling on migrant labour, arbitrary put at 5% of the adult male population of each "community". This very theoretical assignment had nevertheless as a major side effect the extension of an administrative grid at the grass roots.³⁰

This debate raged through the 1920's and, as was reminded above, we owe it the flow of denunciations which, today, enable us to reconstitute some of the hardships encountered by transported workers. However, the ideological overtones of these documents should not be neglected, as denunciations of migrant labour and of a fluid society went hand in hand with apologies for the stability of a dual society. Duality meant at one and the same time to "stabilize", i.e. to modernize gradually rural society, opening it to the market, without provoking an abrupt break with its past. Meanwhile, and in parallel, wage labour would also be "stabilized" as a healthy, self-reproducing segment of African society, attached to employment in the capitalist sector of the economy.

The writings of various theoreticians of what they regarded as "modern colonization" are very instructive in this regard. Essays or reports by O. Louwers, combining his role as the influential colonial adviser with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Brussels with the position of *rapporteur* to the *Congrès Colonial* sessions, or by G. Vanderkerken, a former colonial official, who had joined the faculty of the *Université Coloniale* in Antwerp, or again the better-informed missionary authors of the day, all conjure up the image of a maturing dual society which would be able both to ensure the development of the capitalist sector, and of the African rural economy, based on family production. A modern peasant sector would thus perform the functions of a well-tutored *contact zone*, gradually opening the way for what was then called "civilization" and stood in stark contrast to the demoralizing melting pot of the new townships and company camps. The aim, in short, was to substitute a stable society for the uncertainties of a society in flux. Rural society in its idealized form would in the end constitute the foundation on which the whole colonial edifice would rest. For the first time in African history, it would make coercion unnecessary, thus rendering Nieboer's law obsolete.

Beyond this common aim, there were, of course, differences on the strategies to follow. Some in the administration would insist on moving very gradually, maintaining, and if need be, reviving traditions, notably by propping up the authority of the chiefs and the writ of "native courts", by encouraging "native crafts" etc. Missionaries or colonial theoreticians under their influence derived much of their inspiration from the tradition of Belgian political Catholicism, with its fascination for protection of the peasantry against the encroachments of industry.³¹ They laid more hope in the

30 The 5% ratio of the male population allowed to be employed at a distance was proclaimed in 1925 by the *Commission pour l'étude de la main — d'oeuvre au Congo belge*. Defined in Brussels, this target when applied in the field entailed the impossible task of keeping track of the movements of every individual. Despite its unrealistic character, this instruction was stubbornly enforced, leading over the years to a stream of complex and sterile calculations.

31 This line has hardly been explored by historians who see in colonial policies the sole aim of imposing a dependence of the rural upon the capitalist sector, human "restocking reservations" being set aside, with "hunting quotas" being imposed so as to replenish labour reservoirs, for the benefit of the capitalist segments of the economy. It takes only a step further to describe Africans as a herd of wild animals that needed closed hunting seasons. Northrup, D., *o.c.*, p. 180. The institution of "reservations" was, of course, unknown in the Belgian Congo. For a general overview of agriculture in colonial Congo, see Jewsiewicki, B., "Rural society and the Belgian colonial economy", in: Birmingham, D., and Martin, P.,

transition to monogamous, Christian, family as the basis for modernity than in careful reconstruction of old traditions. Here again, however, in the missionary Church, there was an "indigéniste" minority who were planting the seeds of the Good Word in what they regarded as pure, revitalized primitive societies, not yet contaminated by modern rationalism. In their view, the future of Christianity laid there, and not in the materialistic civilization of capitalist enterprise. A point of view which led them to adopt an ambivalent attitude towards colonization.³²

These ideological views of the "good rural society" were fraught with distrust against the demands of a rapidly growing capitalist sector, and this division to an uncomfortable situation in the face of colonial companies which were accepted as the main economic actors and indeed felt that they were entitled to the help the administration. Coexistence between the colonial actors could only be resolved through an endless stream of compromises, negotiated at the top as well as in the field. In the last resort, state-construction had to reconcile the need to extend its control on the ground, through the agency of chiefs and of a myriad of indigenous assistants, with its lending daily assistance to colonial entrepreneurs. Weren't they, in the end, those who would be feeding the money economy through wages or the payment of cash-crops?

The ensuing result was an effort by the administration to regulate movements between the rural and capitalist sectors, to introduce quotas for recruitment, to encourage the replacement of labour by machines whenever possible, notably through the extensive road-building programme from the late 1920's through the 1930's. It can indeed be argued that the State built its administrative network on the ground through the struggle to keep migration under control, to deny, in the field, a free hand to recruiters and to limit their demands and the movement of people to the bare essentials. A programme which found its theoretical expression in a number of writings on "politique indigène", and whose success or failure owed much to personal relationships established between the main actors, be they African or European.

4. To conclude: glimpses at migration as an experience in transculturation³³

In colonial society in its early stages, if we borrow from the dualist model, two worlds coexisted, each sealed off from the other by a complex of exclusions. There was the world of rational, bureaucratic States, of capitalist enterprises based on a long-term view of profit, a world which granted a special position to world religions. This world had its own particular mixes, less rational in character, as represented by concepts such as races, cultures, national identities. All combined to clearly set this

eds., *History of Central Africa*, vol. II, London, Longman, 1983, pp. 95 — 125.

32 Much work remains to be done on nativistic currents in Belgian Africa. Among the first essays, Bontinck, F., *Aux origines de "La Philosophie bantoue". La correspondance Tempels-Hulstaert (1944 — 1948)*, Kinshasa, Faculté de Théologie catholique, 1985. See also contributions by Vinck H. on other parts of G. Hulstaert's correspondence, in: *Annales Aequatoria* (Mbandaka) (1986 et sv.).

33 See select bibliography in annex.

world of modernity apart from what it regarded as "native societies". The latter themselves imposed exclusion on the outside world, through their particularistic rules and rites, through their self-centred world view.

This cleavage may have been cultivated in principle as it embodied a promise of stability. In practice, however, it always gave way to a variety of unstable "contact zones", where the language was transcultural, adaptative, opening up new spaces where various forms of symbolic power were present even though there was sometimes felt a possibility of transcending the existing relations of domination and conquest.

This is a complex history where colonial subjects acted selectively in their appropriation of dominant cultures but also where they borrowed from other subjects. Influences and adaptation flowed the other way too, with dominant people incorporating indigenous symbols, often as a way to consolidate their rule, but also provoked by these new encounters into adapting their own cultural outlook to a new situation.

Migration served as one powerful tool for this sort of interaction and creativity. Up to now, the subject has been broached through the study of colonial urban cultures in their different aspects. In the case of the Congo, the creativity of popular culture in the cosmopolitan African towns has been illustrated in the case of popular art, of sport, of language. The same process of creation has been less often explored in the rural areas, but there too there are sources which allow us to reconstruct something of the atmosphere of awe and terror which surrounded the relations with urban life. After all, as was seen earlier, the world of migration was one of brutal captures, of men being submitted to injections, undergoing a number of bizarre physical tests and measurements, a tragic crowd of men disappearing by the thousands into the unknown, never to be heard of again, vanished into a world obsessed with the production of material goods. Did this world of riches and of evil utilize souls or corpses to produce wealth? Were they not Europeans who were looking for men to buy, rather than for work to pay? And in the villages, behind the departed migrant workers, what remained if not a world where jealousy and evil were everywhere present? What expected the fortunate migrant who had survived, upon his occasional return to the home village?

Much material has already been gathered on the traumas and the dreams nourished by migration and the "contact zones" of colonial Congo. Enough has already been brought to light to renew and enrich our understanding of structural processes such as labour migration. But the field of transculturation still holds room for much work to be done and it will no doubt open for still some time one of the more exciting directions to be explored by the historiography of the colonial age.

ANNEX

Migrations as a transcultural experience. A select bibliography of current research on the cultural history of colonial Congo.

Africa-Europe. Exercises in mutual exploration:

Jewsiewicki, B., "Painting in Zaire. From the Invention of the West to the Representation of Social Self", in: *Africa Explores. 20th century African Art*, New York, The Center for African Art, 1991, pp. 130 — 175.

Id., "Peintres de cases, imagiers et savants populaires du Congo", 1900 — 1960. Un essai d'histoire de l'esthétique indigène" (unpubl. paper, 1991).

Mudimbe, V. Y., *The Invention of Africa. Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*, Indiana University Press, 1988.

Transculturation at birth:

Hunt, N. R., "Le Bébé en brousse: European Women, African Birth Spacing and Colonial Intervention in Breast feeding in the Belgian Congo", *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, XXI — 3 (1988), pp. 401 — 432.

Pidginizing language as a symbol of power:

Fabian, J., *Language and Colonial Power. The Appropriation of Swahili in the Former Belgian Congo, 1880 — 1938*, University of California Press, 1991.

Reinvention through stereotypes and fantasies:

Vellut, J.-L., "Matériaux pour une image du Blanc dans la société coloniale du Congo Belge", in: J. Pirotte, dir., *Stéréotypes nationaux et préjugés raciaux aux XIXe et XXe siècles*, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1982, pp. 91 — 116.

People's history:

Fabian, J., *History from Below. The "Vocabulary of Elisabethville" by André Yav. Text, translation, and interpretive essay*, Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Co., 1990.

Verbeek, L., "L'histoire dans les chants et danses populaires: la zone culturelle Bemba du Haut-Shaba (Zaire)", *Enquêtes et Documents d'Histoire africaine* (Louvain-la-Neuve), 10 (1992) (in the press).

Rumours as source. Buyers of men, sellers of corpses:

White, L., "Vampire Priests of central Africa, Or, African debates About Labor in Colonial Northern Zambia" (unpubl. paper, 1991).

Art déco vs. traditional art: two modes of appropriation:

Vellut, J.-L., "Peintres congolais (1900 — 1950). Entraves et ouvertures dans les rencontres artistiques entre Afrique et Europe", in: *La naissance de la peinture contemporaine en Afrique centrale, 1930 — 1970*, Tervuren, Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale, 1992, pp. 4 — 11.

Appropriating football as an African sport:

Martin, P. M., "Colonialism, Youth and Football in French Equatorial Africa", *International Journal of the History of Sport*, VIII-1 (1991), pp. 56 — 71.

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