

Vincent Viaene, Bram Cleys and Jan De Maeyer (eds.), *Religion, Colonization, and Decolonization in Congo, 1885-1960/Religion, colonisation et décolonisation au Congo, 1885-1960*.

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The proceedings of an international conference held at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KU Leuven) in 2010, *Religion, Colonization, Decolonization in Congo*, is not merely an assemblage of papers that explore the ways in which religion shaped the colonial experience in the Belgian Congo. In this volume, editors Vincent Viaene, Bram Cleys and Jan De Maeyer took great pains to delineate an overarching theme centered on the penetration of Christianity in lockstep with the colonial onslaught. Studies intersecting religion and colonization in Congo have generally focused on specific geographic areas. Examples of this are Yolanda Covington Ward's *Gesture and Power: Religion, Nationalism, and Everyday Performance in Congo* (2015), devoted to the Lower Congo, and Reuben Loffman's *Church, State and Colonialism in Southeastern Congo, 1890-1962* (2019), an important contribution to the tensions that punctuated the relationship between the powerful Catholic Church and the colonial government in the Katanga area. A particular emphasis has also been given to Congolese appropriations of Christianity, namely Kimbanguism and Kitawala, a Central African version of the Watchtower movement. Going against the grain of this historiography, this volume covers not only the *longue durée*, but some of the salient topics that intersect with religion, including education, music, health, and politics. The volume is conveniently bookended by 1885, the creation of Leopold II's Congo Free State, and by Congo's independence in 1960.

The first part, 'Religions and the Colonial State', deals with the shift that occurred in the eighteenth century, from the humanistic, often idealistic religious zeal that championed the abolition of the slave trade to a more nationalistic view that most European missionaries espoused in order to advance the colonial project of their respective nation. It opens with a chapter by Jean-Luc Vellut that lionizes abolitionism as a central issue that shaped the penetration of Christianity in the Congo Basin over the *longue durée* and fueled missionary zeal once slavery, which amounted to '*un grand désordre international*' according to Vellut on page 24, gave way to forced labor. In what Vellut dubs the 'historical contradictions of Christianity' in Central Africa, both Catholic and Protestant missionaries had to walk a tightrope between supporting the colonial oeuvre and denouncing its hubris and abuses during the Congo Free State era. Viaene's insightful chapter is concerned with the

internationalization of what he calls ‘the religious geopolitics’, which played an important role in both advancing the imperial project in Congo, first conceived by Leopold II, and in marshalling the kind of Christian missioning that helped the Belgian colonial project win full-throated public support at home. Yet, Viaene boldly strays from the Christian beaten path to also examine Islam’s role in the early colonial period. Religion as treated in this first part should be construed as European-imposed religion, as all four authors eschew not only local beliefs but also local resistance to Christian evangelization and missionary imposition that often took the form of syncretic movements. The authors’ focus on white missionaries is in full display in a picture inserted on page 131 whose caption unwittingly makes the African ‘subjects’ invisible. Even though they outnumber whites in this image, the caption simply reads ‘Scheut missionaries on a bridge over the river Mukundayi’.

Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo’s chapter looks at the religious sovereignty Portugal claimed over the Congo. Acting as a wedge, those claims helped Portugal regain a foothold in Africa, its so-called *historical rights*, which it had lost in a context of inter-imperial rivalry that tended to marginalize Portugal. In contrast to Leopold II and the French government, who dispatched explorers to stake claims in the Congo Basin, Portugal sought to revive its moribund missionary presence as a beachhead to facilitate colonial expansion even in territories controlled by rival European powers, namely France and Leopold II’s front colonial venture, the International African Association. Anne-Sophie Gijs’s chapter shifts the focus by paying close attention to one particular article of the General Act of the Berlin Conference binding European colonial powers ‘to watch over the preservation of the native tribes, and to care for the improvement of the conditions of their moral and material well-being, and to help in suppressing slavery, and especially the slave trade’.<sup>1</sup> This, according to Gijs, was at the roots of the holistic approach of *mens sana in corpore sano*, which sought to combine moral values with material development through evangelization and agricultural *mise en valeur*. Yet, here again, Belgian Jesuit missionaries felt compelled to maintain a precarious equilibrium both by toeing the line of colonial propaganda, so as not to lose the support of the colonial state, and by reproving the treatment meted out to ‘natives’, even though their own balance sheet, according to Gijs, proved less than unblemished. For Bram Cleys, starting in the 1890s, Belgian missionary zeal in Congo’s Kasai region deployed following territoriality, a concept he borrowed from the late historian of Gabon Christopher Gray, with its attendant imposition through the control of people’s geographic space, their mobility, and their selfhood. As such, territoriality was meant to fill ‘empty space’ with ‘structures and meaning’ (121).

1 ‘General Act of the Berlin Conference on West Africa’, 26 February 1885, article 6.

The second part ‘Intermediaries’ explores the fault lines and confluences that emerged as a result of interactions within the missionary contexts. Anne Cornet’s original contribution examines the intersectionality between religion and music in the pre-wwII Christian soundscape of the Great Lakes missions where music animated most religious and secular activities and where the meeting of European and African musical traditions occasionally created some sorts of Bachovian counterpoints. Yet, controlling African voices and instruments and their perceived exuberance, if not savagery, testifies to the missionaries’ holistic attempts to govern both bodies and minds, especially when Africans choreographed music with dances that European missionaries considered ‘savage’, if not outright ‘satanic’. Mary Bryce’s chapter disrupts the sacrosanct unity between colonial and Catholic officials that often appears in the literature about colonial Congo, while the Protestant foreign missions are being sidestepped in matters related to colonial policy. Instead, she argues, using the example of Leopoldville’s *École Unique des Assistants Médicaux Indigènes* (AMI), that constant negotiations over issues as the enrollment, training, and housing of Congolese healthcare recruits pitted missionaries, regardless of their affiliations, against the colonial authorities. Because AMIS were government-run institutions located in large urban centers, missionaries balked at the idea of sending their pupils there for medical training without adequate ‘moral guidance’. Emery Kalema picks up where Bryce left out. Thanks to his meticulous ethnography, we get a glimpse of how former African medical assistants perceived the intersection of religion and medicine and their stance vis-à-vis ‘traditional’ medicine. Elizabeth Mudimbe-Boyi adopts a non-conventional methodological approach in a remarkable chapter that pieces together the lives of a Congolese Christian family in an autobiographical and genealogical narrative that draws on memory, history, and archival resources. Not unlike Kalema, albeit on a more intimate scale and intersecting filiation and affiliation, she recovers local voices and fragments from the past that colonial narratives about Congo’s evangelization had buried and silenced, to use Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s apt notion.

The last part of the volume, ‘The Crisis of the Colonial Missions’, seems to revert back to the original ambit of the volume with the leading chapter by Piet Clement reevaluating Belgian missionary Placied Tempels’ ethnology and indefatigable missionary activities with a focus on the genealogy and reception of his *Bantu Philosophy*. According to Clement, Tempels’ seminal work, which he published in 1945, represents the first major ideological departure from Catholic missionaries’ essentialization of African ontology as primitive culture. Yet, in addition to these internal fractures, missionary ideology was also challenged by African independent movements. Dominic Pistor and Sindani Kiangu tackle two of these movements, Kitawala and Mulelism, respectively. Pistor is less interested in the missionary response to Kitawala’s resistance in the Province Orientale than in the colonial

government's stick-and-carrot policy in the postwar period, a strategy aimed at separating the wheat from the chaff, namely the apolitical Kitawala from what the Belgian colonizer perceived as the xenophobic Kitawala in a context of postwar rising nationalism throughout Africa. Starting his narrative in the late 1950s, when several religious movements in the Kwilu area adopted a radical stance vis-à-vis Belgian Catholic missions, Kiangu follows up with an original interpretation of revolution as religion, and political indoctrination as political catechism (*malongi ya politique*). To be sure, the crisis of colonial missions escalated with Leopoldville's January 1959 insurrection. Rather than engage the reader with a nuanced chronicling of the ways in which colonial missions coped with and withstood Leopoldville's 'perfect storm', Zana Etambala's account focuses on the Catholic missionaries's official version, with the likes of Father Joseph Van Wing leading the charge and pinning the blame on the Kimbanguists. According to this debunked version, some Kimbanguists had supposedly infiltrated the Alliance of Bakongo (ABAKO) and ignited the powder keg of unemployment and urban malaise that led to the insurrection.

For all intents and purposes, this volume should serve as both an illustration and a reminder that scholarship of African colonial history, a perennial ectopic field, will continue for an unforeseeable future to be framed by the academic trajectories of its scholars and pegged to the sources available to them, to say nothing of their 'collective idiosyncrasies'. Even though the volume hardly avoids dichotomizing this contested history – Belgium scholars' archive-sourced narratives focus on European missionary activities while Congolese scholars investigate local developments – it is clearly a valuable addition to our understanding of the ways in which European missionaries in Congo buttressed the colonial civilizing mission, yet sowed the seeds of their own demise. For that particular reason, it deserves some praise and a wide dissemination.

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