Writing Transimperial Histories from/of the Belgian Congo

Reflections on a Historiography in the Making

AMANDINE LAURO

This article investigates the neglect of the Belgian colonial empire – particularly the Belgian Congo – in the burgeoning field of transimperial history. It explores this omission from both a historical and historiographical perspective, not to advocate for an umpteenth academic 'turn', but rather to reflect on the Belgian empire's ambivalent relationship to internationalism and comparisons and its impact on knowledge production about the Congo's colonial past. Drawing on existing literature and the author's empirical research on the history of sexual violence, racial psychology and military engagements in the two World Wars, the article considers what insights a transimperial lens could bring to the study of the Belgian empire, identifying new thematic and analytical possibilities, and conversely, how the Belgian case might contribute to (and eventually challenge) transimperial historiography. Ultimately, the article invites reflection on the specificities of Congo's historiographical treatment within the broader landscape of imperial histories.

Dit artikel onderzoekt de marginale positie van het Belgische koloniale rijk – met name van Congo – binnen het groeiende onderzoeksveld van de transimperiale geschiedenis, vanuit zowel een historisch als een historiografisch perspectief. In plaats van een nieuwe academische 'turn' te introduceren, beoogt het een reflectie over de ambivalente houding van België tegenover internationalisme en comparatieve benaderingen (het historische luik), en over de gevolgen daarvan voor de kennisproductie over Congo's koloniale verleden (het historiografische luik). Op basis van bestaande literatuur en eigen empirisch onderzoek naar seksueel geweld, raciale psychologie en Belgische militaire inzet tijdens beide Wereldoorlogen verkent dit artikel twee sporen: enerzijds de inzichten die een transimperiale benadering kan opleveren voor het onderzoek naar het Belgische

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kolonialisme, en anderzijds hoe de Belgische casus kan bijdragen aan, of juist een uitdaging kan vormen voor, de transimperiale historiografie. Kortom, deze bijdrage nodigt uit tot reflectie over Congo's specifieke historiografische plaats binnen bredere imperiale kaders.

Introduction

The starting point of this article is the recent emergence of the field of transimperial history. For historians of colonialism, this field is likely a familiar one as it has become a prominent trend in the historiography of empires in the last few years. The numerous high-quality publications and academic events that have since appeared on the topic testify to the exceptional dynamism of this scholarship.[1]

For readers less acquainted with this new body of research, transimperial history can be summarised as an approach that examines interactions, connections, and exchanges across empires – rather than focusing solely on circulations within a single empire or comparing different empires in isolation. In other words, the transimperial approach emphasises the interconnectedness of colonial empires and highlights how they were shaped by their mutual interactions (of competition *and* cooperation) – and

1 Major works include Volker Barth and Roland Cvetkovski (eds.), *Imperial Co-Operation and Transfer, 1870-1930: Empires and Encounters* (Bloomsbury 2015). DOI: https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474256100; Christoph Kamissek and Jonas Kreienbaum, 'An Imperial Cloud? Conceptualising Interimperial Connections and Transimperial Knowledge', *Journal of Modern European History* 14:2 (2016) 164-182. DOI: https://doi.org/10.17104/1611-8944-2016-2-164; Sara Legrandjacques and Karim Mammasse (eds.), *Interconnexions (post-)coloniales, XX-XXIe siècle*. Special issue of *Les Cahiers Sirice* 20:1 (2018); Kristin L. Hoganson and Jay Sexton (eds.), *Crossing Empires: Taking U.S. History into Transimperial Terrain* (Duke University Press 2020). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478007432; M'hamed Oualdi, *A Slave Between Empires: A Transimperial History of North Africa* (Columbia University Press 2020); Laurent Dedryvère et al. (eds.), *Transimpérialités contemporaines/Moderne Transimperialitäten. Rivalités, contacts, émulation/Rivalitäten, Kontakte, Wetteifer* (Peter Lang 2021). DOI: https://doi.org/10.3726/b18669; Damiano Matasci and Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo (eds.), *Coopérations et circulations transimpériales en Afrique (fin du XIXe siècle - années 1960)*. Special issue of the *Revue d'Histoire Contemporaine de l'Afrique* 3 (2022). For detailed historiographical analysis of the field, see Daniel Hedinger and Nadin Heé, 'Transimperial History: Connectivity, Cooperation and Competition', *Journal of Modern European History* 16:4 (2018) 429-452. DOI: https://doi.org/10.17104/1611-8944-2018-4-429; Damiano Matasci and Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo, 'Une histoire transimpériale de l'Afrique: concepts, approches et perspectives', *Revue d'Histoire Contemporaine de l'Afrique* 3 (2022) 1-17. DOI: https://doi.org/10.51185/journals/rhca.2022.0301. A founding reference is also Simon J. Potter and Johnatan Saha, 'Global History, Imperial History and Connected Histories of Empire', *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 16:1 (2015). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/cch.2015.0009.

ultimately how these interactions contributed to shaping the global imperial landscape. Key themes of exploration include circuits of encounters between empires, cross-border dynamics, and the ways in which the transimperial mobility of people, ideas, practices, and commodities influenced the development of various empires. Other important topics include the politics of (anti)colonial comparison – that is, how empires compared themselves to one another in the past and how such comparisons were used – and shared challenges and solutions, such as how empires (their leaders, subjects, and opponents) learned from or influenced each other in addressing issues related to colonial governance, resource management or dealing with resistance, among other examples.

In terms of intellectual genealogy, the field could be summed up roughly as a three-dimensional encounter between imperial history/colonial studies, global history, and transnational history. Some might argue that this is basically the transnational turn applied to colonial history; however, as one of the most insightful articles tracing the development of this new historiography, by Daniel Hedinger and Nadine Heé, has already pointed out, the relationship between the two fields is far more complex – particularly because 'transnational history used the colonies to deconstruct the nation' and in doing so, paradoxically, 'often ended up in nationalizing empires'.[2]

A simple glance at the tables of contents of works published within the framework of transimperial history reveals something striking: the absence of the Belgian colonial empire[3] and more specifically of the Belgian Congo.[4] This

2 Hedinger and Heé, 'Transimperial History', 440. See also Volker and Cvetkovski, *Imperial Co-Operation*, 21-22.

3 The term 'empire' is used here in the 'traditional' sense of the term and refers to the Belgian colonies/mandates of Congo (1908-1960) and Rwanda and Burundi (1916-1962).

4 The main exception is an article by historian Geert Castryck – significantly focused on colonial Rwanda – titled 'Mwami Musinga et la sauvegarde de la frontière de la Kagera entre le Rwanda et le Tanganyika. Le tournant transimpérial après la Première Guerre mondiale', *Revue d'Histoire Contemporaine de l'Afrique* 3 (2022) 129-143. DOI: https://doi.org/10.51185/journals/rhca.2022.0309. A few articles related to the Belgian empire that also develop a transimperial approach have been published in other editorial contexts: Amandine Lauro, '"To our Colonial Troops, Greetings from the Far-Away Homeland": Race, Security and (Inter) Imperial Anxieties in the Discussion on Colonial Troops in World War One Belgium', *Journal of Belgian History* 48:1-2 (2018) 34-55; Geert Castryck, 'Reinventing International Colonialism during a Crisis of Empire: Belgian-British Colonial Exchanges between Inter-Imperialism and Inter-Colonial Technical Cooperation, 1920s-1930s', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 48:5 (2020) 846-865. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2020.1816618; Amandine Lauro, '"The British, the French and even the Russians use these methods": Psychology, Mental Testing and (Trans)imperial Dynamics of Expertise Production in Late-Colonial Congo', in: Miles Larmer et al. (eds.), *Across the Copperbelt: Urban & Social Change in Central Africa's Borderland Communities* (James Currey 2021) 267-295. DOI: https://doi.

is all the more surprising given that transimperial history, from its inception, has included smaller European empires (and even non-European ones) and has therefore never been centred solely on British or French imperial experiences – as was the case in some earlier historiographical 'turns' in colonial history. The aim of this article is precisely to interrogate this absence and to seize it as an opportunity to reflect on the relationship between the Belgian colonial empire and the transimperial, from both a historiographical and a historical perspective. My intention is by no means to advocate for yet another 'indispensable' academic 'turn', nor to prescribe a new research agenda to historians of Belgian colonialism. Rather, I propose an exploratory analysis of the contrast between the richness of transimperial historiography and the silence about the Belgian empire, of its possible meanings, and of why this omission might be regrettable for the historiography of both the Belgian Congo and transimperial studies. In this sense, this article also invites reflection on the specificities of Congo's historiographical treatment within the broader landscape of imperial histories.

More concretely, this contribution addresses three transversal questions. The first one is quite basic: How can we explain the absence of the Belgian empire in transimperial scholarship? To what extent is this absence surprising, despite the existence of pioneering works from earlier historiography? As academic turns often work on pretences of reinventing the wheel, it is important to acknowledge the significance of the earliest innovative research addressing transimperial issues without using that label (if I may be permitted this anachronism). Among others, two landmark pieces of work merit mention here. First, the 1970s research of Jean Stengers on Leopold II and the Dutch colonial model, in which the famous Belgian historian demonstrated how the Dutch system of exploitation in Java served as a complex source of inspiration for the Congo Free State regime – a typical

org/10.1515/9781800101487-015. The article by Cyrus Schayegh, 'The Expanding Overlap of Imperial, International and Transnational Political Activities, 1920s-1930s: A Belgian Case Study', *International Politics* 55:6 (2017) 782-802. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-017-0109-x also addresses similar issues; however, in focusing on metropolitan (colonial) Belgium and on diplomatic (metropolitan) archives, it tends to use imperial Belgium as a metonym for the Belgian empire. The complex connection between the imperial and the transnational in Belgian colonies is also excellently evoked in two articles by Miguel Bandeira Jeronimo, 'Restoring Order, Inducing Change: Imagining a "New (Wo)man" in the Belgian Colonial Empire in the 1950s', *Comparativ* 28:5 (2018) 77-96. DOI: https://doi.org/10.26014/j.comp.2018.05.05 and idem, 'Les organismes inter-impériaux et l'internationalisation des politiques sociales (des années 1940 aux années 1960)', *Etudes Internationales* 54:1 (2023) 23-50. DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1110732ar. Last but not least, historian Jean-Luc Vellut has been a precursor in this field, as in many others (see in particular his 'Réseaux transnationaux dans l'économie politique du Congo Léopoldien, c. 1885-1910', in Laurence Marfaing and Brigitte Reinwald (eds.), *Afrikanische Beziehungen, Netzwerke und Räume* (LIT 2001) 131-146).

JEAN STENGERS

Léopold II et le modèle colonial hollandais

Le 17 février 1860, le duc de Brabant, futur Léopold II, prenait la parole devant le Sénat belge. L'héritier du trône, aux termes de la Constitution, était sénateur de droit à partir de l'âge de dix-huit ans. Le duc de Brabant avait pris séance au Sénat le jour même de son dix-huitième anniversaire, le 9 avril 1853. De 1853 à 1859, cependant, il n'était intervenu dans les débats que de manière relativement concise, au sujet notamment de problèmes de défense nationale, de travaux publics et d'expansion commerciale de la Belgique.[1] Le 17 février 1860, il prononce son premier grand discours.

Son thème est l'un de ceux qu'il avait déjà traités précédemment, mais auquel il donne cette fois une réelle ampleur: c'est la nécessité de promouvoir le commerce belge à l'étranger et l'exportation des produits belges. Le duc préconise diverses initiatives dans ce domaine, et notamment la création de comptoirs en Orient. A la fin de son discours, mais dans un style moins direct, d'une manière un peu voilée – au point que la portée de ses paroles échappera à certains de ses auditeurs –, il aborde aussi la question des acquisitions coloniales que la Belgique pourrait envisager.[2] Il n'avait pas jusqu'alors, dans ses interventions au Sénat, parlé de colonies. Pour la première fois, il emploie le terme. 'Les comptoirs et les colonies', dit-il, 'n'ont pas seulement toujours bien servi les intérêts commerciaux des peuples, mais c'est encore à ces établissements que la plupart d'entre eux ont été redevables de leur grandeur passée ou présente'.[3]

A l'appui de cette assertion, le duc de Brabant évoque le passé colonial de toute une série de pays européens, et les avantages que les possessions coloniales leur ont valus. Les Pays-Bas, bien entendu, figurent dans ce palmarès. Le duc se plaît à rappeler la gloire et la prospérité de l'ancienne Compagnie des Indes orientales. 'Ses dividendes s'élevèrent, en moyenne, depuis son établissement jusqu'en 1648 à 22 %. Il y eut des années où ils atteignirent 40, 50, 60 et même 75 %'. Les Pays-Bas continuent à avoir les meilleures raisons de se réjouir de leur Empire colonial. 'C'est grâce à ses colonies que la Hollande voit ses fonds publics se maintenir si

[1] E. Descamps, 'Le duc de Brabant au Sénat de Belgique', dans *Académie Royale de Belgique. Bulletin de la Classe des Lettres*, 1903. Par une curieuse inadvertance, Descamps a cependant omis de relever le maiden speech du prince, qui date du 7 juin 1853, et qui était consacré au projet de loi militaire de 1853 (*Annales parlementaires, Sénat*, 1852–1853, p. 467–468).

[2] Un reflet du caractère relativement voilé de ses propos: le ministre d'Angleterre à Bruxelles, dans l'analyse qu'il fait du discours du duc, met l'accent sur ses propositions en matière commerciale ('The more immediate point which His Royal Highness has in view and which he presses on the government, is the creation of national houses of commercial agency in foreign countries'), mais ne dit pas un mot de la question des colonies (Howard de Walden à Russell, 18 février 1860; Public Record Office, F.O. 10-226).

[3] *Annales parlementaires, Sénat*, 1859–1860, p. 59.

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Figure 1. In a pioneering analysis that could be characterised as transimperial avant la lettre, the distinguished Belgian historian Jean Stengers explored in 1977 the impact of the Dutch colonial model – particularly the system developed in Java – on Leopold II's conception of colonial exploitation. Jean Stengers, 'Léopold II et le modèle hollandais', *Tijdschrift voor geschiedenis* 90 (1977) 46–71. https://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/retroapp/service_tvg/tvg_90/images/tvg090_01_046.jpg?size=800x.

case of transimperial lesson-learning avant la lettre (Figure 1).[5] Second, the work of the political scientist and specialist in state politics in the Congo Crawford Young, who published a groundbreaking book in 1994 offering a comparative history of colonial states in Africa with extensive coverage of the Congo. Of course, comparative history is not transimperial history, but there was something very original in the way Young's analysis connected and not just compared the Congo to other empires.[6] These works could have paved the way for a new generation of histories of the Belgian empire. Yet they did not, and I would like to argue that part of the explanation lies in the colonial period itself, and in the complex relationship of Belgian colonial authorities to internationalism and colonial comparisons.

The second question or rather set of questions this article seeks to address pertains to the potential contributions of a transimperial approach when applied to the Belgian Congo. What new stories can be told with it? What new points of focus does it illuminate? Why is it relevant beyond the academic trend? In other words, what are the interests and challenges of writing transimperial histories *of* the Belgian Congo? The third question addressed by this article mirrors the previous one: How can the Belgian 'case' contribute to the existing literature on the transimperial? In other words, what is the interest and what are the challenges of writing transimperial histories *from* the Belgian Congo?

The ambition of this article is not so much to provide exhaustive answers to these questions as to open a conversation about them, based on a selection of reflexive and empirical considerations, mostly rooted in political and cultural history.[7] Some of the historical episodes and case-studies supporting this contribution are drawn from existing literature, while others are derived from my own empirical work. The latter concern three distinct areas of exploration, investigated throughout my past and present research. While they might appear somewhat disparate, they each carry distinct resonances from a transimperial perspective.

The first area deals with gender and sexuality politics, specifically sexual violence, considered from a legal history perspective. It is now

5 Jean Stengers, 'Léopold II et le modèle colonial hollandais', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 90 (1977) 46-71.

6 Crawford Young, *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective* (Yale University Press 1994).

7 This focus notably overlooks key insights from economic history – a field that merits a transimperial analysis of its own. As an anonymous reviewer of this article rightly noted, one might consider, for instance, the role of foreign capital and stakeholders in major enterprises, and thus in the economic development of colonial Congo. Similarly, the Belgian empire's sector-specific ties with neighbouring powers – such as the entanglement of Portuguese and Belgian actors in the diamond industry – deserve closer attention. On these topics, see Vellut, 'Réseaux transnationaux' and S.E. Katzenellenbogen, *Railways and the Copper Mines of Katanga* (Clarendon Press 1973).

well-known that gender and sexuality were key sites where the distinction between coloniser and colonised was reproduced, in close articulation with race. These topics have been central to the renewal of colonial studies and their programmatic call to consider metropole and colony in the same analytical framework,[8] but have not featured prominently in recent transimperial scholarship. For this article, these issues will provide an opportunity to investigate the circulations of legal practices between empires and some transimperial 'lesson-learning' choices made by Belgian colonial authorities.

The second theme developed in this article is the history of psychology in the Belgian Congo. With this topic, we delve into the rich history of knowledge production in colonial contexts, a pioneer area for the study of connected histories of empires. This is unsurprising given that science was a central field of transimperial encounters from the beginning of colonial expansion and that knowledge production was highly institutionalised, with societies and networks formalising these transimperial exchanges.[9] As such, this theme offers a window onto the multiplicity of networks of cooperation and their sometimes conflictual intersections.

The third theme explored in this article is the history of the military in the Belgian Congo during the two World Wars. By definition, military campaigns during these wars were moments of transimperial encounters, but they have been little studied as such. While a transimperial perspective may not radically alter our understanding of these episodes, it can provide a valuable lens to re-examine them, for instance to grasp the complexity of the competition/cooperation relationship between empires that crystallised during these moments, and the experiences of those involved. Notably, although numerous excellent studies have explored the role of colonised soldiers, they often remain within an imperial framework, focusing primarily on recruits' mobility to European metropoles. Here again, examining these experiences through the lens of transimperial connectivity allows to reconsider them from a different angle. In the case of the Belgian Congo, as this article will show, it also reveals tensions around the transimperial as both a resource and a threat, and its varied appropriations by different actors, including the colonised.

8 Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, 'Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda', in: Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (eds.), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (University of California Press 1997) 22. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520205406.001.0001.

9 Barth and Cvetkovski, *Imperial Co-Operation*, 10-11; Hedinger and Heé, 'Transimperial History', 438-439. A key work prefiguring transimperial analysis in the Belgian empire concerns the field of tropical medicine: Myriam Mertens and Guillaume Lachenal, 'The History of "Belgian" Tropical Medicine from a Cross-Border Perspective', *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* 90:4 (2012) 1249-1271. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3406/rbph.2012.8285.

A final clarification before getting to the heart of the matter: as both the brief outline of these themes and the title of this article suggest, the focus here is not on the Belgian empire as a whole, but specifically on its principal colony, the Belgian Congo. The limits of my expertise and the centrality of the Congo in the historiography of colonisation explain this choice, even if I will return, in the conclusion, to the challenges posed by the mandates of Rwanda and Burundi in relation to a transimperial history of Belgian colonialism.

An ambiguous relationship: transimperialism as a resource and a threat

From the outset of its colonial history, Belgium maintained a complex and somewhat paradoxical relationship to internationalism and transimperial comparisons. It is well known that during the Scramble for Africa, King Leopold II used strategies of internationalisation to assert the legitimacy of his rule over the Congo Free State; simultaneously, from a domestic political standpoint, he encouraged comparative studies of colonial methods of exploitation.[10] Beyond the pragmatic objective of lesson-learning, this strategy also aimed to position Brussels – and Belgium at large – as a hub of international expertise on colonial affairs. The clearest expression of this ambition was the founding in 1894 of the Institut Colonial International, soon renowned for its innovative expertise on '*colonisation comparée*'.[11]

But things changed quickly in the early twentieth century, when the global reach of the 'Red Rubber' campaign against atrocities in the Congo instilled an enduring distrust of international interference in colonial affairs among Belgian authorities. As Guy Vanthemsche has underlined, following

10 Jean Stengers, *Congo, mythes et réalités* (Racine 2005 [1989]) 45-98. On the complex relationship between Belgian internationalism and imperialism, see Daniel Laqua, *The Age of Internationalism and Belgium 1880-1930: Peace, Progress and Prestige* (Manchester University Press 2013) 45-79. DOI: https://doi.org/10.7228/manchester/9780719088834.001.0001. On the entanglement of foreign interests in the creation and early history of the Congo Free State, see the developments described in the introduction of this special issue by Janne Schreurs and Eline Ceulemans: 'Transimperial Opportunities? Small State Colonisation of Congo (1876-1940)', *BMGN – LCHR* 140:4 (2025). DOI: https://doi.org/10.51769/bmgn-lchr.22632.

11 An international forum for the exchange of knowledge on colonial matters among scholars, politicians, and administrators, the International Colonial Institute later became the International Institute of Differing Civilizations. See Janny de Jong, 'Kolonialisme op een koopje. Het Internationale Koloniale Instituut, 1894-1914', in *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 109 (1996) 45-72; Pierre Singaravelou, 'Les stratégies d'internationalisation de la question coloniale et la construction transnationale d'une science de la colonisation à la fin du XIX^e siècle', *Monde(s)* 1:1 (2012) 135-157. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3917/mond.121.0135; Florian Wagner, *Colonial Internationalism and the Governmentality of Empire, 1893-1982* (Cambridge University Press 2022). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009072229.

the 1908 *reprise* (when the Congo Free State of Leopold II became a national colony, the Belgian Congo), these anxieties intensified. Belgian colonial leaders grew increasingly paranoid that their sovereignty over Congo was under threat, that rival colonial powers and international institutions were sceptical of Belgium's ability to succeed as an imperial power, and that it was imperative to demonstrate that Belgium was not only up to the task, but would do better than the others.[12] Ironically, efforts to establish Brussels as a transimperial capital also backfired; the city hosted the second Pan-African Congress in 1921, which adopted a critical stance towards colonialism, and was a few years later chosen as the venue for the inaugural congress of The League Against Imperialism and Colonial Oppression.[13]

In the ensuing decades, the Belgian colonial worldview remained always particularly sensitive about colonial comparisons and internationalism at large, albeit with paradoxical consequences. On the one hand, transimperial allusions were frequently employed to bolster claims of the Congo's supposed 'model' management, emphasising discourses of superiority and exemplarity. Simultaneously, while transimperial comparisons often informed policy decisions, they were downplayed in public discourse in favour of a dominant narrative of imperial self-definition that asserted an alleged unique Belgian approach to colonial governance, rooted in the nation's claimed expertise and know-how. In the interwar period, theoretical debates about the pros and cons of direct versus indirect administration (the most contentious topic among colonial experts at the time)[14] were, for instance, presented as concerns for other colonial powers, with Belgium purportedly having no need to engage in such armchair, petty exchanges ('we don't have a doctrinal native policy', proudly stated a high-rank official from the Belgian Congo in 1922, but an 'experimental' one)[15]. Or so the official discourse went, aiming to assert that Belgium did not need any external advice and was sufficiently proficient in colonial affairs to be (and to build) its own model. This political strategy rendered many transimperial connections and exchanges invisible in the public sphere, even though they were integral to the everyday practices of colonial policymaking.

This invisibilisation stands indeed in stark contrast to the extensive transimperial archives available within the colonial bureaucracy's records. This discrepancy and its reproduction in historical narratives became

12 Guy Vanthemsche, *La Belgique et le Congo. Empreintes d'une colonie* (Complexe 2007) 110-112.

13 M. W. Kodi, 'The 1921 Pan-African Congress at Brussels: A Background to Belgian Pressures', *Transafrican Journal of History* 13 (1984) 48-73. On the 1927 Brussels congress, see Jürgen Dinkel, *The Non-Aligned Movement: Genesis, Organization and Politics (1927-1992)* (Brill 2019) 16-41. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004336131.

14 Véronique Dimier, *Le gouvernement des colonies, regards croisés franco-britanniques* (Editions de l'Université libre de Bruxelles 2004).

15 Alphonse Engels, 'Administration directe ou administration indirecte au Congo', *Congo. Revue générale de la colonie* 1 (1922) 335.

particularly evident when, a few years ago, I investigated why Belgium chose not to deploy soldiers from the colony to the metropolitan battlefields during the First World War. Until then, this question had been relegated to a footnote in most history books, partly because previous historians had mostly focused on public political discourses such as official reports or discussions from the Council of Ministers, which had barely devoted a few lines to the subject. However, a glance at the colonial administration's files made clear that the thickness of the archive, and of the debates surrounding this question, laid primarily in processes of transimperial comparison, competition, and (counter)inspiration through missions to French military headquarters and *camps d'acclimatation* in the South, meetings with French colonial officers, collection of legal documents and parliamentary debates from other empires, international press clippings, and more. These records are significant not only for their intrinsic value and insights into the use of transimperial comparisons as political instruments, but also for the perspective they offer on the absence of colonial troops in Belgium during World War I. Considering the substantial involvement of colonial and military authorities in transimperial processes amidst a raging war, this absence was neither a foregone conclusion nor an inevitable outcome.[16] While this does not fundamentally alter our understanding of the reasons behind this absence, the nuance it adds to our knowledge of this historical (non-)event serves as a valuable reminder of a transimperial perspective viewed 'less as an end than as a means to rewrite the histories of empires'.[17]

Beyond the diplomatic scene, another consequence of Belgian colonial authorities' distrust of foreign interferences was the policy of 'Belgicisation' of the Congo's white community. Initiated in the late 1910s,[18] this strategy was only partly successful, as evidenced by the persistence of Portuguese, Greek, Italian or Jewish communities in the main cities of the colony (Figure 2).[19]

16 Amandine Lauro, '"To our Colonial Troops"'.

17 Hedinger and Heé, 'Transimperial History', 431.

18 Vita Foutry, 'Belgisch-Kongo tijdens het interbellum: Een immigratiebeleid gericht op sociale controle', *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 13 (1983) 461-488.

19 Historian Jean-Luc Vellut has been a pioneer of the history of these communities. See notably his 'La communauté portugaise du Congo belge', in: Eddy Stols and John Everaert (eds.), *Flandre et Portugal. Au confluent de deux cultures* (Mercator 1991) 315-345. See also Rosario Giordano, *Belges et Italiens du Congo-Kinshasa* (L'Harmattan 2008); Daniele Comberiati et al. (eds.), *Des Italiens au Congo aux Italiens du Congo. Aspects d'une globalité* (L'Harmattan 2020); Moïse Rahmani, *Shalom Bwana, la saga des Juifs du Congo* (Romillat 2004); Georges Antippas, *Pionniers méconnus du Congo belge* (Romillat 2008). See also the contributions of this special issue on other national minorities, notably the Finns and the Luxembourgers, in the colony: see Janne Lahti, 'Finns in the Congo: Opportunities and Colonial Experiences in a Foreign Empire', *BMGN – LCHR* 140:4 (2025). DOI: https://doi.org/10.51769/bmgn-lchr.20006; Kevin Goergen, 'Negotiating Assimilation: Luxembourgers in the Congo Basin During the Interwar Period (1918-1939)', *BMGN – LCHR* 140:4 (2025). DOI: https://doi.org/10.51769/bmgnlchr.20005.

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Figure 2. Despite the policy of 'Belgicisation' of the Congo's white community, the group of colonisers retained a relatively cosmopolitan character. The Portuguese formed a major community, especially in Bas-Congo and in the commercial sector, their presence materialised in the built environment such as the Portuguese Circle in Kinshasa – a hub of business and sociability in the capital. Postcard 'Gremio Portugalia' (Cercle Portugais), s.d. [1900–1920]. © Manuel Charpy, *Sape*, InVisu. https://corpus-invisu.inha.fr/s/sape/document/Congo_88.

Nevertheless, it contributed to the silencing of the importance of cross-border connections in the Belgian Congo and to the low visibility of the cosmopolitan nature of its demography. Here again, colonial policies were marked by contradictions and ambiguities. Consider the well-known case of Katanga: Belgian colonisers were very concerned, in the post-annexation period, about British influences in the region. The creation of the city of Elizabethville near the Congolese-Rhodesian border on the railroad from Southern Africa was an obvious attempt to counter that danger. Yet that same location and railroad meant that Elizabethville was far more connected with 'cities such as Bulawayo and Salisbury as well as Cape Town and Beira than with Boma and Leopoldville, the successive capitals of the Belgian Congo'.[20] Furthermore, in Katanga as elsewhere in the Congo, that cosmopolitanism was of course never limited to the white community – and I am here thinking of the many individuals and communities about whom we know so little in the history of the Belgian Congo: Chinese workers, Indian traders, non-Congolese African workers and craftsmen from Rhodesia, South Africa, Senegal and Western Africa at large, not to mention all the connections with the Arabo-Swahili communities of the East African coast.[21] Once again, these presences, while notable on the ground, were scarcely mentioned in Belgian public discourses about colonial society. Here too, the transimperial approach can provide us with an opportunity to finally tell the histories of these individuals and communities who, beyond the interest *per se* of their trajectories, remind us that Belgian colonialism in the Congo was never entirely a *face-à-face*, a binary encounter between 'Belgians' and 'Congolese'.

That being said, and as it is always useful to think against one's own argument, it remains important to emphasise the challenges inherent in

20 Sofie Boonen, 'Une ville construite par des "gens d'ailleurs". Développements urbains à Élisabethville, Congo belge (actuellement Lubumbashi, RDC)', *ABE Journal* [Online] 14-15 (2019) 2. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/abe.6164.

21 Chinese workers were recruited for the infamous construction of the Leopoldville-Matadi railway at the end of the nineteenth century, in conditions that remain unclear to this day; Indian traders' presence in the Belgian empire has only been documented in Burundi and the Eastern Congo (see Vellut, *Congo*, 101, 146 and Jean-Pierre Chétien, 'Les communautés indiennes au Burundi sous les colonisations allemande et belge', *Lusotopie* 15:1 (2008) 161-173. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/17683084-01501012). While 'coastmen' (migrants from Western Africa) are evoked in works on the cultural history of Kinshasa, little is known about their history. The Arabo-Swahili communities in the Congo have recently been at the centre of new research (see inter alia Noemie Arazi et al., 'History, Archaeology and Memory of the Swahili-Arab in the Maniema, DRC', *Antiquity* 94:375 (2020) 1-7. DOI: https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2020.86 and Xavier Luffin, *Un autre regard sur l'histoire congolaise. Les documents arabes et swahilis dans les archives belges (1880-1899)* (ARSOM-KAWO 2020)), but their long-term history remains little explored – Burundi on the contrary has been extensively studied by Geert Castryck (see notably 'Living Islam in Colonial Bujumbura: The Historical Translocality of Muslim Life between East and Central Africa', *History in Africa* 46 (2019) 263-298). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2019.2).

striking a balance between, on the one hand, recognising the importance of narrating these histories and, on the other, avoiding the risk of 'overemphasizing' (or fantasising about) these connections.[22] Specifically, there is a risk of losing sight of the broader picture when discussing the Belgian Congo: namely that colonial authorities were remarkably successful in imposing controls on the movement of people and ideas from and to the Congo. As highlighted in an excellent article by Matthew Stanard, the 'imperial immobility' that was one of the singularities of the Belgian empire calls for prudence in this regard. While Stanard uses this argument to call for 'precision'[23] in the face of the generalisation of a paradigm like the 'metropole and colony in a single analytical field'[24] one – so key to the new colonial studies' agenda and admittedly rooted in the experiences of major imperial powers – a similar caution is warranted when studying transimperial connections. In my view, however, this analytical caution only makes the case of the Congo more interesting from a transimperial perspective, as the Belgian colony offers an ideal field to reflect simultaneously on what moved and on what did *not* move, on connectivities and immobilities. This dual focus resonates with a central tension in historiographical debates on global history – and on its 'circulatory tropism'[25] – while aligning with calls from prominent historians of the field to study 'connections and interruptions' as 'non-mutually exclusive processes'[26] and to pay attention to the 'varying degrees of intensity of entanglements'.[27]

After the Second World War, Belgium's colonial rule faced heightened international scrutiny, leading to an even more strained relationship with international institutions – albeit one marked, once again, by ambiguities. More than ever, the fear of international interference in colonial affairs and distrust of the UN's criticism led to a well-known defensive stance by

22 Hedinger and Heé, 'Transimperial History', 441.

23 Matthew Stanard, 'Belgium, the Congo, and Imperial Immobility: A Singular Empire and the Historiography of the Single Analytic Field', *French Colonial History* 15 (2014) 87-110, 89. DOI: https://doi.org/10.14321/frencolohist.15.2014.0087. This call has also been substantiated in Daniel Tödt, *The Lumumba Generation: African Bourgeoisie and Colonial Distinction in the Belgian Congo* (De Gruyter 2021) 31, 360. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110709308.

24 Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, 'Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda', in: Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper (eds.), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (University of California Press 1997) 4.

25 Matasci and Bandeira Jerónimo, 'Une histoire', 8.

26 Richard Drayton and David Motadel, 'Discussion: The Futures of Global History', *Journal of Global History* 13:1 (2018) 10. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022817000262.

27 Tödt, *The Lumumba Generation*, 360, referring to Monica Juneja and Margrit Pernau, 'Lost in Translation? Transcending Boundaries in Comparative History', in: Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Jürgen Kocka (eds.), *Comparative and Transnational History: Central European Approaches and New Perspectives* (Berghahn 2009) 105-129. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/9781845458034-007.

colonial Belgium.[28] While this was not a Belgian specificity as the distrust was indeed shared across European empires, Belgian hostility was greater than that of French or British authorities, to such an extent that in 1952, Belgium withdrew from the Information Committee for Non-Autonomous Territories, the main UN body on (de)colonial issues. On the diplomatic stage, Belgium's position implied a contradictory and fascinatingly complex relationship to colonial comparisons. On the one hand, it was all about saying that Belgian colonies could not be compared to other empires: anticolonial troubles were portrayed as concerns for other African colonies but not for the 'model' Belgian Congo, a 'peaceful' colony untouched by the prospects of anticolonial turmoil – according to the official mythology. On the other hand, a key element of the Belgian strategy was to use comparison as a tool to counter criticism, though not exactly 'colonial' comparison: the whole point of the famous 'Belgian position' (*la thèse belge*) created by Belgian diplomats for the UN was indeed to argue that the Congo should be compared to other autonomous territories dealing with indigenous populations, such as Brazil. The argument was not only that it was unfair for the UN to focus solely on colonial powers; it was also that these other countries, including Brazil, fell short compared to the Belgian Congo in terms of standards of living, healthcare, and education for indigenous populations.[29] Unsurprisingly, no one was convinced, but that was the reasoning that was developed, with an obvious tension between using comparison (but not too much) and asserting exceptionalism.

These tensions were not only matters of international diplomacy but also impacted other areas of colonial policies, notably the field of knowledge production, where similar ambiguities towards internationalism and comparisons were at play. Indeed, as a result of Belgium quitting the UN's Committee for Non-Autonomous Territories, the Belgian Congo was largely excluded from programs of UN agencies such as the UNESCO and the WHO – key sponsors of research on 'development' and 'modernization', the two buzzwords of late-colonial politics in Africa.[30] This exclusion was not only political but also justified by Belgium's critique of the UN's intellectual neutrality on colonial matters. Yet, it did not prevent Belgian colonial scientific institutions to boast in their official reports about 'prestigious'

28 Vanthemsche, *La Belgique et le Congo*, 142-148.

29 Ibidem, 147; Jacques Vanderlinden, *Pierre Ryckmans, 1891-1959* (De Boeck 1994) 699-702; Frank Gerits, 'Americanising the Belgian civilising mission (1941-1961)', in: Laurien Crump and Susanna Erlandsson (eds.), *Margins for Manoeuvre in Cold War Europe* (New York 2019) 130-146. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429425592-10.

30 Frederick Cooper, 'Development, Modernization, and the Social Sciences in the Era of Decolonization', *Revue d'Histoire des Sciences Humaines* 10:1 (2004) 9-38. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3917/rhsh.010.0009. This paragraph, and the one-and-a-half following, are inspired from my 'The British', 267-295.

individual invitations received by their researchers from UNESCO, reflecting the ambivalence surrounding an internationalisation that could provide scientific validation despite fears of its anticolonial implications. As shown in previous research, this tension was particularly pronounced in applied psychology, a key area of expertise for post-1945 empires and their renewed technocratic ambitions.[31] Take for example the case of official narratives about Congo's educational policies and their incorporation of psychological advancements. In 1957, the Colonial Office (responsible for colonial public relations) claimed Belgium was 'serving as a model for UNESCO', arguing that the organisation's new educational recommendations for Africa aligned with practices Belgium had pioneeringly implemented in the Congo for decades.[32] Given the context, this was a whole new level of articulating the rhetoric of the 'model colony' with internationalist discourses, especially considering the absence of Belgian psychologists from most of UNESCO's initiatives in Africa.

This absence was not lost on everyone. In education policy, UNESCO indeed faced a transimperial/transnational rival: the Catholic Church. After 1945, Western Catholic leaders sought new international strategies in response to the impending collapse of empires; these efforts focused on expanding humanitarian organisations to counter secular ideologies and on a self-claimed unique combination of 'science and charity'.[33] Among many examples, the 1957 international conference on African childhood organised by the Bureau international catholique de l'enfance and held in Yaoundé in French Cameroun was intended as a landmark in this strategy. It brought together not only ecclesiastical authorities and colonial officials, but also scientists – especially psychologists, the new disciplinary experts on childhood. One specialist was chosen to summarise the challenges of studying the psychology of African children and to advise on Catholic education in 'detribalised' settings: Paul Verhaegen, the Belgian director of the psychological research centre of Union Minière du Haut Katanga (the main, almost parastatal, mining company of the Congo). Conveniently, he was also one of the few international experts not involved in 'rival' UNESCO-funded projects, aligning with the Church's strategic positioning.[34] While this example offers a classic tale of two competing internationalisms, it also highlights the potential to consider the Catholic Church as a transimperial actor – an approach that has been underexplored in recent scholarship on transimperial connections.

31 Erik Linstrum, *Ruling Minds: Psychology in the British Empire* (Harvard University Press 2016) 155-188. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674089150.

32 'Où la Belgique sert de modèle à l'UNESCO. L'éducation de base au Congo belge', *La Métropole*, 24 September 1957.

33 Charlotte Walker-Saïd, 'Science and Charity: Rival Catholic Visions for Humanitarian Practice at the End of French Rule in Cameroon', *French Politics, Culture & Society* 33:2 (2015) 33-54.

34 Lauro, 'The British', 280-283, 291.

From the perspective of the Belgian empire, the Catholic Church was probably the most influential international organisation in colonial territories. Although few colonial contexts witnessed the Church assume such a prominent, almost sovereign role, this specificity makes the Congo an excellent case for examining the Church as a pivotal actor in cross-border exchanges within the colonial world. Incorporating the Catholic Church into transimperial analysis, as the Congo allows, might also help us to envision colonial territories as (more or less) autonomous sites of transimperial exchanges, beyond and/or apart from their connections with European metropoles.[35] Towards the end of the colonial period, the Belgian Congo seemed to emerge as an important site for international Catholic congresses. An example: a few months after the Yaoundé conference on the African child, Bukavu in Eastern Congo hosted a week-long conference on family and gender issues, particularly in relation to religious education. Organised by Catholic associations focused on Sub-Saharan Africa, the event brought together several hundred participants from various regions of colonial Africa (from British-ruled Uganda to French-ruled Dahomey), included French-English simultaneous interpretation and displays of books in multiple languages (as the organisers proudly noted).[36] This event offers a fascinating perspective on the complex transition that many Catholic actors in Africa faced during that period, shifting from their role 'as the moral foundation of European imperialism' to becoming a 'voice of political and social change in the era of decolonization'.[37] It also shows that the challenges of Africanising the pastoral care of the family were not only about content or teaching methods, but also about implementing new transimperial networks centred no longer just *on* Africa but also *in* Africa. These initiatives and their actors further invite us to consider the postcolonial (dis)continuities of these connections, a theme that has received limited exploration in transimperial scholarship, aside from cases involving solidarities explicitly rooted in anticolonial objectives.[38]

35 An anonymous reviewer rightly highlighted the early cosmopolitanism of Protestant missionaries in the Congo and its role in bringing international attention to the Belgian colonial regime of exploitation, particularly during the Leopoldian era. While this topic is well documented, I would argue that these dynamics align more with transnationalism than transimperialism; furthermore, the less centralised structure of Protestant institutions limits their capacity to act as cohesive (transimperial) agents.

36 See the leaflet of the event 'Second International Study Week: Special Theme "Religious Education of the Family", Bukavu July 29-August 3 1957', KADOC Archives Leuven. See also the correspondences (1957) in Archivio Storico Propaganda Fide (Rome), Nuova Serie Anni 1923-1958, file (2080).

37 Darcie Fontaine, *Decolonizing Christianity: Religion and the End of Empire in France and Algeria* (Cambridge University Press 2016) 10. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316339312.

38 See footnote 57.

Transimperial circulations between and beyond empires

The Belgian Congo also offers a compelling case for thinking about the pluralities of transimperial circulations, not only between but also beyond empires. One reason the term 'transimperial' has gained prominence over 'interimperial' in recent years is that the prefix 'trans' allows to grasp not only interactions among colonial empires but also with other political entities[39] or, in other words, to seize the complex 'overlap'[40] between the transimperial and the trans/inter-national. As recently summarised by Miguel Bandeira Jeronimo and Damiano Matasci, 'the trans-imperial perspective is nourished by taking into account the role played by actors who are not necessarily "colonial", but who are closely connected to the history of the African continent'. These actors such as international philanthropic foundations or institutions (connected for instance to the League of Nations and later the UN) 'constituted platforms from where new definitions of colonial policies – from education to health to work – were developed, while at the same time serving as a resonance point for the demands of African populations'.[41]

Among several themes, this entanglement is particularly fruitful for studying racial policies. Quite surprisingly given their centrality to colonial governance, these policies have not featured as much as one could expect in recent transimperial scholarship. On the one hand, in this field as in many others, comparisons between empires have long prevailed over connections and transfers; on the other, race has often been approached through the study of concepts and ideologies rather than of its concrete implementation. At the intersection of the transimperial and transnational, dynamics of emulation in this domain invite to broaden the spectrum of transimperialism, notably in processes of lesson-learning. As the following paragraphs on legal debates on sexual violence in the early twentieth century will show, seen from the Belgian Congo, the connections and the countries that colonial authorities chose to turn to reveal much about their conceptions of racial distinctions and the challenges of their operationalisation.

A few words of context: initially, racial distinctions were absent from the laws on sexual violence in colonial Congo. Legislation on rape and indecent assault, introduced in the late nineteenth century, was largely modelled on the Belgian metropolitan Criminal Code, albeit in a 'simplified' version. In practice, however, things were different. Depending on the 'native' or 'non-native' status of the accused, cases were tried in different courts. African defendants appeared before tribunals where judges were largely non-professional and where the rights of defence were limited. Yet this was

39 Hedinger and Heé, 'Transimperial History', 442.

40 Schayegh, 'The Expanding Overlap'.

41 Matasci and Bandeira Jerónimo, 'Une histoire transimpériale', 7.

a matter of judiciary practice, and the fact remains that the law itself did not prescribe different penalties for Europeans and Africans.[42]

From the 1910s onwards, colonial authorities began to view this racial 'neutrality' as a problem, or rather as a weakness. In the aftermath of a 1912 criminal case in which a Congolese man broke into the home of a European woman at night – provoking widespread panic within the white community in Katanga – officials resolved that it was time to impose harsher penalties for rape cases involving black men and white women. In drafting legal reforms, Belgian rulers looked abroad for inspiration. Quite significantly, they did not choose to turn to other colonial empires *stricto sensu*, but to two countries well-known for their segregationist policies: the Union of South Africa and the United States.[43] It is not only the choice of countries that is telling, but also the fact that while the initiative to consult South Africa came from the local administration in Congo, it was the metropolitan Minister of Colonies in Brussels who decided to contact Belgian diplomats in Washington to report on US criminal legislation concerning rape and indecent assault specifically 'committed by black individuals'.[44] Even at a single imperial level and on a single issue, different circuits of knowledge circulation could co-exist, with the metropole-colony divide itself embedded in multiple, and at times rival, transimperial and transnational connections.

In the end, Belgian colonial authorities did not change the legislation on sexual violence, at least not until the early thirties. Yet in the meantime the history of sexual violence and the political anxieties it raised in the interwar period cannot be fully understood without considering renewed transimperial connections with Southern Africa. In the early twenties, a convergence of local incidents, rumours, and Katangese newspaper reports echoing the 'black peril' rhetoric then flourishing in British Southern Africa sparked fresh political discussions about racial boundaries and their reinforcement – and about the opportunity to introduce capital punishment in the Belgian Congo's Criminal Code for rapes committed by African men against European women.[45]

42 Articles 71-74 of the Criminal Code of the Congo Free State and the Belgian Congo, *État Indépendant du Congo. Bulletin Officiel* (1888) 92.

43 These two countries have complex histories of imperialism of their own, raising the issue of the fluid boundaries between the transimperial and the transnational (the Union of South Africa had become a self-governing dominion of the British Empire in 1910).

44 Minister of Colonies to Minister of Foreign Affairs, 8 November 1913, State Archives of Belgium-Cuvelier Repository in Brussels (hereafter SAB2), AA, (JUST) (146A). See also the correspondences from 1912-1914 in the same file.

45 See the correspondences and press clippings from 1921-1923 in SAB2, AA, JUST (146A). See also the press clippings from 'Chroniques du Katanga', 7 October 1921 and the notes in SAB2, AA, AI (1395), and Secretary General to Minister of Colonies, 30 November 1922 in Archives of the Belgian Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs, AA, GG (6858). On interracial sexual violence in the Congo, see Jean-Luc Vellut, 'Matériaux pour une image du Blanc

This continued history offers the historian a textbook example of 'the archive within the archive' – that is, when documents originally assembled for earlier political purposes are re-used in later debates, to support or contest new political positions – and a piece of transimperial archive that serves both as a source and a subject of analysis. In this case, it is fascinating to see the afterlives of the files compiled in the 1910s on South African and US legislation being reactivated over a decade later, albeit with ambiguous results. The new 1930 decree on sexual violence finally promulgated did indeed introduce the death penalty for rape resulting in the victim's death (an unprecedented and specifically colonial measure absent from Belgian metropolitan law), but without any reference to race. This was the product of a complex compromise: South African and US examples were used both as sources of inspiration and as deterrent models, particularly regarding their explicit, formalised use of racial distinctions in legal culture, which Belgian authorities ultimately sought to avoid.[46] Nonetheless, the preparatory files for the 1930 decree leave no doubt that the death penalty provision was in fact intended only for the African perpetrators of lethal sexual violence against European women.

This was not the only time that South Africa served as a lesson-learning territory for Belgian colonial authorities. After the Second World War, exchanges between the Belgian Congo and the Union of South Africa evolved from the stage of information gathering to that of on-the-spot missions and head-to-head interactions. This was a new level of 'inter-colonial intimacy'.[47] Once again, the fields involved and the political choices at stake in these missions reveal much about the ideological references and orientations of the Belgian colonial regime, concerning not only race but also repression. In early 1946, for instance, a group of Belgian medical officers from the Force Publique visited the Johannesburg-based South African National Institute for Personnel Research. Recently established by a team of psychologists, the Institute promoted the use of psychology – notably intelligence testing – in personnel management. While on the long term, it did not always uphold the racial premises of South Africa's regime,[48] the Institute was nevertheless the

dans la société coloniale', in: Jean Pirotte (ed.), Stéréotypes nationaux et préjugés raciaux aux *XIX^e* et *XX^e* siècles (Academia 1982) 91-116, and Amandine Lauro, 'Violence, Anxieties, and the Making of Interracial Dangers: Colonial Surveillance and Interracial Sexuality in the Belgian Congo', in: Chelsea Schields and Dagmar Herzog (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Sexuality and Colonialism* (Palgrave 2021) 327-338. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429505447-29.

46 See in particular the arguments developed in the internal reports of the Ministry of Colonies, 1 February 1930 and 28-29 February 1930, SAB2, AA, JUST (146A).

47 Mari K. Webel, 'Trypanosomiasis, Tropical Medicine, and the Practices of Inter-Colonial Research at Lake Victoria, 1902-1907', *History and Technology* 35:3 (2019) 266-292, 285. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/07341512.2019.1680151.

48 Stuart Coupe, 'Testing for Aptitude and Motivation in South African Industry: The Work of the National Institute for Personnel Research, 1946-1973', *Business History Review* 70:1 (1996) 43-68. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/3117219.

heir of South Africa's controversial history of intelligence testing and racial comparisons, including purported correlations between intelligence and skin colour.[49] The Force Publique's decision to engage with this specific institution to explore psycho-technical tools for shaping Africanisation policies within the colonial army thus testifies to a particular mindset, both in relation to racial science and the delegation of authority to African intermediaries.[50]

Psychology was also an *en vogue* expertise among prison specialists in the late-colonial world. Unsurprisingly, when Belgian authorities planned a series of missions to 'inspiring' detention sites across colonial Africa in the late fifties, they included South Africa, specifically the Leeuwkop Prison Farm, a rural facility spanning 800 hectares, where coerced agricultural labour was combined with psychotechnical assessments to define paths of (penitentiary) reform.[51] As the groundbreaking work of Valentine Dewulf has shown, Belgian delegates, who also visited prisons in French Equatorial Africa and the infamous internment camps of the Mau-Mau repression in British Kenya, returned impressed from their mission. Their conclusions, though indirectly, informed the 1958 revision of the Belgian-Congolese legislation not on prisons but on relegation.[52] As this example illustrates, incorporating a transimperial dimension is of course not just about showing that connections existed and stopping there 'as if it were self-evident how crossing boundaries worked to produce something different, as if […] connecting meant fusing and integrating'.[53] Rather, it is also about examining the outcomes these connections produced, outcomes that often proved more complex than a direct line of influence, and that could also result in 'detachment, aversion, withdrawal'[54] or unexpected reverberations, as the earlier case of legal exchanges on sexual violence also revealed.[55]

49 Linstrum, *Ruling Minds*, 140-142.

50 For details about the context of this mission, see Lauro, 'The British', 274-275.

51 Valentine Dewulf, *Les barreaux de la justice. Institutions, réseaux, acteurs de l'enfermement carcéral sous la colonisation belge (1908-1960)* (PhD thesis, Université libre de Bruxelles 2023) 270-273.

52 Ibid., 276-280.

53 David A. Bell and Jeremy Adelman, 'Replies to Richard Drayton and David Motadel', *Journal of Global History* 13:1 (2018) 20. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022817000262.

54 Ibid.

55 While the role of South Africa as a refuge for former colonials after the decolonisation of the Belgian empire is well known (see Lazlo Passemiers, *Decolonisation and Regional Geopolitics: South Africa and the 'Congo Crisis', 1960-1965* (Routledge 2019). DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351138161), the connections extend well beyond that period: one might think about the connections between the Flemish Movement and South Africa, about the comparison with the Apartheid's racial politics, or about the key role of the alliance with South Africa during the Second World War. South African expansionist ambitions in Katanga have been explored in Robrecht Declercq, '"From Cape to Katanga": South African Expansionism, White Settlers and the Congo (1910-1963)', *South African Historical Journal* 72:4 (2020) 604-626. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/02582473.2020.1832142.

Transimperial history from below?

The last characteristic of the transimperial approach that this article seeks to highlight in relation to the Belgian Congo could also be viewed as a limitation of this historiography. Despite its stated ambition to 'encompass the grassroots level of imperial rule' and to account for the agency of a wide range of colonised (mobile) actors, this body of work has predominantly concentrated on policy-making perspectives and intellectual exchanges.[56] In practice, transimperial history has paid limited attention to transimperial encounters 'from below' and to what these may have meant for 'ordinary' actors. This is not to suggest that the field has only dealt with colonial bureaucrats or armchair scholars, but it must be acknowledged that even studies on transimperial anti-imperialism and its role in shaping decolonisation have tended to centre on elite categories such as colonised students at metropolitan universities, pan-African intellectuals, or networks of anticolonial leaders.[57] But what about other actors who represent different social categories and had different relations with the colonial order? With a few exceptions, little is known about the role of other groups in shaping and reverberating transimperial connections.

Once again, the Belgian Congo presents a stimulating case, both in terms of historical challenges and intellectual opportunities. The Belgian authorities' distrust of foreign influences was indeed only matched by their well-documented suspicion of colonised elites, leading to policies that prevented Congolese people's access to both higher education and cross-border mobility. Belgian authorities always feared that these two types of experiences would stimulate critiques of colonialism among the indigenous elite. Particularly in the post-Second World War context, it was not only contact with the metropole that raised concern, but also, and perhaps more so, potential exchanges with intellectuals and political figures from other colonies, notably French-speaking West Africa, with whom the '*évolués*' shared a common language. In the words of Daniel Tödt, 'elite formation in the Belgian Congo' was intended as a 'national project, not a starting point for pan-African solidarity'.[58] In this regard, Patrice Lumumba's well-known

56 Hedinger and Heé, 'Transimperial History', 442. See also Volker and Cvetkovski, *Imperial Co-Operation*, 14-15.

57 Among a vast literature, see notably Michael Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism* (Cambridge University Press 2016). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139681001; Daniel Brückenhaus, *Policing Transnational Protest: Liberal Imperialism and the Surveillance of Anticolonialists in Europe, 1905-1945* (Oxford University Press 2017); idem, 'Challenging Imperialism Across Borders: Recent Studies of Twentieth-Century Internationalist Networks against Empire', *Contemporary European History* 29:1 (2020) 104-115. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777319000134. Exceptions have focused on mobile actors such as sailors or migrant workers.

58 Tödt, *The Lumumba Generation*, 199.

1958 trip to the All-African People's Conference in Accra, at the invitation of Kwame Nkrumah, was the exception rather than the rule. Despite some historiographic calls to write more global, connected histories of African decolonisation, the broader picture in the Congolese case remains one of effective isolation: the *cordon sanitaire* imposed by Belgian authorities worked, and '*évolués*' had 'limited opportunities to build international networks or engage with debates in the global public sphere'.[59] This means that, unlike in other colonial contexts, the role of the colonised elite's transimperial anti-imperialism was only marginal in the Belgian Congo. Here again, this observation does not undermine the value of the transimperial approach in examining challenges to colonial rule within the Belgian empire. On the contrary: it invites historians to think more creatively about other actors and other experiences of transimperial encounters.

This is precisely what I aim to do in an ongoing research project on the history of the Force Publique's military campaigns during the Second World War, examined through the archives of the Belgian-Congolese military courts established around the battlefields and camps where Congolese soldiers were deployed beyond the borders of Congo – principally in Ethiopia, Nigeria, Egypt, and Palestine (Figure 3).[60] These court archives are of course loquacious about the many legal and political challenges involved in dispensing justice and maintaining order at the intersection of multiple layers of imperialisms, as soldiers fought in and against territories colonised by other European powers and as the Force Publique had to collaborate with other colonial armies. They also expose the depth of Belgian anxieties – even in such a tense context – regarding their reputation and the respect of their prerogatives as a colonial power, especially at a time when diplomatic stakes were high and it was crucial to demonstrate to allied audiences that colonial Belgium and its Force Publique respected the 'civilised' laws of war to the letter. Yet these trials also offer invaluable insights – and testimonies, through court interrogations – into what it meant for 'ordinary' Congolese soldiers to operate between and across different empires, and into how these experiences altered patterns of deference, loyalty, and transgression of the colonial order.

Our knowledge of the political significance of this historical episode remains largely shaped by superficial narratives that acknowledge the Second World War campaigns as a catalyst for anticolonial sentiments, yet offer little investigation of the lived experiences and encounters that may have shaped and conveyed these sentiments. Indeed, soldiers returned 'changed', but by what, exactly? Maybe they were less transformed by their war experiences *per se* than by their transimperial encounters. It is worth recalling here that

59 Ibidem, 31.

60 On the history and interest of these archives, see Benoît Henriet, Amandine Lauro and Renaud Juste, 'Archives of Military Courts in Colonial Congo: New Sources for the History of Violence and Agency in Central Africa', *History in Africa* 50 (2023) 259-274. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2023.9.

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Figure 3. In 1943–1944, thousands of soldiers from the Belgian Congo were deployed in Egypt. Despite colonial surveillance, this deployment opened up unprecedented encounters with military contingents from other empires and with civilian populations – an understudied space of intercultural and transimperial interactions. Photographer unknown, 'Soldats du 2ème Bataillon en excursion aux pyramides, Égypte, 1944'. © War Heritage Institute, N° Inv WHI: 201070958. Photographer: Luc Van de Weghe.

the Force Publique's battalions only engaged in combat in Ethiopia during the spring of 1941; elsewhere, the *corps expéditionnaire* was deployed primarily for logistical support, not battle. As numerous trials and inquests into acts of indiscipline reveal, Congolese rank-and-files soldiers, too, developed their own colonial comparisons, and those were not exactly favourable to Belgian rulers. They forged their own networks of solidarity and exchange with fellow soldiers from other empires and with local civilian populations – though these connections should not be romanticised, as the many recorded instances of violence against civilians attest. They gained access to new ideas and cultural products that were prohibited in the Belgian Congo: some judicial files, for instance, record the anxieties provoked by Congolese soldiers going to the cinema in Cairo and watching films censored in the Congo. Moreover, they witnessed the constant petty disputes and rivalries among their officers and those of other imperial forces – debates over jurisdiction, authority, and the fluid boundaries of transimperial competition and cooperation.[61]

Conclusion

The trajectories of these soldiers and the anxieties they provoked among Belgian colonial authorities further illustrate how the transimperial could function simultaneously as a resource and a threat – not only for the administration but for a wide range of actors within colonial society. Even among the colonisers, transimperial connections served multiple interests and, at times, fuelled political confrontations. For instance, missionaries, and women's philanthropic organisations could draw on international reformist discourses (on issues such as forced labour or women's rights) and transimperial comparisons – 'look at how others are doing better than us' – to challenge official policies. As was often the case in the Belgian Congo, however, such conflicts and arguments remained little publicised, reflecting the broader history of the invisibilisation of transimperial exchanges in the Belgian-Congolese public sphere discussed throughout this article. These silences have likely shaped the ways historians think and write about the Belgian empire and its place in transimperial networks.

A notable limitation of this article is the absence of Rwanda and Burundi – though this is as much a limitation as a promising avenue for future research. In many aspects, these two territories complicate the transimperial histories of the Belgian empire, for two key reasons. First, their mandate-status tied them more closely to international institutions and interferences than the Belgian Congo, involving, from the League of Nations and later the

61 An article on this topic is in development. Preliminary results have been presented in Amandine Lauro, 'Transimperial Experiences: Revisiting the History of Belgian-Congolese Armed Forces in World War II' at the 6th Congo Research Network Conference, 31 January 2025.

UN, monitoring missions, reporting obligations, and, for colonised subjects, petition rights – each linked to broader dynamics of transimperial alliances and rivalries. Second, Rwanda and Burundi have a well-documented and specific history of cross-border exchanges and movements with neighbouring imperial territories. These two regions, of course, experienced an initial phase of colonisation under the German empire, the legacies of which persisted well beyond the First World War. Moreover, their borders with neighbouring British colonies remained particularly porous. The Great Lakes functioned more as a contact zone than a frontier, and over the *longue durée* of Belgian rule, hundreds of thousands of Rwandans and Burundians fled to escape the rigours of Belgian colonial impositions. As a result, there were more Rwandans and Burundians living in Uganda or Tanganyika than in the Congo.[62] Greater attention to this history would undoubtedly enrich future research and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the transimperial circuits that traversed and shaped the Belgian empire.

But the principal omission in this analysis may lie in two structural features of the broader historiography of Belgian colonialism, both of which might help explain the marginal place of the Belgian Congo in the transimperial turn. To begin with, Belgian colonialism has, after all, rarely been approached through the conceptual lens of 'empire'. In both primary and secondary literature, the very use of the term 'empire' is the exception rather than the norm. Beyond the terminological curiosity, the predominance of the 'colonial' over the 'imperial' lexicon reflects a deeper historical and historiographical difficulty in conceptualising Belgian colonial projects in Central Africa within the framework of imperial expansion. This situation has its own underlying causes, which cannot be explored here, but it raises a fundamental question: can one meaningfully engage with the 'transimperial' when the 'imperial' itself has yet to be fully integrated?

A second, and arguably more significant, characteristic is the long-standing marginality of Belgian colonial historiography, particularly when compared to its British or French counterparts. Despite the international visibility and conceptual influence of a few scholars (such as the widely recognised contributions of Nancy R. Hunt or Didier Gondola, whose works have influenced African and colonial history well beyond the confines of Congo studies), the number of established historians specialising in Belgian colonialism remains relatively small. While the field has experienced an

62 Jean-Pierre Chétien, *L'Afrique des Grands Lacs. Deux mille ans d'histoire* (Flammarion 2000) 243-244. A key reference on cross-border mobility and its *longue durée* history in the region is also Gillian Mathys, *Fractured Pasts in Lake Kivu's Borderlands* (Cambridge University Press 2025). On the porousity of other borders in Congo's history, see also Didier Gondola, *Villes miroirs. Migrations et identités urbaines à Kinshasa et Brazzaville, 1930-1970* (L'Harmattan 1997) and Bas De Roo, 'The Blurred Lines of Legality: Customs and Contraband in the Congolese M'Bomu Region, 1889-1908', *Journal of Belgian History* 44 (2014) 112-141.

unprecedented boom in recent years, with many young researchers joining its ranks, the legacy of previous decades persists. The many gaps in the historiography of the Belgian Congo, so familiar to historians of Belgian colonialism, are telling. What other empire lacks books on such 'classic' topics as the Second World War or white settlement?

This observation, which is worthy of a dedicated study in its own right, brings us back to the question of the usefulness of this article and, more broadly, of advocating for 'trendy' academic 'turns'. The present invitation to engage with transimperial histories of the Belgian Congo should not be read as a claim that the transimperial approach offers *the* answer to the shortcomings of the historiography of the Belgian empire. Having long worked in the field, I am well aware that behind many new, 'fancy', academic 'brands' often lie 'conventional kinds of scholarship'[63] – and let me be clear that this article does not claim any epistemological or heuristic originality in that regard.

To the question of why to write transimperial histories *of* the Belgian Congo, my short answer would simply be that such a perspective can help, as we say in French, to '*désenclaver*'[64] – literally, to 'un-enclave' – the history of the colonial Congo; that is, to open it up and make it less isolated and, in the light of what Samuël Coghe has suggested for Portuguese colonialism, to 'reassess […] the often-asserted exceptionality' of Belgian colonial rule.[65]

To the question of why to write transimperial histories *from* the Belgian Congo, my final answer would be twofold. First, as this article has argued, the Belgian-Congolese case offers valuable contributions to transimperial scholarship. Its distinctive approach to regulating circulations and mobilities challenges us to conceptualise transimperial connections and disruptions in more nuanced ways. Furthermore, its historical trajectory invites to broaden the spectrum of transimperial actors, notably by highlighting the role of the Catholic Church as a significant transimperial actor. Second, and on a more personal note as a historian of the colonial Congo, I must confess that my motivation for writing transimperial histories *from* the Belgian Congo is also rooted in a commitment to ensuring that the colonial Congo, and indeed Rwanda and Burundi, whose colonial histories are

63 Christopher A. Bayly et al., 'AHR Conversation: On Transnational History', *American Historical Review* 111:5 (2006) 1447 cited in Drayton and Motadel, 'Discussion', 8.

64 As already underlined by Matasci and Bandeira Jerónimo, 'Une histoire', 4, who also refer to Hélène Blais et al., 'Introduction. Désenclaver l'histoire de l'Algérie à la période coloniale', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 63:2 (2016) 7-13. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3917/rhmc.632.0007.

65 Samuel Cöghe, 'Reassessing Portuguese Exceptionalism: Racial Concepts and Colonial Policies Toward the "Bushmen" in Southern Angola, 1880s-1970s', in: Warwick Anderson et al. (eds.), *Luso-Tropicalism and Its Discontents* (Berghahn 2019) 184-214, 185. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/9781789201147-011.

even more overlooked, keeps being put on the global historiographical map: their histories are worth it.[66]

This last motivation is also why this article remains unapologetic about studying a single colony transimperially. Of course, transimperial history is primarily about challenging the 'traditional' imperial boundaries within which historians have operated. However, it has also been explicitly conceived as an approach, a 'means [less than an end]'.[67] As such, and as many excellent transimperial studies focused on a single imperial framework have demonstrated, it is both possible and meaningful to study transimperial connections from the perspective of a single colonial territory, and to examine the resonances, effects, and understandings of these circulations at 'smaller scales of historical experience'. If global history can also be about 'the experience of the global in […] small places', then transimperial history can be so as well. Hopefully, other historians will explore the many 'in-between spaces of empires'[68] and the roles played by the Belgian empire within them. In the meantime, there is no doubt that the Congo continues to offer a wealth of historical material for investigating the multiple meanings attributed to the cosmopolitan and the transimperial in Central Africa as well as their postcolonial (re)configurations.

Amandine Lauro is a Research Associate of the Belgian National Fund for Scientific Research (FNRS) at the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), where she also teaches courses in African history, colonial history, and gender studies. Her research focuses on gender, race, and security in colonial Africa, with a particular emphasis on the Belgian Congo. She has published a monograph and several contributions on these topics. E-mail: amandine.lauro@ulb.be.

66 I am indebted for the reflections of these two last paragraphs to the discussions held at the Congo Research Network's 2025 conference, in particular with Sarah Van Beurden (on the 'gaps' in Belgian-Congolese historiography) and Margot Luyckfasseel (on the importance of maintaining the Congo 'on the map' underlined in her concluding remarks).

67 Hedinger and Heé, 'Transimperial History', 431.

68 Nathan Cardon and Simon Jackson, 'Everyday Empires: Trans-Imperial Circulations in a Multi-Disciplinary Perspective – Origins, Inspirations, Ways Forward', *Past and Present*. https://pastandpresent.org.uk/everyday-empriestrans-imperial-circulations-multi-disciplinaryperspective-origins-inspirations-ways-forward/. 5 May 2017.