Chapter 1: The virtuous enclave

Introduction

Built at the meeting point of two rivers – the Kwilu and the Kwenge – the Leverville concession also occupied more figurative crossroads. It emerged at the intersection of exotic fantasies on Central Africa's "savageness" and of longings for its "rational" exploitation. Leverville's founding act resulted from a seemingly uncanny entente between the young Belgian colonial state and a British soap magnate, the Lever Brothers. Furthermore, both actors endeavoured to jointly pursue two inseparable yet divergent goals: to "value" the concession's natural resources and "civilise" its inhabitants.

Considering that Leverville originated from these diverse meeting points helps us understand its multifaceted nature. The concession not only existed as a physical enclave; it also comprised a legal framework, a set of values and a business model. These facets were all deeply entangled with each other. However, they all originated from a single, grandstanding initiative. Before it came to assume these different guises, Leverville was born as a tropical utopia. It emerged among a continuum of similar initiatives, which spanned across the Global South from the late 19th century onwards. In the time of Western imperial expansion, ambitious men were driven to build their own model societies in landscapes they fantasised as untamed "jungles" and "savannahs." Chosen enclaves became laboratories for private social engineering, where their founders' "virtuous" pursuits were, more often than not, coercively enforced.

This chapter retraces the foundation of Leverville by replacing it in its cultural, contractual and economic frames. It tackles first the concept of tropical utopia, and how the concession could be seen as its epitome. Second, it covers the emergence of Leverville from the convergent moral agendas of Belgian colonial authorities and of Lever Brothers. Finally, it looks at the legal and physical foundation of Leverville. It shows how utopian fantasies and philanthropic goals came to be formalized in Europe, and how they materialised in Congo. These approaches shed light on how imbricated dynamics led to the creation of the concession. Leverville's economic objectives were inseparable from its moral guise, while both were intrinsically linked to a broader cultural framework of exotic fantasies on colonial frontiers.

This overview leads us to two observations that fit into the book's broad argument. First, it calls for critically reassessing the centrality of profit making in colonial private endeavours. The concession survived long after its structural lack of profitability was acknowledged, which indicated that the "virtuous" agenda pur-

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sued by the state and company alike was not only destined to cynically cover up their exploitative goals. Fulfilling a moral program "overseas" could very well turn into a genuine incentive for capitalist ventures, not to be systematically subordinated to the promises of short-term financial gains.

Second, although Leverville was framed as a virtuous project, radically breaking with the gruesome practices of the Congo Free State, it still shared many common traits with Leopoldian forms of exploitation. Legal arrangements, resource extraction, and the overall Promethean spirit of the concession directly tapped into Free State precedents. Studying Leverville's emergence therefore brings to the surface how the seemingly clean-cut break of Congo's 1908 transfer of sovereignty actually comprised structural economic and political continuities.

Tropical utopias

Looking for the roots of the Leverville concession requires considering the overall cultural context in which they sprouted. This section accordingly tackles the fantasies circulating on colonial frontiers in the early 20th century and how they stimulated the inception of concurrent experiences of social engineering. These projects, which could be defined as "tropical utopias," shared different characteristics. After having detailed them, I will further delve on how the imaginary of Congo at play in *fin de siècle* Europe has deeply influenced the inception of Leverville as a "virtuous" endeavour.

Landscapes of the Global South have long exerted a fascination for Western minds. For some particularly driven individuals in the age of empires, the rainforests, wetlands and drylands of Africa, Asia and South America were empty pages upon which they could write their own contribution to history. They endeavoured to turn seemingly forsaken places into private utopias, where their ambitions would come to fruition. While deeply entangled with the age of empires, these endeavours would be more adequately labelled as "tropical" rather than "colonial."

Although they were always located in warm climates, such utopias were not systematically related to imperial ventures. For instance, several US corporations created company towns south of the border, including Fordlandia (see introduction). They were conceived as both productive enclaves and laboratories for the inception of American values. These spaces functioned as "New World alternatives to European imperialism," [1] according to Greg Grandin. In both European

1 Grandin, *Fordlandia*, 15.

and American "overseas" enclaves, cultural and economic hegemony went hand in hand.

A form of utopianism was, however, intrinsic to colonialism. For its advocates, colonizing meant improving the social, economic and moral standing of an exotic frontier. It meant considering foreign lands as either blank or chaotic canvasses upon which migrants, companies and states could paint more orderly and therefore better futures. Migrants were susceptible to be inspired by the utopian depiction of settler colonies as promised lands, promoted by their founders and authorities. However, exploitation colonies such as Congo could also become the stage of more seldom and ambitious fantasies.[2] These latter tropical utopias shared three common features. First, they mostly arose in a context of humanitarian urgency. Second, they stemmed from the hubris of colourful characters. Third, they required a certain level of constraint and containment to be achieved. Leverville shared these traits with concurrent prospects, such as Fordlandia and the Haut-Nyong region of French Cameroon, which was autonomously administered by a colonial doctor during the Second World War. These initiatives might seem disjointed at first, given their emergence in varied settings and their diverse points of origin. However, they were all characterised by a blend of exotic fantasizing on Southern frontiers, coupled with a longing on the part of colonists for their radical "rationalisation."

First, these tropical utopias were fashioned as promethean endeavours destined to solve particularly acute plights. Sweeping epidemics, demographic decline, and helpless "natives" left to the mercy of cruel exploiters set the scene for the arrival of ambitious initiatives, which promised to offer all-encompassing answers to these manifold sufferings. These predicaments only enhanced the boldness and heroism of peculiar figures, who took it upon themselves to change the course of these territories' histories. For instance, when Dr. Jean-Joseph David took the helm of Haut-Nyong in 1939, the region was in the midst of a ravaging outbreak of sleeping sickness. The doctor ambitioned to tackle it with structural reforms ranging far beyond the scope of sanitary measures.[3] Similarly, the area chosen by Henry Ford for the building of his Amazonian rubber plantation Fordlandia was reportedly inhabited by destitute, meek, hungry and exploited in-

2 Lyman Tower Sargent, "Colonial and Postcolonial Utopias," in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, edited by Gregory Claeys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 200.

3 Guillaume Lachenal, *Le Médecin qui Voulut Être Roi: sur les Traces d'une Utopie Coloniale* (Paris: Seuil, 2017), 28.

digenous rubber tappers, who the company envisioned turning into productive and Americanized planters.[4]

Second, utopias emerged in places depicted in the West as chaotic hells, yet which contained the seeds of prosperous futures should they be correctly organised and exploited. The pursuit of these ambitions was depicted as an almost impossible challenge, which could only be met by an exceptional character: a man gifted with a unique vision, able to foresee and relentlessly pursue a path leading towards better prospects. It required, therefore, an unparalleled hubris to feel up to the task. Haut-Nyong's Dr. David accordingly endeavoured to completely reorganise the territory under his command in domains ranging from alimentation to labour, sports, agriculture and education.[5] Henry Ford seemingly had the ambition to turn a plot of rainforest into both a plantation and an Amazonian remake of an American suburb, complete with white-painted pavilions and red fire hydrants.[6]

Third, these projects relied more on the ambition of their founders than on the consent of their inhabitants. Communities of people living within the boundaries of tropical utopias underwent multifaceted and often coercive processes of transformation. Within these relatively secluded enclaves, workers and inhabitants were "educated," "healed" and put to work; they were then monitored according to their creators' grand designs (see chapter 5). The simultaneous enforcement of new labour techniques, infrastructures, medical therapies or leisure activities might seem unrelated at first sight. However, they participated in an overall process of rationalisation, encompassing both the enclave's human and natural resources. It consisted in implementing a vast array of "standard" behaviours, practices and techniques within the enclave's boundaries to bring "order" where "chaos" was previously thought to prevail. These experiences therefore proposed a radical transformation of all aspects of a given zone through the sheer grid of "rationality."

Fourth, these transformative ventures were, to a small extent, connected with one another. Various utopian projects were indeed envisioned as laboratories of social engineering, where improvement strategies of "Others" could be tried and tested before being potentially emulated in other tropical frontiers. For instance, David envisioned turning Haut-Nyong's medical institutions into experimental centres and training grounds for colonial doctors, who would later be sent to all corners of the French empire.[7] The success of tropical utopias

4 Grandin, *Fordlandia*, 86–91.
5 Lachenal, *Le Médecin*, 99.
6 Grandin, *Fordlandia*, 18.
7 Lachenal, *Le Médecin*, 81, 98.

could only be assessed as long as they remained relatively shielded from potentially corrupting outside influences. These ventures therefore had to be significantly self-contained, which included the control of their entry points and a thorough limitation and monitoring of their inhabitants' mobility.

Tropical utopias generally seemed to possess two overarching characteristics. On the one hand, they took the form of rationalising endeavours; they were laboratories of social and economic improvement based on the systematic enforcement of "modern" ways to exploit and to rule. On the other, they did not stem from an extensive knowledge of their target area. To the contrary, the places destined to become Fordlandia or Leverville were hardly charted and documented before the groundwork began to be laid for their creation. They existed, for the most part, in the minds of their makers as fantasies rooted in exotic literature.

Textual production on non-Western lands indeed played a key role in colonisation prospects, both on emotional and rational planes. It simultaneously excited the imagination of its readers and built a body of knowledge to be mobilised for further imperial ventures. For Mary Louise Pratt, sentimentality and objectivity could be concurrently present in travelogues and exploration reports from the mid-18th century onwards. Heroic narrators would reflect on their personal experiences while attempting to convey "objective" descriptions of the places they "discovered."[8] This literary pattern was particularly visible in the written descriptions of Congo circulating in the early 20th century.

For Gaston-Denys Périer, a leading proponent of Belgian "colonial arts" in the interwar, Congo was "born out of literature" and gradually imprinted in European consciousness through the successive reprints of Henry Morton Stanley's oeuvre.[9] At the *fin de siècle*, the explorer's thrilling adventures were still considered as authoritative on Central Africa, which illustrates well the permeability of objectivity and sentimentality in early accounts of the region.[10] Although imposing, Stanley was not the only author musing on Congo at the turn of the century. The Congo was also mobilized in fierce critiques of the Leopoldian rule, penned by prominent figures like Mark Twain and Joseph Conrad. Furthermore, the Congo basin was also the setting chosen by several popular adventure writers

8 Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 74–75.

9 Cited in: Pierre-Philippe Fraiture, *La Mesure de l'Autre. Afrique Subsaharienne et Roman Ethnographique de Belgique et de France (1918–1940)* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2007), 75.

10 Kevin Dunn, *Imagining the Congo: The International Relations of Identity* (New York-Houndmills: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2003), 23.

versed in the crafting of fictional utopias.[11] These different strands of literary production shared similar visions of Congo as a place of endemic cruelty and savageness, whose future prosperity relied on Western interventions, "less a garden of Eden than an unrealized possibility,"[12] according to Stephen Donovan.

Discourses presenting Congo as a savage yet bountiful land and of the Congolese as helpless prey of slavers, sorcerers, "barbaric traditions" or tropical illnesses set the stage on which the drama of colonization would take place.[13] Imagined frontiers, compiled in the literary canon that Valentin Mudimbe coined as the "colonial library," [14] influenced the course of action of Europeans in Central Africa and beyond. It shaped their interventions as Promethean efforts, conjointly bringing the light of civilisation and modernity in allegedly forsaken places.

The colonial library's effective influence on imperial governance could be observed among others in legislative processes. Empires regularly borrowed each other's laws to rule over seemingly unrelated societies.[15] For instance, property laws in the Free State were directly inspired by a South Australian legislation commonly known as the Torrens Act. This body of rules allowed Europeans to formalize their property claims on lands they considered as "vacant." Variations of the Torrens Act were also enforced in territories as disparate as Fiji Islands, French Western Africa, Tunisia and Madagascar, whose sole common features were their coerced annexation to a European empire.[16] In all cases, belief in the "racial" discrepancy between colonizers and colonized was relentlessly echoed in Western literary production and served as the foundation for colonial practices of land encroachment. The belief in an ontological difference between Europeans and undifferentiated "Others" allowed colonial actors to arrogate land for themselves through a process of legal "rationalisation."

Blended discourses of colonial othering and longings for the ordering of tropical frontiers were already at play in the Congo Free State decades before the Leverville concession came to be. The inception of the Leverville concession, however, depended on the emergence of a particular strand of imperial ideology, which derived from converging beliefs from the young Belgian colonial administration and the Lever Brothers that a virtuous form of exploitation could come to light in the marshes of the Congo basin.

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11 Stephen Donovan, "Congo Utopia," *English Studies in Africa*, 59:1 (2016): 64.

12 Donovan, "Congo Utopia", 64.

13 Dunn, *Imagining*, 53.

14 Valentin Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 188.

15 Benton, *A Search*, 36.

16 Benoît Henriet, "Colonial Law in the Making: Sovereignty and Property in the Congo Free State (1876–1908)," *The Legal History Review*, 83 (2015): 214–215.

Colonizing virtuously

This ontological change in the governance of Congo closely espoused the disappearance of its infamous first sovereign. Leopold II passed away in December 1909 as a profoundly unpopular monarch.[17] His libertine antics, authoritarian tendencies and controversial African ventures had turned many Belgians against him. The death of the disfavoured king also presented an opportunity for the country's power holders to set a new course in colonial affairs. In the months following Leopold's funeral, both the Minister of Colonies, Jules Renkin and Leopold's nephew and successor, Albert I, publicly acknowledged the "errors" previously committed in Congo and attempted to draw a new way forward for Belgian colonialism, eschewing the "worst excesses" of its predecessor.[18]

This discursive shift also built upon already existing measures. When Belgium officially took over Congo in October 1908, the Belgian Parliament enacted the "Colonial Charter," a body of laws destined to instigate a "righteous" course of action in its new empire. Some of the Charter's main measures were unmitigated responses to the Free State scandal. For instance, the second article forbade forced recruitment for private companies, while the fifth article entrusted Congo's General Governor (GG) with "the conservation of native populations" and the "improvement of their "moral and material living conditions"[19] (see chapter 4).

These initiatives also attempted to deflect the scepticism of other European chancelleries regarding Belgium's colonial abilities. In the light of the Leopoldian debacle and of the new metropolis' lack of previous imperial experience, foreign leaders doubted whether this new colonial venture would fare better than the last. Belgian authorities therefore strived to assert their worth as a major player in the imperial field. They endeavoured to show that Belgian Congo could be efficiently managed and "modernised," while effectively caring for the welfare of its "natives."[20] After the First World War, the administration coined a concept summing up its political goals; Congo was to become *une col-*

17 Matthew Stanard, *The Lion, the Leopard and the Cock: Colonial Memories and Monuments in Belgium* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2019), 41

18 Matthew Stanard, *Selling the Congo: A History of European Pro-Empire Propaganda and the Making of Belgian Imperialism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 52–53.

19 "Charte Coloniale," in *Codes & Lois du Congo Belge*, edited by Pierre Piron and Jacques Devos (Brussels: Larcier, 1954), 9–14.

20 Vanthemsche, *La Belgique*, 148–152.

onie modèle, a "model colony."[21] Although the idea of "model" colonisation remained loosely defined, an earlier occurrence provided a clearer perspective of the objectives originally pursued by the authorities.

The term "model colony" (*Müsterkolonie*) was first used by the German state to boast its achievements in Togoland, which Germany administered between 1884 and 1918.[22] Germany and Belgium were both latecomers on the imperial stage, and resorting to such a concept allowed them to affirm their colonial legitimacy. In Togoland, German authorities even managed to win the praise of foreign observers, which seemed to indicate the existence of a loose international consensus on what a "model colony" could mean in the early 20th century. Togoland was applauded for its balanced budgets; its modern infrastructure; and its predominantly "pacified" state. These achievements came at a cost, however, for they necessitated the forced mobilisation of workers; the frequent resort to corporeal punishments; crushing taxation rates and grossly unequal levels of development.[23] These incidences seemed to indicate that the criteria used to define "model" colonialism by the time Leverville came to be mostly depended on a certain level of prosperity. Even before Belgian authorities endeavoured to claim the concept for Congo after 1918, the imperatives of economic success were critical to secure its imperial future. Given the Free State's burdensome legacy, these goals could not be achieved at the cost of a new humanitarian scandal.

The double objective of economic *mise en valeur* and of "civilising" the Congolese was not be pursued by the state alone. Belgium's reprise of Congo happened against the backdrop of a widespread political reluctance to shoulder the costs of colonisation.[24] The first article of the Colonial Charter explicitly stated that Congo must remain economically independent from its metropolis. Colonising would therefore require collaborating with private actors who would be both interested in the colony's natural resources and willing to exploit them "virtuously," in stark contrast to the brutality of the Free State's rubber companies. It was in that context that the British soap manufacturer, Lever Brothers, entered the Congolese stage.

Lever Brothers was then heralded by Lord William Hesketh Lever, 1st Viscount Leverhulme (1851–1925), a man famous for advocating philanthropic

21 Amandine Lauro, "Maintenir l'Ordre dans la 'Colonie-modèle' : Note sur les Désordres Urbains et la Police des Frontières Raciales au Congo Belge," *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés* 15:2 (2011): 99.

22 Dennis Laumann, "A Historiography of German Togoland, or the Rise and Fall of a 'Model Colony,'" *History in Africa*, 30 (2003): 195.

23 Laumann, "A Historiography," 196.

24 Vanthemsche, *La Belgique*, 208.

forms of entrepreneurship. "It is said that there is no sentiment in business," he wrote in September 1915. "I have always combatted that idea. There is only one phase of life with more sentiment in it than business, that is the home. Business has much more sentiment in it than Art or literature. I sometimes think that business would be impossible without sentiment."[25]

For Lord Leverhulme, capitalism must not only concentrate on profit making; it had to be used as a medium for philanthropic actions. Employers had to care for their employees, as well as for the common good. Benevolence would both secure the loyalty of their workforce and sketch out a path leading to a better society.[26]

The ultimate embodiment of Leverhulme's paternalistic vision still stands today in the outskirts of Liverpool. In 1899, the company founded the garden city of Port Sunlight to house its factory's employees. These rows of suburban pavilions and communal infrastructures such as a hospital, a leisure hall and sports accommodations were gratuitously put at the disposal of Lever Brothers' workforce, expected in return to follow strictly appointed rules of temperance, gendered separation, punctuality and efficiency. Port Sunlight was a utopian reconstruction of the English countryside at the heart of industrial Britain, aimed at fostering middle-class values and habits in the hearts and minds of its working-class population.[27]

Leverhulme was not the only businessman to pursue such goals. Other early 20th century captains of industry endeavoured to firmly weave together social engineering and profit-making. In 1917, Henry Ford decided for instance to grant a 5-dollar daily wage to its workers – the double of what his competitors offered. In return, they were expected to pursue what the company considered as "a wholesome life."[28] Whereas Leverhulme sought to promote bourgeois respectability among his proletarian workforce, Ford attempted to Americanize his migrant employees. It was not coincidental that both men later attempted to propagate their widely praised experiences of social engineering in allegedly "destitute" tropical frontiers.

In their quest for suitable private partners, Belgian authorities sent emissaries in 1909 to Lord Leverhulme, to probe his interest in the colony's vast resources of oil palms.[29] The ever-increasing demand for palm oil on Western markets

25 UA, LBC/229, W.H. Lever to Max Horn, 3 September 1915.
26 Brian Lewis, *So Clean: Lord Leverhulme, Soap and Civilization* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 20 – 23.
27 Lewis, *So Clean*, 110 – 1.
28 Grandin, *Fordlandia*, 38 – 39.
29 Lewis, *So Clean*, 167.

was at that time sustained by both technologic advancements and new bodily uses. Needed in the first half of the 19th century for the greasing of heavy machineries, palm oil became a staple of soap production from the 1830s onwards.[30] As the social marker of corporal hygiene rapidly spread from the upper classes to Europe's urban proletariat and rural areas, the demand for hygienic products steadily rose, requiring soap makers to find and secure increasingly vast supplies of palm oil.[31]

From 1906 onwards, Leverhulme tried unsuccessfully to found large oil palm plantations in British Nigeria and Sierra Leone, where he faced the opposition of the colonial administration. Public servants feared that the extended concessions Lever Brothers intended to set up would bring havoc to the social fabric of palm oil producing regions, which were divided between local smallholders. They thought that depriving indigenous peasants of their property rights could lead to large-scale unrests.[32] No such issue arose in Belgian Congo, where palm oil production remained in its infancy in the early years of the 20th century, and where the authorities precisely advocated the creation of large-scale exploitation units. Lever Brothers therefore answered positively to the Belgians' offer, and sent two preliminary expeditions to select the five 60-km wide "circles" of rainforest land that the authorities offered them to lease. From the onset, one of those areas appeared to be the most economically promising, for it held the densest and most accessible natural palm groves. Centred on the village of Lusanga at the meeting point of the Kwenge and Kwilu rivers, this area would be baptised Leverville after the company's founder. The four other tracts of land – Brabanta, Flandria, Alberta and Elisabetha – would be granted a name either honouring Belgian's reigning couple or referring to the metropole's geography.

The objectives pursued by Lever Brothers in Congo were loosely similar to those underlying the making of Port Sunlight, and stemmed from the same blend of pragmatism and Protestant, Congregationalist moralism. In Leverhulme's perspective, Africans were granted with resources that they were unable to properly exploit, while Europeans possessed the wisdom and knowledge needed to valorise these neglected assets for the common good.[33] *Mise en valeur* should not happen at the expense of "natives," but must rather be seized as an opportunity to further their civilizational prospects. The Chairman occasionally

30 Henderson, Osborne, "The Oil Palm", 63–64.

31 Adeline Masquelier, *Dirt, Undress and Difference: Critical Perspective on the Body's Surface* (Bloomington-Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 6.

32 David Meredith. "Government and the Decline of the Nigerian Oil-palm Industry, 1919–1939," *The Journal of African History*, 25:3 (1984), 311.

33 Lewis, *So Clean*, 177.

shared his optimism with regards to the HCB's ability to durably "civilize" its employee, for whom he fostered a condescending benevolence. "I believe the Congo native is a particularly intelligent man when he is rightly handled,"[34] he wrote for instance in April 1916. According to his personal secretary, Leverhulme even claimed that "the Congo native is [...] the best tropical labourer in the world."[35] To fully reach their potential, Congolese HCB employees had to be properly paid, correctly housed, accordingly fed and cured, like their Port Sunlight counterparts.[36] Leverhulme himself underlined the strong parallels between both ventures in November 1924, a few months before his death. HCB was, according to him, "a business like none other we have. Perhaps Port Sunlight comes nearest to it in social work."[37] At that time, the company had already achieved a global outreach and was active in territories as diverse as the Indian subcontinent, the Solomon Islands, and the Hebrides. Leverhulme's comments therefore appeared to allude to the *Huileries*' uniquely ambitious scope within the Lever Brothers consortium.

Originally, HCB was also depicted and widely supported as a radical break with the woeful practices of the Congo Free State. Leading figures of the anti-Leopoldian campaign actively petitioned for Leverhulme's ambitions in Central Africa, such as Emile Vandervelde, Belgium's historical socialist leader,[38] and Edmund D. Morel, spearhead of the Congo Reform Association (CRA). Vandervelde's advocacy for Belgian imperialism and interest for colonial affairs set him starkly apart from his socialist comrades. He was the sole member of his political group to vote for the annexation of the Free State by Belgium, for he was convinced that a future left-wing government would support the social emancipation of the Congolese.[39] At the height of the Congo scandal, Vandervelde befriended and collaborated with Morel; both men attempted to bring an end to Leopold II's personal rule in Central Africa.[40] Morel would later actively support Leverhulme's prospects in the Congo, for he remained persuaded that the Port Sunlight experience could be reproduced in the tropics by a "decent, honest

34 UA, LBC/215, W.H. Lever to Henry Moseley, 11 April 1916.

35 UA, UAC 2/34/4/1/1, Diary of T.M. Knox

36 Lewis, *So Clean*, 168–9.

37 Lewis, *So Clean*, 177.

38 Emile Vandervelde (1886–1938), member of parliament, minister of justice (1918–1921), foreign affairs (1925–1927), and health (1936–1937), was the president of the Belgian Workers Party from 1933 to 1938, and the president of the Socialist International from 1923 to 1938.

39 Janet Polasky, *Emile Vandervelde: Le Patron* (Brussels: Labor, 1995), 58.

40 Polasky, *Emile Vandervelde*, 54.

and most powerful capitalistic force."[41] Vandervelde similarly asserted that HCB would be beneficial for its Congolese workers after the brutal experience of the Free State.[42]

Interestingly, Morel's CRA was only disbanded in 1913, five years after the annexation of the Free State by Belgium.[43] The Association kept lobbying the new colonial authorities and the British government to make sure that effective reforms would be put in place beyond the formal transfer of sovereignty.[44] The CRA's delegate claimed to have secured the association's main purposes when they decided to close it down; however, the CRA fell short of reaching all of its goals. First, they could not secure collective land rights for the colony's inhabitants.[45] Second, Morel ultimately failed in his efforts to emulate the successes of its reform campaign by putting an end to the brutal labour practices in French Equatorial Africa.[46] Third, workforce mobilisation strategies in Belgian Congo remained widely similar to those in place in the Free State (see chapter 4 in particular). The political climate of colonial affairs in the infancy of Belgian Congo was still significantly shaped by its predecessor. The validity of new capitalist ventures, especially as ambitious as HCB, were widely measured by how they fared compared to Free State practices. This paradigm shift only enhanced the necessity of framing Leverville as a radical, utopian break with the past.

A clean break?

Leverville arose from congruent ambitions to reset colonial endeavours in Central Africa. However, in spite of this meeting of the minds, HCB continued to a great extent in the footsteps of earlier forms of colonialism. I will begin this section by detailing the obligations Lever Brothers pledged to fulfil in the Congo. I will then shed light on how Leverville could be depicted as a tropical utopia. Finally, I will explore the concession's multifaceted roots in the Congo Free State.

On 14 April 1911, representatives of Lever Brothers and of the Belgian government sat down to sign a convention outlining the consortium's future activities in the colony. The corporation had to create a company under Belgian law – the

41 Lewis, *So Clean*, 165.
42 Fieldhouse, *Unilever Overseas*, 505.
43 Stanard, *Selling*, 46.
44 Dean Pavlakis, *British Humanitarianism and the Congo Reform Movement, 1896–1913* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 247
45 Pavlakis, *British Humanitarianism*, 235
46 Pavlakis, *British Humanitarianism*, 214

Huileries du Congo Belge – to manage its new exploitations. HCB representatives had ten years to choose up to 75, 000 hectares of vacant lands in each circle, where they could either harvest naturally-growing palm trees or set up new plantations. Within its circles, HCB had to assume the construction of all necessary infrastructures on its own funds – be they roads, canals, railways, telegraph and telephone lines – which could be gratuitously used by state agents. HCB also had to invest in the building of schools and medical facilities, at least one in each circle, to benefit the concessions' workers and inhabitants. In return, the company only had to pay a symbolic loan to the Belgian government – 25 cents per hectare annually – and could come into full ownership of the areas it effectively occupied after 35 years of exploitation. Should HCB fail to uphold its duties, the convention could in term be nullified. HCB would receive a formal warning from the government outlining their shortcomings and be granted a year to correct the course of its operations. Past this deadline, the Belgian state could unilaterally resign their agreement and publically auction all of HCB's colonial assets.[47]

The "virtuous" business venture stemming from the meeting of the minds of Lever Brothers' management and Belgian colonial public elite was utopian in many aspects. Like Fordlandia, it was designed to bring radical forms of social change in a poorly studied and highly fantasised area. The very foundation of Leverville was for instance described by Sidney Edkins – the concession's first manager – as a Promethean effort that would finally bring "civilisation" to destitute indigenous communities. Accordingly, his description of the company's first contingent of workers rendered their alleged helplessness:

> "All this labour was poor, underfed, ravaged by sickness and intertribal warfare and all were cannibals. Sleeping sickness had wiped out 80 percent of the population and human life had little or no value. The Writer during his first visit of exploration inland, saw villages with hundreds of houses abandoned except by a few miserable beings in the last stages of sleeping sickness and others entirely destroyed by fire during a raid by a rival village [...] The remaining population was in such poor physical condition that they no longer had the energy to keep the larger wild animals at bay by attacking them when they approached their villages."[48]

47 "Projet de décret approuvant une convention conclue le 21 février 1911 entre le Gouvernement du Congo belge et la Société "Lever Brothers Limited" et ayant pour objet la concession de terres à une société à constituer sous le nom de: "Société Anonyme des Huileries du Congo Belge", in *Annales Parlementaires* 1911, Document parlementaire n°126.

48 RMCA EA 54.85.171, Sidney Edkins' notes on the history of the HCB.

This narrative largely resorted to the set of exotic images regularly mobilised in the colonial library.[49] Cannibalism, endemic diseases or continuous inter-tribal warfare were discursive tropes to which explorers, missionaries, colonial writers or filmmakers frequently resorted to justify the necessity of imposing European rule over Africa. Edkin's ample resort to superlatives – *all* workers were cannibals, human life had *no* value – only enhanced the dire need of indigenous inhabitants for initiatives such as Leverville. A titanic effort that the aging Lord Leverhulme attempted to micromanage to the best of his abilities.[50]

The chairman's correspondence regarding HCB regularly alluded to both his very personal concerns for the company and to the colossal challenges it represented. Leverhulme visited his Congolese plants in 1913 and again in 1924, only a few months before his passing at the age of 74. In a letter written shortly before his last departure, he underlined the intimate importance and certain sacrifices that such a trip implied. "I take a personal interest in the success of the HCB and go to the very great expense and rather serious absence of business in England."[51] Furthermore, the interest bestowed upon HCB by King Albert I himself, along with the relationship that the two men developed around the *Huileries*, seems to have only heightened Leverhulme's involvement in his Congolese venture. "My one objective in life today is to prove myself by the success of the *Huileries* to be worthy of [the King's] confidence,"[52] he wrote to an aide in June 1914. This communication expressed a feeling he reiterated ten years later before departing Europe for Congo: "whenever I have visited Brussels I have always found His Majesty, the King, not only to take a very close personal interest in the operations being carried by the HCB in the Belgian Congo, but stimulating in his influence on myself to take a close personal interest and active part in the business of the HCB directly myself."[53] The monarch's attention for HCB also seemed to highlight its importance as a landmark project in the reorientation of colonial affairs in Congo far from its Free State precedent.

Beyond royal favours, Leverhulme's interest in HCB was also linked with the titanic challenge it represented, which he endeavoured to overcome. "It can only be by strenuous hard work, pursued with great persistency over a long number of years, that the scheme will finally win out,"[54] he envisioned in 1916. Six years

49 Pierre Halen, *"Le Petit Belge avait vu Grand": une littérature Coloniale* (Brussels: Labor, 1993), 200.

50 Lewis, *So Clean*, 174.

51 UA, LBC/230, W.H. Lever to Max Horn, 18 June 1924.

52 UA, LBC/229, W.H. Lever to Max Horn, 23 June 1914.

53 UA, LBC/230, W.H. Lever to Max Horn, 18 June 1924.

54 UA, LBC/215, W.H. Lever to Henry Moseley, 11 April 1916

later, he asserted that difficulties encountered would not deter him, which therefore highlighted how the Chairman's personal pride played a crucial role in HCB's continued existence in spite of the many issues it faced. "I have never closed down any undertaking that I have been connected with yet and I am certain the HCB will not cause me to break this good rule."[55] For Leverhulme, HCB's success would be measured by its philanthropic achievements even more than by the profits it could yield. It would "depend upon and be in proportion to the happiness and contentment of the natives, which must be assured,"[56] he wrote in 1912. This ethos would continuously imbue his vision for HCB. "It is up to us to make service so attractive that they prefer to work for us,"[57] he wrote as an instruction to Elso Dusseljé when he took the direction of Leverville in December 1923.

Leverhulme's virtuous designs in Congo, as well as his pride and reputation were deemed important enough for its parent company to keep on investing into HCB, in spite of its limited and only occasional profitability.[58] Throughout its history, the production costs of palm oil in Congo remained structurally higher than its market price (see chapter 6).[59] Enormous amounts of money were nevertheless poured into the *Huileries*, with little returns on investment. In 1911, Lever Brothers had already devolved one million pounds to the company, out of a total capital of 6.6 million pounds at the time. HCB briefly generated profits between 1918 and 1920 – which amounted to less than 72 000 pounds – before generating further losses from 1920 onwards.[60] After Leverhulme's passing and in the midst of the Great Depression, money nevertheless kept on flowing from Port Sunlight. "In spite of the formidable crisis which is currently hitting us extremely hard and forces us to work in pure loss for long months already, our company has not lost faith in the future, and proved it by injecting in total more than 20 million pounds in Congo for the year 1931,"[61] strenuously wrote the HCB's delegate administrator the Minister of Colonies. According to a May 1933 despatch, only 11 million Congolese francs were distributed as dividends

55 UA, LBC/229, W.H. Lever to Max Horn, 24 April 1922.

56 Cited in Lewis, *So Clean*, 173.

57 AAB, MOI 3602, Instructions from Lord Leverhulme to Elso Dusseljé, 8 December 1923.

58 See as well: Reuben Loffman, Benoît Henriet, "'We Are Left with Barely Anything': Colonial Rule, Dependency, and the Lever Brothers in the Belgian Congo, 1911–1960," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 48:1 (2020) : 71–100.

59 Charles Wilson, *The History of Unilever: A Study in Economic Growth and Social Change* (London: Cassel, 1970, 1954), 320.

60 Fieldhouse, *Unilever Overseas*, 508.

61 UA, UAC/2/36/7/1/2, HCB delegate-administrator to the GG, 9 April 1931.

to the company's shareholders in its 22-year history, against investments amounting to 500 million francs.[62] For David Fieldhouse, "HCB survived [...] only because Lever was willing and able to pour far more money in the Congo than was justified. [...] HCB was always heavily over-capitalised. It could show reasonable profits only when oil prices were exceptionally good."[63] This was another striking similarity with Fordlandia. The Amazonian plantation was built after the rubber boom receded and never became profitable.[64] However, this did not stop Ford to keep investing in it until 1934. In both cases, the success of its utopian vision supplanted profitability as an investment incentive, although Fordlandia closed its door much sooner, after only six years of unfruitful activities.

As a business venture and an experience of social engineering, the Leverville concession was conceived as a virtuous answer to the Free State's abuses. The Belgian government and Lever Brothers worked together to set up the guiding lines for a "philanthropic" capitalism in the Congo. This venture benefitted from the blessing of prominent critiques of the defunct Leopoldian rule and the personal involvement of both the Belgian King and the company's chairman. Lord Leverhulme and his successors also spared no expense to see HCB not only economically succeed, but to fulfil its paternalistic goals above all. However, in spite of the apparent break in colonial affairs that the *Huileries* embodied, HCB remained largely dependent upon Free State uses and practices. Overall, the 1908 reprise did not constitute such a clean break in terms of colonial governance. Many administrators remained in place, such as Théophie Wahis, Governor General of the Free State 1900, who stayed in function until 1912 in spite of his involvement in the "atrocities" scandal.[65] Furthermore, the confusion between public and private interests that infamously characterized the previous era kept on influencing many extractive activities in the colony.[66] The virtuous turn seemingly taken by resource extraction in the newly Belgian colony could therefore not suppress, nor entirely supplant, its pre-existing violent guise.

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62 UA, UAC/2//36/1/1/1, HCB delegate-administrator to the Minister of Colonies, 1 May 1933.

63 Fieldhouse, *Unilever Overseas*, 509.

64 Grandin, *Fordlandia*, 97.

65 "Théophile Wahis," in the *Biographie Coloniale Belge*, accessed March 7, 2020, https://www.kaowarsom.be/fr/notices_wahis_theophile.

66 Jean-Luc Vellut, "Hégémonies en Construction: Articulation entre État et Entreprises dans le Bloc Colonial Belge (1908–1960)," *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 16 :2 (1982): 326; Julia Seibert, "More Continuity than Change? New Forms of Unfree Labor in the Belgian Congo, 1908–1930," in *Humanitarian Intervention and Changing Labor Relations: The Long-Term Consequences of the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, edited by Marcel Van der Linden (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 375.

On a symbolic plane, the making of Leverville tapped into the practices and uses of the times of the Congo's exploration. Like newly "discovered" lands, HCB's five circles were given new names, symbolically marking their entry into the Western consciousness, and by extension into "civilisation."[67] The concession aimed at becoming HCB's flagship outpost was accordingly christened after Leverhulme, in the same spirit that made Henry Morton Stanley baptise Congolese landmarks after either himself or Leopold II. This recurring trope in empire-building allowed prominent colonial actors to claim foreign lands as their own, and to mark the entry into "history" under their personal tutelage. Asserting a power to name allowed them to "arrogate themselves the power of origins,"[68] according to Anne McClintock.

Furthermore, these circles were concessions, broadly following the legal arrangements enacted between the Congo Free State and rubber companies. Up until the Second World War, the main production scheme in place in those concessions also remained strikingly similar to rubber harvest: indigenous workers were recruited to forage raw materials in forest areas and bring them to the company's buying stations (see chapter 6). In both cases, this business model could only be sustained through diverse forms of coercion (see chapter 4).

Finally, the Kwilu basin being poorly charted and scarcely manned in 1911, HCB would effectively come to play the role of the agent of colonisation in and around Leverville.[69] This pioneering role was a source of pride for its first manager. In his 1936 personal account of the company's history, Sidney Edkins fondly remembered the HCB's beginnings, narrated again in the heroic spirit of 19th century travelogues:

> Neither of the present government stations in the Lusanga area, Kikwit, Bulungu and Niadi then existed. They were created after the HCB had occupied the Lusanga circle and had established firm and friendly relations with the local population. [...] The Kwilu River above Kikwit had never been navigated on until the Writer accompanied by Mr Dusseljé and Mr Moorat, at considerable risk and discomfort, found and marked a passage through several miles of rapids.[70]

HCB agents both opened the Leverville area to administrative occupation, and assumed sovereign prerogatives such as infrastructure building within its prem-

67 Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 31.

68 Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather. Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (London-New York: Routledge, 1995), 29.

69 For similar practices in the Free State, see: Reuben Loffman, *Church, State and Colonialism in Southeastern Congo, 1890 – 1962* (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2019), 85 – 91.

70 RMCA, 54.85.171, Sidney Edkins' History of the HCB, 31 October 1936.

ises. The blurring of the lines separating state and company within its zone of influence not only constituted another continuity with the Free State, it also became a source of conflicts, frustration and violence. The uncertain prerogatives devolved to private and public actors generated significant frictions between both spheres, as well as within their respective structures (see chapters 2 and 4). The seemingly harmonious meeting of the minds embodied in the 1911 convention held the seeds of the discords to come. Furthermore, it only partially brought an end to Leopoldian forms of governance and resource extraction. As I will detail in the coming chapters, the "clean break" advocated by HCB's metropolitan proponents failed to materialise in the field.

Conclusion

The Leverville concession emerged at many crossroads. In theory, Leverville embodied an institutional and economic break between the violence of the Free State and the virtuous guise that Belgian colonialism ambitioned to assume. The concession's utopian nature was to a certain extent "born out of literature," yet it ultimately took the form of a legally-binding contract, and one that merged the state and the company together. Leverville's prime objective was to foster benefits, yet both its philanthropic goals and the chairman's hubristic will to see them achieved appeared to have prevailed over any form of efficiency.

Seen from the top down, the concession's inception appears as a particularly transformative endeavour. Prominent yet diverse figures – a respected businessman; a leftwing politician; a young Monarch; and a humanitarian activist – actively supported its creation. Lever Brothers and the Belgian government agreed on a plan of action outlining how profit-making in Congo should from then on be bound to a moral straitjacket.

However, once observed from the bottom-up, the radical turn that HCB seemingly embodied rather looked like a thin varnish of philanthropy spread out on old exploitative practices. Leverville was expected to function like a rubber concession, albeit one where Congolese workers would be "humanely" treated. It acted as the principal agent of colonisation in the Kwilu basin, a role also played by private companies under the Free State. Even HCB's utopian guise rehashed old Leopoldian tropes. In its time, the Free State had also been originally presented as a humanitarian endeavour, before its brutal guise became the object of a large-scale scandal.[71]

71 Donovan, "Congo Utopia," 66.

In the field, the multifaceted nature of the concession would turn into an endless source of conflicts. Far from being inseparable, the moral and economic goals of HCB turned out to be widely incompatible. Professions of faith in the bright future of virtuous colonialism were hardly translatable in practice, and Leverville's incoherent objectives spawned further forms of violence and constraint. As shall be illustrated, the impossibility to act on these imperial fantasies of morality were the main thrust of colonial impotence in the concession and its hinterland.