

Chapter 4: An indescribable ugliness

The general aspect of Leverville is one of indescribable ugliness. [...] Leverville is not an attractive place to be in. It is 600 miles from a telegraph office, on a small river with no passing traffic except HCB; but it happens to be one of the wealthiest areas of Elais palm trees in the world. The life of a white man in one of these places must be terrible beyond words.

Diary of T.M. Knox, 23 November 1924.¹

Introduction

In late 1924, Lord Leverhulme paid one final visit to “his” HCB concessions. He was accompanied by his personal secretary, T.M. Knox, who noted his own impressions of Congo in a private diary. The entry of 23 November – cited above – contained a dreadful depiction of Leverville. Under Knox’s pen, the *Huileries*’ crown jewel became a remote and alienating eyesore, where the “social life [...] must at any rate become dangerously similar to that at the school of Mr Per-rin and Mr Traill,”² a reference to a 1911 novel about bitter rivalries between teachers in an isolated Cornish public school. Knox was not the only person to experience Leverhulme’s tropical utopia as a claustrophobic enclave. In November 1931, for instance, judge Eugene Jungers urged the colony’s authorities to “investigate what happens behind the philanthropic façade showed to distinguished guests, the two splendid hospitals of Tango and Leverville and the magnificent brick-walled camps, exposed to the river banks.”³ For Jungers, the concession’s hidden, “ugly” side was made visible in a “village of imported workers [...] so miserable, so disgusting that I can say that I have never seen anything similar in the twenty years I spent in the Congo. [...] The Blacks occupying these huts are living like animals.”⁴

Both Knox and Jungers described the concession as a toxic environment, fostering tensions or dissimulating its dark inner workings under a thin layer of virtuous paternalism. Knox’s allusion to the “ugliness” of Leverville referred to its unpleasant appearance and forsaken location, yet it also provided a relevant entry point to approach its *metaphoric* ugliness; the endemic brutality that Jungers more openly mentions. The dire living conditions of fruit cutters indeed tes-

¹ UA, UAC 2/34/4/1/1, Diary of T.M. Knox, 23 November 1924.

² UA, UAC 2/34/4/1/1, Diary of T.M. Knox, 23 November 1924.

³ AAB, AE 3268, Rapport d’enquête sur la révolte du Kwango, 29 November 1931.

⁴ AAB, AE 3268, Rapport d’enquête sur la révolte du Kwango, 29 November 1931.

tified to the structural violence of Leverville, which relegated a segment of its reluctant workers in disparaged hamlets. It could also be manifest in the company's brutal recruitment campaigns, when fruit cutters were forcibly rounded. Furthermore, HCB's business model was also inherently violent. Although Leverville's paternalism was designed to attract voluntary workers, the company resorted to coercing male recruits and illegally relied upon women and children for heavy manual labour. The commodification of palm fruits was also supervised by a chain of intermediaries, who often took advantage of their privileged position to extort goods, money and (sexual) services from HCB workers.

In this study of the multifaceted violence of Leverville, I focus on forced recruitment, hidden labour and abuses of power. Taken together, they testify to the brutality implemented to bring the "utopian" vision of the concession to life (see chapter 1). Furthermore, these three case studies highlight the continuities between violent practices in the Congo Free State and in Leverville. Even if HCB was destined to pioneer benevolent ways of extracting Congolese natural resources, it still made use of the Free State's brutal exploitation models, such as coerced recruitment and reliance upon a network of abusive intermediaries to oversee the fruit cutters' daily activities.

This chapter approaches violence from both bottom-up and top-down perspectives. On the one hand, there is a focus on a series of Congolese actors, such as sentries, messengers and *capitas*, who were in charge of ensuring the daily functioning of palm oil production. These agents infused the concession's inner workings with violence, both to increase the company's productivity and to their own benefit. On the other hand, the chapter sheds light on the ever-present, structural character of Leverville's violence, which is visible in the concession's resorting to exploiting women and children for burdensome tasks, such as portage, from which they were legally exempted.

The many faces of colonial violence

In recent years, scholars of colonialism have paid more attention to daily guises of colonial constraint. Historians have argued that the inherent brutality of colonialism could take many forms, and be as much present in corporeal punishment as in the strategies put in place to coerce indigenous communities to work, pay their taxes or be vaccinated (see chapters 2 and 5).⁵ The concurrent

5 See for instance the special issue of *Vingtième Siècle* on everyday colonial policing in Africa, edited by Romain Tiquet: *Vingtième Siècle*, 140:4 (2018).

existence of individual and collective forms of constraint, simultaneously occurring at both macro and micro levels, testify to the structural violence of modern imperialism.⁶

Studying forced recruitment, female and child labour and individual maltreatments not only contributes to making sense of the Leverville experience; it is also crucial to reframe the concession's brutal idiosyncrasies in their broader historical continuum. For Raphaëlle Branche, violence occupies a crucial place in the history of colonialism. According to Branche, violence is a constant feature of mankind's history, but it espouses specific forms, motives, justifications, targets and objectives in different settings. Paying attention to the particular forms taken by given expressions of violence, studying their fluctuations in space and time provide precious information on the unique fields of tensions at play in a given historical object.⁷ In the context of interwar Central Africa for instance, traumas fostered by the brutality of colonial conquests pervaded the further stages of imperial histories, morphing along with time and circumstances.⁸ If one considers colonial violence in the broader spectrum suggested by Branche, it becomes easier to understand how exactions similar to those perpetrated in the Congo Free State could still occur within the "virtuous" structure of Leverville (see introduction and chapter 1). Similarly, Nancy Rose Hunt also evoked how the traumas inherited from the Free State kept on pervading the daily life in former rubber concessions of the Equateur province. According to Hunt, the private colony's violence still "bled into post-Leopoldian [milieus], through imagination, ongoing traffic, and the reproduction of capital and extraction."⁹

As I previously illustrated, concessions such as Leverville constitute nodes of strategic importance in the colonial canvas (see introduction and chapter 2). Such enclaves were characterised by a greater concentration of institutions, infrastructures and European agents than other parts of Belgian Congo. For Jean-François Bayart, these very nodes, which can include mines, missionary outposts, plantations and hospitals, constitute privileged observation spots of the mundane guise of colonial violence.¹⁰ Studying protean displays of brutality and constraint in Leverville can therefore serve three intertwined purposes. First, as underlined by Branche, it offers precious information on the specific power dynamics at play at a micro-historical level. Second, it connects these unique

⁶ Samuel Kalman, "Introduction: Colonial Violence," *Historical Reflections*, 36:2 (2010): 1.

⁷ Raphaëlle Branche, "La Violence Coloniale: Enjeux d'une Description et Choix d'Écriture," *Tracés* 19 (2010), 31.

⁸ Branche, "La Violence," 35.

⁹ Hunt, *Nervous State*, 31.

¹⁰ Bayart, "Hégémonie et Coercition," 127.

forms of brutality to the structural nature of colonial violence. In the present case, it lays bare the continued existence of Leopoldian exacting practices in the interwar. Third, it contributes to a clearer understanding of how colonial power was enforced in its strategic enclaves.

To close this lengthy introduction, I invite the reader to consider whether the metaphor of “ugliness” is the most appropriate way to characterize Leverville’s protean brutality. I am not the first to propose correlating these terms in the context of Central African history. Pedro Monaville has described the reminiscences of colonial violence in Congo as a “distinctive ugliness,” one that continues to fester in Belgian collective memories.¹¹ In the case of Leverville, “ugliness” seems particularly relevant to speak of the grimness of the concession, as well as to shed light on how this violent guise was intrinsically conjoined to its seemingly virtuous ambitions (see chapter 1).

The epigraph from T.M. Knox at the start of the chapter also alluded to the “indescribable” nature of Leverville’s “ugliness.” Knox was referring to the impossibility of conveying with words the hopelessness oozing out of this assemblage of corroded industrial plants and ramshackle accommodations. However, pursuing the metaphoric reading of his diary entry, “indescribable” could also speak of the difficulty of documenting and accurately depicting Leverville’s violence. Public and private archives related to the concession are often silent on coercive practices. When they mention forms of brutality, they often remain shrouded under a veil of vagueness. For instance, strategies of forced recruitment become “the method of authority”¹² under the pen of interwar public servants. Furthermore, oral enquiries I performed in the former Leverville concession mostly brought to mind distant memories of violence, distorted by time, nostalgia and the passing of direct witnesses. My oldest interlocutors were young children in the interwar, who possessed only vague reminiscences of Leverville’s inner workings, mostly passed on by now deceased relatives. Many of the individuals invoked *chicottes*, prison cells and constraint when they spoke of HCB. However, even these recollections did not stop them to recall the concession’s heydays as a bygone era of prosperity. “Labour was forced to some extent, it wasn’t good, but it was for our own sake,”¹³ Pemba Dimamaso shared with me. He then was the director of what remained of Leverville’s palm oil mills in 2015.

11 Pedro Monaville, “A Distinctive Ugliness: Colonial Memory in Belgium,” in *Memories of Post-Imperial Nations: The Aftermath of Decolonization, 1945–2013*, edited by Dietmar Rothermund (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 58–75.

12 AAB, AIMO 1652, Situation de la main d’oeuvre dans le cercle de Lusanga des HCB, 1931.

13 Pemba Dimamaso (b. 1961), 4 August 2015, Lusanga.

The profound intertwining of violence and “virtue” in collective memories of Leverville was perhaps best embodied in the following painting (figure 6). Since 1989, it has adorned the walls of the *Cercle Elaeïs*, the now-derelict private club of senior Unilever workers in Lusanga, the former Leverville. This composite work illustrated various aspects and actors involved in the mobilization of HCB workers. On the left stand an administrator and a messenger, coercing a worker to climb a tree by lighting a fire at its roots. In the background, a policeman and another messenger are trying to catch a runaway worker. On the right, a company agent—distinguishable from the administrator by his white garment—distributes rations of *makayabu* (salted fish). He is probably accompanied by a *Coastman*, a West African clerk, who is recognizable by his striped loincloth and black blazer.

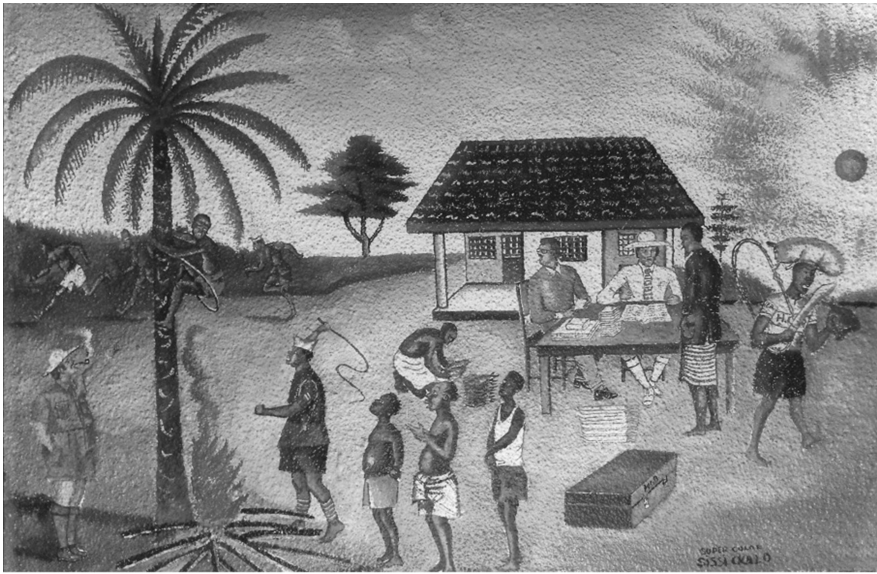


Figure 6: Mural by Sissi Kalo, Cercle Elaeïs, Lusanga, 1989. Picture taken by the author.

The artist was called – or more likely nicknamed – Sissi Kalo, and was commissioned to decorate the company’s offices with a series of paintings. This strikingly brutal reminiscence of the past was chosen to brighten up a room dedicated to after work socialization and pleasant activities for the labour elite of the *Plantations Lever au Zaïre* (PLZ), the name taken by HCB between 1971 and 1997.

This image shares many common motifs with other depictions of colonial times in Congolese “popular painting.” From the 1970s onwards, naïve portraits

as well as historical scenes painted by artists with no formal training became a regular fixture in the living rooms of the Zairian middle-class.¹⁴ Representations of the colonial past were in high demand in the pictorial repertoire of popular painters. These paintings mostly shared a series tropes and archetypes – a juxtaposition of disjointed events in a single frame – with a main scene consisting of the public flogging of a man by an African soldier under the supervision of a European official. Used and re-used by many urban artists, the visual recollection of colonial times tended to take the shape of public torture and humiliation.¹⁵

Some of these common elements are present in Sissi Kalo's mural; the flogging with the administrator smoking a pipe, which can be read as a manifestation of detachment;¹⁶ and the enacting of violence by an African intermediary. However, the main contrast between this oeuvre and the colonial archetype of popular paintings is the representation in the very same scene of HCB's paternalism, symbolized by the distribution of rations (see chapter 5). Decades after the *Huileries'* colonial business schemes were abandoned, Leverville remained alive in local memories as a place where violence and "benevolence" were concurrent and coexistent. Let us now turn to the first guise of the concession's "ugliness": its coercive recruitment practices.

Violent recruitment

This section sheds light on the effective strategies put in place by HCB and state agents to overcome the reluctance of Congolese men to work as fruit cutters. Forced recruitment was officially outlawed in Belgian Congo, and ran contrary to the virtuous objectives of Leverville. However, the concession faced a structural shortage of voluntary recruits, which hindered its profitability. A series of ad-hoc arrangements emerged to coercively round up HCB workers. This trend arose from the discrepancy between Leverville's moral and economic objectives. However, most archives tend to euphemise the effective forms of unfree labour existing in Leverville. This strategy, which created a discursive gap between the exercise of violence and its paper trails, could be conceptualised as a form of lexical

¹⁴ Bogumil Jewsiewicki, "A Century of Painting in the Congo: Image, Memory, Experience and Knowledge," in *A Companion to Modern African Art*, edited by Gitti Salami, Monica Blackmun Visonà (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2013), 338.

¹⁵ Tom Turner, "Images of Power, Images of Humiliation: Congolese "Colonial" Sculpture for Sale in Rwanda," *African Arts*, 38:1 (2005): 70.

¹⁶ Turner, "Images of Power," 61.

distancing.¹⁷ It allowed both field agents and their superiors to appear to respect legal boundaries, while they effectively engaged or condoned illegal forms of recruitment.

It remains difficult for today's observers to accurately describe the forms of coercion exerted on potential HCB recruits in Leverville. Instructions given to company representatives in the field were often contradictory. Vague words such as "propaganda," "(moral) constraint," "intervention," and "method/policy of authority" regularly appear in administrative despatches touching on the recruitment of Leverville workers. Authors of administrative reports and despatches penned vague instructions and accounts of their activities, allowing sufficient space for interpretation by their recipients as to avoid explicitly condoning or instigating illegal practices. These strategies were by no means limited to the interwar Kwango-Kwilu. To the contrary, they belonged to the coercive arsenal of colonial actors throughout Africa. For instance, Frederick Cooper noted how "the carefully chosen words" of field administrators in late 1930s Ivory Coast failed to paint an accurate picture of the practices of constraint effectively used to mobilize workers.¹⁸

In Leverville, such lexical distancing was found in both top-down instructions and bottom-up reports. First, superiors of field agents could lecture their underlings on the importance of respecting legality when enlisting workers, employing vague and sometimes contradictory turns of phrases. This strategy gave much leeway to HCB recruiters or field public servants when they had to enforce their superiors' instructions. For instance, this manifest ambiguity was present in an April 1928 letter from Minister of Colonies Jaspar to Governor General Tilkens, in which Jaspar relayed to Tilkens Leverville's chronic shortage of fruit cutters:

The report of the consultative committee underlines [...] that recruitment of workers can only be performed in a context of freedom; it admits, on the other hand, the necessity of administrative propaganda to bring the natives to collaborate to the country's *mise en valeur*.

This intervention will never take the form of constraint, even moral, and will remain therefore in the domain of a general propaganda in favour of wage labour and its advantages for the natives. Nonetheless, it does not exclude indications, and even advises, in favour of private companies [...].

17 Emmanuel Blanchard, Joël Glasman (2012), "Le Maintien de l'Ordre dans l'Empire Français : une Historiographie Emergente", in *Maintenir l'Ordre Colonial. Afrique et Madagascar (XIXe-XXe siècles)*, edited by Jean-Pierre Bat, Nicolas Courtin (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2012), 30. Branche, "La Violence", 38–40.

18 Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society. The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 81.

This propaganda in favour of labour should be considered as a social and moral duty, and is for the administration and especially for the territorial service, an essential and permanent obligation. [...]

A period of transition is necessary during which the intervention of the territorial service, at least of its subaltern agents, can be exerted in a more direct manner, in favour of recruitments which, by their ends and methods, justify the government's benevolence.¹⁹

While asserting the necessity of freedom in recruitment, the minister left the door open for the effective constraint of workers. He did so by first neglecting to specify the precise meaning “propaganda” and, more critically, by envisioning a “period of transition,” where “persuading” recruits could go beyond merely advertising for private employers. Furthermore, the minister suggested that African intermediaries (“subaltern agents”) such as *chefs médaillés*, soldiers, and messengers could take the burden of such “persuasion” on their shoulders, as they did in Sissi Kalo's painting.

Other despatches also floated the idea that a “transition period” was necessary to familiarize the Kwango communities with wage labour. In a December 1931 letter to the *Huileries*' Director-General, the Commissioner-General of Congo-Kasai – the right-hand of the provincial governor – evoked the future “suppression of the *policy of authority* that your company had to follow until recently” (my emphasis).²⁰ A similar euphemism appeared in the same year under the pen of senior public servant and future General Governor of Belgium, Pierre Ryckmans, in a report on labour conditions in Levertville: “during the successive openings of its sectors in the Kwilu, HCB applied the *method of authority* for the recruitment of their personnel, the only possible one with the extremely primitive races populating their concession.”²¹ These documents condoned forced recruitment as transitory and unavoidable, yet they did not remark upon how or why it was practiced.

Second, bottom-up reports of field agents to their hierarchy also contained vague admissions of participation to coercive recruitments. In a report to the Kwango district commissioner in August 1923, for instance, the territorial administrator of Feshi – one of the company's recruitment pools – wrote that the “natives of the territory have never been constraint to go to the HCB” while nevertheless mentioning a few lines later that “there has certainly been a bit of

¹⁹ AAB, AIMO 1644, Lettre du ministre Jaspar au GG Tilkens, 30 April 1928.

²⁰ AAB, AIMO 1856, Lettre du commissaire général Wauters au directeur général des HCB, 31 December 1931.

²¹ AAB, AIMO 1652, Situation de la main d'œuvre dans le cercle de Lusanga des HCB, 1931.

moral constraint: gifts to chiefs, description of the advantages of workings for HCB...”²²

If reports and dispatches remain astoundingly silent on the precise nature of “propaganda,” “authority” or “constraint,” other documents were more explicit. Destined for a private audience, or written by individuals unrelated to either the administration or the company, they could shed a much-needed light on what recruitment effectively meant for those who had to perform them, and they mostly painted an unflattering picture of the involvement of territorial public servants. In the letters that Ryckmans wrote to his wife Madeleine during his 1931 visit to Leveville, he mentioned the confessions of a missionary that he chose to leave out of his final report: “he declares that people only engage because the territorial agent accompanies the recruiter. [...] that the territorial personnel is, if not bought, at least intimidated; convinced that anyone who does not go along with HCB will be displaced – conviction, one again, based on experience” (on the participation of territorial public servants to HCB recruitment, see chapter 2).²³

Furthermore, the report penned by judge Eugene Jungers after the *Tupelepele* revolt (discussed in chapter 2) explicitly mentioned “the resort to violence of colony agents and chiefs acting on behalf of the recruiters.” According to the magistrate:

Recruitment, after fifteen years of existence of HCB, only occurred in the Kandale territory through the direct constraint by state agents, administrators, or chiefs acting on the recruiters’ behalf in exchange for gifts [...] The territorial administrator was required to provide the amount of men requested by the district commissioner, who determined the quota – it is the word he used – to be provided by each territory.²⁴

Paul Raingeard de la Bletière, a French doctor in charge of vaccination campaigns by the colonial administration, also published a vitriolic attack in 1932 against the labour practices of palm oil companies in the Kwango district.²⁵ Some of his more stringent criticism concerned the role of territorial agents: “recruitment and compliance to the employment contract are ensured by prison

²² AAB, MOI 3602, Lettre de l’agent territorial de Feshi au commissaire de district du Kwango, 9 August 1923.

²³ Lettre de Pierre Ryckmans à Madeleine Ryckmans, 15 January 1931, in Vanderlinden (ed.), *Main d’Ouvre*, 142.

²⁴ AAB, AE 3268, Rapport d’enquête sur la révolte du Kwango, 29 November 1931.

²⁵ Paul Raingeard de la Bletière, “La Main d’Ouvre au Kwango,” *Revue de Médecine et d’Hygiène Tropicale* 24 (1932): 21–48.

and *chicotte*, generously distributed by state agents, who lowered themselves at the role of [...] of the companies' own tormentors."²⁶

Furthermore, I could also find memories of coercive labour practices in interviews I conducted in the summer of 2015 in the former Leverville concession. Christophe Mwazita, a retired cutter whose father worked for the company at the end of the interwar, recalled, "the white man needed a lot of people, boys and cutters, you were not asked to work, you had to go. The first thing that happened to you when you arrived at Leverville was the *chicotte*, to discipline you. [...] the white man did not administer it himself, it was the role of the policemen, the white man only gave the instructions".²⁷ For Gaston Willia Fetsi, an elderly cutter, "recruiters got in touch with the village chief, who selected the teams that had to go. He sent away the stubborn, and the state 'took care' of them: they received the *chicotte*, were thrown in a cell, had to pay a fine and then had to go work for the company."²⁸ For Fabien Kalaki, who was born in the early 1930s, "at the beginning, the men refused recruitment and fled into the forest. [...] The chief was involved; he pursued the fugitives in the forest to catch them. [He] was sometimes invited to Leverville to be paid according to the number of recruits he sent there."²⁹ Jean Ndeke Lutanda shared, "when labour was forced, workers were chosen by the village chief, who designated those who already knew how to cut."³⁰

These memories mostly highlight the crucial role played by indigenous leaders in the recruitment process. European actors – be they HCB employees or public servants – only appear as undifferentiated entities such as "the state" or "the white man." The distortion of time, and the fact that all of these testimonies were either second hand or childhood memories, partially explained why chiefs, as the everyday personification of authority, left a more profound imprint on my interlocutors than territorial agents and recruiters, who only occasionally visited their communities. The *chicotte* was a key element in recollections of colonialism. Whipping was one of the most common sanctions exerted in Belgian Congo, which explains its central role in visual depictions of the colonial past.³¹ State agents were uncertain that other forms of punishment, such as incarceration, were efficient and effectively understood as such by the Congolese.³²

26 Raingeard de la Bletière, "La Main d'Oeuvre," 38.

27 Christophe Mwazita (born 1946), camp Kalamba, Lusanga, 4 August 2015.

28 Gaston Willia Fetsi (born 1923), camp Avion, Pindi, 6 August 2015.

29 Fabien Kalaki (born 1933), Ifwani – Kakobola, 10 August 2015.

30 Jean Ndeke Lutanda (born c. 1940 – 1945), Ifwani – Kakobola, 10 August 2015.

31 Bayart, "Hégémonie et Coercition," 141–143.

32 On the resort to the *chicotte* by administrators, see Dembour "La Chicote," 205–225.

Discourses on the inevitability of coercion to stimulate recruitment are profoundly entrenched in another key element of the colonial rhetoric: the supposed lazy atavism of African men.³³ “No one will question that the native prefers to happily vegetate in his village, making his wife or wives do the work, rather than accepting, in exchange for a salary, a difficult work in mines, oil mills, factories or plantations,”³⁴ stated the explanatory note appended to a revision of the colony’s labour legislation. The alleged unwillingness of the Congolese to engage in wage labour was perceived as a sufficiently serious threat to Congo’s economic health to be countered by harsh measures, even if it became necessary to circumvent colonial ethics. “Freedom to be lazy is not considered everywhere as absolute and by wanting to allow it as such, no matter the contingencies, we risk undermining the country’s position in the global economic struggle, which becomes fiercer every day,”³⁵ wrote General Governor Rutten to Minister of Colonies Houtart in 1926. Five years later, while visiting Leverville, Ryckmans also expressed that “the adoption of a regime of true liberty would imply the immediate closing of the factories.”³⁶

Private and public authorities were ambivalent about coercion in the recruitment of HCB fruit cutters. Its existence was known, considered to be problematic; partially forbidden but still practiced, and more or less tolerated. This was justified on different grounds: the need of a transition period to introduce the Kwango inhabitants to wage labour, the inherent “laziness” of African men, and the certainty that indigenous workers, even when coerced, would be better off than left out of the monetised economy.

Lexical distancing, characterising official narratives of coercion, went further in my opinion than an ad hoc dissimulation of abuses and illegalities. It was a practical tool of governance, which allowed colonial actors to fill the gap between the virtuous and violent guises of their enterprise. In Leverville, it was a way to euphemise the concession’s ugliness by cloaking it under a veil of vagueness.

Lexical distancing constituted a form of colonial coded language, allowing messages to flow between subordinates and their superiors and to be understood by all parties without explicitly violating the colony’s laws. It was not a coinci-

33 Seibert, “More Continuity,” 343; Northrup, *Beyond the Bend*, 100; Tiquet, *Travail Forcé*, 153–161.

34 AAB, AIMO 1415, Modifications aux décrets des 16–3–22 et 16–6–21. Contrat et hygiène des travailleurs. Exposé des motifs, undated.

35 AAB, AIMO 1598, Lettre du GG Rutten au ministre Houtart, 3 August 1926.

36 Pierre Ryckmans to Madeleine Ryckmans, 18 January 1931, in Vanderlinden (ed.) *Main d’Oeuvre*, 146.

dence that more precise descriptions of effective coercion appeared in private correspondence but not in administrative despatches or official reports. The only official actor who openly denounced abusive recruitment practices was Eugene Jungers, a magistrate who asserted his independence by openly challenging what was carefully hidden by agents with vested interests in HCB's recruitment practices.

Lexical distancing was another corollary of colonial impotence. The inability of HCB to mobilise voluntary workers demonstrated the discrepancy between its goals and its practices and implied that Leverville field employees and their allies within the administration (see chapter 2) could not act as expected. Their careful, almost coded, discursive practices were one of the strategies they could mobilise to effectively deal with this inadequacy.

Abuses of power

Violence was illegally employed to round up recruits. It was also pervasively present in encounters between the concession's workers and the Congolese intermediaries in charge of overseeing them. Sentries, messengers and *capitas*, who were deemed as indispensable linchpins in Leverville's extractive schemes, often brutalised fruit cutters and their families for the sake of either the state, the company, or themselves. Although such abuses were regularly denounced and were deemed to be counterproductive, they were mostly tolerated both by the company and by public servants. The inability of HCB or the administration to rein in their underlings constituted a further testimony of colonial impotence.

Cutting palm fruits was much more similar to the tapping of wild rubber than to agricultural activities. Along with their aides, cutters roamed through the concession's palm groves, looking for fruit clusters to cut and bring to the company's buying posts. They extracted resources in extensive, poorly charted lands, widely dissimilar to the standardized rows of crops found in plantations. Contrary to the working areas of farms, mines and industrial plants, the groves areas were not strictly delimited, and could not be easily supervised by foremen. It was therefore quite challenging for the company to monitor its employees. HCB nevertheless resorted to "fruit sentries," indigenous agents charged with ensuring the steady output of fruit cutters. These intermediaries were vested with loosely defined tasks, which all relied on their ability to exert constraint. According to Mr. Moorat, the vice-director of Leverville in 1930, sentries "do not have predefined tasks, they are "jack of all trades" who give a hand where it is neces-

sary.”³⁷ For Charles Dupont, general director of the concession in 1930, sentries were “a kind of police force charged to bring back to work recalcitrant cutters or deserters, or to push the men whose output is not sufficient.”³⁸ A territorial administrator denounced sentries’ supervision of cutters as a form of “disguised constraint.”³⁹

The resort to sentries, effectively acting as the *Huilleries*’ mercenaries, constituted a form of continuity with Free State practices. In rubber concessions, private militias employed by companies such as the ABIR and the *Anversoise*⁴⁰ were authorised to both exert police prerogatives in the name of the state and supervise the labour of rubber tappers. They often resorted to violence to stimulate productivity.⁴¹ In August 1930, Charles Dupont recognized that “the employment of sentries [is], in a modified form, the old system of sentries of the ABIR.”⁴²

Within the supposedly “virtuous” enclave of Leverville, the resort to Free State extraction models led to comparable results. Recruiting workers under duress to harvest naturally growing products implied resorting to violent intermediaries for their supervision. These similarities highlighted how the legacy of Leopoldian colonialism still pervaded Belgian imperialism long after the private colony’s official dismantling. The transition from the Congo Free State to a Belgian possession was intended to instigate a more humane and legalist form of governance, habits, and structures. However, decision-makers could not be changed from one day to the next. Many Free State administrators remained in place in the early structures of Belgian Congo, and the confusion between public and private interests that infamously characterized the previous era continued to dictate the colony’s economic activities well after 1908.⁴³

Public servants’ opinions diverged regarding the role played by fruit sentries. After witnessing their doings in 1931, Ryckmans was sceptical, to say the least: “although closely monitored, they constitute a nuisance. For few benefits, they cause significant troubles. They act like true gadflies, whose idiotic zeal mostly

37 Entretien avec Pierre Ryckmans, in Vanderlinden (ed.) *Main d’Oeuvre*, 301.

38 Dupont to Dusseljé, 21 August 1930, in Vanderlinden (ed.) *Main d’Oeuvre*, 24.

39 AAB, AI 4739, Note sur la situation économique des territoires de Kandale, Kikwit, Bulungu et Niadi, 6 January 1932.

40 Anglo-Belgian India Rubber Company and *Société Anversoise du Commerce au Congo*.

41 Lancelot Arzel, “Des Chasseurs en Guerre : Imaginaires et Pratiques Cynégétiques dans les Pacifications de l’Etat Indépendant du Congo 1885–1908,” in El Mechat (ed.), *Coloniser, Pacifier*, 155.

42 Dupont to Dusseljé, 21 August 1930, in Vanderlinden (ed.) *Main d’Oeuvre*, 18.

43 Vellut, “Hégémonies en Construction,” 326; Seibert, “More Continuity,” 375.

takes the form of screams, insults, petty hassles, a constant pursuit; they molest, obsess and exasperate cutters without much improving their outputs.”⁴⁴

Ryckmans also consigned in his personal diary, “sentries are scoundrels. State agents are somehow powerless in the matter.”⁴⁵ However, other functionaries were less critical. Kwango district commissioner, Albert Van de Castelee, wrote a lengthy letter in October 1930 to Elso Dusseljé – the then HCB delegate administrator – where he emphasised the necessity for fruit sentries in spite of their unreliability:

Sentries [were] keeping you *au courant* of the work of the natives, telling you whether they were collecting your products to sell them to the Portuguese traders [...] to call a chief or to transmit a message [...] to correspond rapidly with the administrative staff or the territories. These sentries have certainly been used to bring back to work unwilling or run-away natives, and to control the natives whose output was insufficient. This is logical. You had the responsibility of your direction, your agents, of their *secteur* and their post. You had to take action against workers who had freely contracted, and for a futile reason abandoned, reduced or ceased their work. As these men were often far away from the nearest European post, and as the European in charge could not be everywhere at the same time, you had to employ Black intermediaries or sentries.⁴⁶

Resorting to fruit sentries in the Leverville concession highlighted the continuities between Leopoldian and Belgian exploitation practices. This action also illustrated the ambiguous role that local intermediaries could play when enforcing the demands of colonial institutions. Sentries had loosely defined duties and effectively acted both as foremen and as policemen. Furthermore, another form of ambiguity also characterised the work of Congolese messengers in Leverville, who were simultaneously at the service of HCB and of the administration. Officially, messengers were in charge of carrying letters on behalf of public servants. In practice, they also participated to the supervision of fruit cutters, like sentries did. Both the daily duties of messengers and their source of their income testify of the multifaceted collusion existing between the administration and the *Huiliers* in the Kwango district. According to Ryckmans’ 1931 report,

The administration made the great mistake of hiring for a long time certain messengers funded by the company. This practice was theoretically justified by the fact that the administration lacked the necessary funds to hire more messengers. HCB’s industrial occupation rendered more intensive relations with villages necessary. To avoid being constantly told

⁴⁴ AAB, AIMO 1652, Situation de la main d’oeuvre dans le cercle de Lusanga des HCB, 1931.
⁴⁵ Notes prises par Pierre Ryckmans au cours d’entretiens, in Vanderlinden (ed.), *Main d’Oeuvre*, 297.

⁴⁶ Van de Castelee to Dusseljé, 7 October 1930, in Vanderlinden (ed.), *Main d’Oeuvre*, 65.

that messengers were lacking, HCB offered to pay the salaries of the surplus personnel. It was normal in the society's behalf, but the state should never have accepted this expedient. [...] It should not place administrators in an equivocal posture. [...] We consider that the resort to state messengers should be condemned in general. They have no competence to evaluate the situations, to possibly judge the validity of excuses of cutters accused of laziness. They only understand one thing: that they are in charge of putting people to work; a task they fulfil without measure in their choice of means, being more or less persuaded of their impunity for the natives rarely dare to complaint of their abuses.⁴⁷

The company thus bankrolled intermediaries working for the colonial state and used them to round up and supervise fruit cutters. Although this practice ran against the orderly and virtuous principles of Leverville, Elso Dusseljé advocated for the resort to messengers to the HCB's board of trustees in September 1930.

An administrator who has an immense territory to manage has at his disposition only a few messengers who are continually *en route* on his behalf. Thus, when we ask for the help of the administrator in the form of a messenger to accompany one of our recruiters [...] or for the purpose of letting a native chief know that we want to see him; or again, when the production of a village dropped too abruptly, the administrator cannot always help us, and without this form of assistance our difficulties are greatly increased. [...] I would be very surprised if the engagement of these messengers by the administrators, with the consent of the district commissioner really is illegal, given that nobody has attempted to conceal this procedure.⁴⁸

Whether illegal or not, Dusseljé's justification highlighted the loose attitude of both public and private actors regarding the separation of their prerogatives. It seemed logical for the *Huileries'* area manager to ask messengers working for the administration to round up cutters or to summon indigenous chiefs to Leverville. In return, the district commissioner seemed to accept that messengers working for HCB and the administration at the same time to remain on the company's payroll. Although Ryckmans regretted this ambiguous state of affairs, he nevertheless stopped short of condemning it. Similarly, Dusseljé did not hesitate to assert the righteousness of the messengers' role in labour recruitment and supervision to the company's board even when it seemed to openly contradict the *Huileries'* moral agenda.

As illustrated in Sissi Kalo's painting, local intermediaries thus exerted a vast array of violent practices on behalf of a colonial ensemble, consisting of lower-ranking public servants of the Kwango district and Leverville's management. These intermediaries participated in the forced recruitment of fruit cutters;

47 AAB, AIMO 1652, Situation de la main d'oeuvre dans le cercle de Lusanga des HCB, 1931.

48 Dusseljé to the HCB board, 30 September 1930, in Vanderlinden (ed.), *Main d'Oeuvre*, 39.

hassled them in the groves; and transmitted orders, directives and summons in the name of both the *Huileries* and the state. Furthermore, they also used their privileged position as holders of an informal “right” to be violent for their own benefit. Both written archives and oral testimonies point towards the prevarication performed by both messengers and *pointeurs* or *capita-ngashi*, who were in charge of collecting fruit clusters and paying the cutters at the company’s buying stations. According to Ryckmans,

Capita-ngashi sometimes are dreadful tyrants, as only the Blacks who hold power over other Blacks can be. They demand *matabiches* (briberies); a hen, a calabash of palm wine, a pineapple... sometimes the favours of a beautiful woman. What if they refuse? They are denied their pay. [Some cutters] are smarter: they have an agreement with the *capita*, in return for gifts, he note crates under their name that they have never delivered.⁴⁹

Former HCB workers also reported abuses perpetrated by company workers they called *pointeurs*. Two interlocutors I met during my fieldwork mentioned that *pointeurs* took advantage of the cutters’ illiteracy. Instead of marking the adequate number of crates provided by fruit cutters in their registers, *pointeurs* purposely wrote down a lower number and kept the difference for themselves.⁵⁰ However, *capitas* and *pointeurs* were not the only intermediaries who took advantage of their position. Jungers also reported similar abuses perpetrated by messengers, who compensated their limited or inexistent wages by seizing the resources of the communities they “visited.”

When they “worked” outside of their villages, they had to feed themselves off the backs of others, for they were not paid. [...] They perpetrated countless abuses: extortion of food-stuffs, arbitrary arrests and incarcerations, assaults to obtain women and palm wine,... [...] I had the opportunity [...] to caught two messengers red-handed [...] one laying in a hut with a women he reclaimed, the other busy stuffing a hen in a basket, which he extorted from an old man under the menace of having sex with his wife.⁵¹

The Congo-Kasaï governor relayed similar observations in the aftermath of the Kwango revolt. “Exactions perpetrated by the insufficiently supervised auxiliary personnel form the basis of all movement of insubordination. They are mostly

⁴⁹ Journal de Pierre Ryckmans, 19 janvier 1931, in Vanderlinden (ed.), *Main d’Oeuvre*, 147.

⁵⁰ Georges Zolochi (b.c. 1925 – 1930), Ifwani-Kakobola, 10 August 2015. Lumène Wenge (b. 1931), Nzaji, 11 August 2015.

⁵¹ AAB, AE 3268, Rapport d’enquête sur la révolte du Kwango, 29 novembre 1931.

the doings of messengers: [...] confiscation of hens, women, of diverse gifts, of porters. Menaces, arbitrary arrests.”⁵²

When considered together with reports of exactions perpetrated by Belgian field public servants and HCB recruiters (see chapter 2), these abuses demonstrated that encounters between agents of colonialism and indigenous communities in and around Leverville were, more often than not, marred by violence. Furthermore, such episodes did not systematically serve the objectives of the company or the administration. Recruiters, territorial agents, sentries, *capitas* and messengers could also use their parcel of power to their own benefit.

Unlike the “method of authority” used to forcibly recruit fruit cutters or to “stimulate” their productivity, the prevarication of the Kwango district’s inhabitants did not help consolidate the power of colonial institutions. Abuses performed for the sake of individual agents’ personal enrichment or pleasure ran against the interests of the state and the company, impeding the “prestige” of its representatives and fuelling the resentment of indigenous communities against colonialism. Although such predations were regularly documented, it seemed that few disciplinary measures were taken against their perpetrators. The impunity of the violent agents who embodied colonialism in the field both testified to the weakness of colonial mechanisms of control, and demonstrated how the Free State’s violent guises still “bled into post-Leopoldian milieus,”⁵³ as Nancy Rose Hunt has suggested.

The concession’s violence was linked to its agents’ impotence, a necessity to bridge the gap between its virtuous objectives and the impossibility to effectively enforce them. Practices of forced recruitment for Leverville were deemed as an “inevitable” and “transitory” phase of the colonization process. Similarly, the presence of violent intermediaries vested with ambiguous duties also appeared, under the pen of both public servants and company managers, as a sometimes regrettable yet unavoidable outcome of concessionary dynamics. Leverville’s “ugliness” was not always concealed; its brutal guise was sometimes hiding in plain sight. However, the contradiction between this multifaceted violence and the company’s virtuous ethos did not challenge the utopian narrative championed by its founders (see chapter 1). Paper trails of brutalities occurring in and around the concession were justified by the alleged backwardness and atavistic laziness of the Congolese, and not by the inadequacy of Leverville’s paternalism to its field of action.

52 AAB, AIMO 1855, Lettre du gouverneur du Congo-Kasaï au commissaire de district du Kwango, 9 juin 1932.

53 Hunt, *Nervous State*, 31.

Translucent workers

The discrepancy between Lord Leverhulme's virtuous plans and the concession's "ugliness" was not only manifested in forced recruitment and individual brutalities. It was also visible in the company's resort to the illegal use of female and underage workers. Although they were not officially employed by HCB, the *Huilleries* could not have functioned without their contribution. Female and underage workers cooked the cutters' meals, brought fruit clusters to the company's buying stations, and participated to the processing of palm oil. When Leverville's managers were criticised for relying on these illegal workers, they invoked unchangeable local "traditions" to deflect these accusations.

Colonial archives related to women and children are notoriously scarce.⁵⁴ Under the pen of colonial actors, women and children mostly appear as targets of social engineering, bounded to ambitions of regulating African matrimonies, sexualities, familial arrangements and education.⁵⁵ Therefore, investigating the labour practices of women and children is a complex endeavour. "Working" in interwar sub-Saharan colonies was narrowly defined as male wage labour. Activities performed outside of the monetized economy, especially by individuals categorized as non-adult males, were mostly overlooked by colonial observers.⁵⁶ Even more so than women, pre-pubescent children taking part in colonial workforces were left out of despatches and reports.⁵⁷ European observers often considered that African cultures oppressed women by putting them in charge of arduous tasks such as cropping, while men remained "indolent." Regulations and policies were subsequently tailored to relegate the women into households, confident that such rules would "free" them of the excessive burden from "traditions."⁵⁸

In spite of these difficulties, however, it is still possible to delve into the complexities of the Leverville concession. Studying Leverville requires investigating female and pre-pubescent labour. The concession's extractive practices necessi-

⁵⁴ Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Les Africaines. Histoire des Femmes d'Afrique Noire du XIXe au XXe Siècle* (Paris: Desjonquères, 1994), 109.

⁵⁵ Marie Rodet, "C'est le Regard qui Fait l'Histoire. Comment Utiliser des Archives Coloniales qui nous Renseignent malgré elles sur l'Histoire des Femmes Africaines," *Terrains & Travaux*, 10 (2006), 18–9.

⁵⁶ Rodet, "C'est le Regard," 19.

⁵⁷ Beverly Grier, "Invisible Hands: the Political Economy of Child Labour in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1890–1930," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 20:1 (1994), 28.

⁵⁸ Emily Lynn Osborn, *Our New Husbands are Here. Households, Gender, and Politics in a West African State from the Slave Trade to Colonial Rule* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011), 149–150.

tated the resort to numerous aides and porters, roles which were often occupied, however informally, by fruit cutters' female and underage relatives. The scarcity of "able-bodied men" willing or coerced to work for the HCB also meant that children and teenagers toiled in the company's oil mills and ships.

In spite of a paucity of data, female and underage HCB workers were not entirely absent of colonial archives. They are not invisible, relegated far from the gaze. They are rather *translucent*, hardly perceptible in colonial paper trails. There are no reports on their recruitments, their exact number, no official census integrating cutters' relatives in the company's workforce. However, Levertville's women and children are occasional topics of correspondence, or they occupy a few paragraphs in official reports and accounts of visits of the concession. Retracing their history requires patching up together the scattered archival fragments of their existence.⁵⁹

In January 1931 for instance, Pierre Ryckmans described in a private letter to his wife Madeleine the heavy labour that women had to perform on the *Huileries*' behalf:

We attended a fruit buying, [...] there are, so to speak, only women, their basket exactly fills a standard 25 kg fruit crate. [...] On our way back, we are passing by posts where fruits are still being bought. Women, always. Three carry, in addition to their heavy basket, a small child.... One is pregnant.... [...] It happens that women that left home before dawn, come back exhausted at one in the afternoon, only to go back to work again, and start all over again the next day, and the day after...⁶⁰

The mobilisation of able-bodied men for fruit cutting meant that other social categories would have to assume accessory tasks, such as bringing fruit clusters to the company's outposts. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the *Huileries*' impact on indigenous women – their daily life, their "morality" or the formation of conjugal bounds – became a regular point of discussion and contention among colonial actors. They were mostly articulated around the tensions between moral discourses on the "preservation" of Congolese females and households and the imperatives of *mise en valeur*.

One of the major issues regarding female labour discussed by company representatives and administrators was whether fruit cutters' wives should carry

⁵⁹ Gyanendra Pandey, "Voices from the Edge: The Struggle to Write Subaltern Histories," in *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*, edited by Vinayak Chaturvedi (London: Verso, 2012 (2000)), 282–4.

⁶⁰ Pierre Ryckmans à Madeleine Ryckmans, 19 January 1931, in Vanderlinden (ed.), *Main d'Oeuvre*, 147.

palm fruits between the palm groves and HCB's buying stations. In his 1931 report, Pierre Ryckmans summed up the discomfort of some European observers:

As in all of Africa, portorage, in the Kwilu, is the women's task. [...] It is a truly regrettable situation. [...] Regarding native mentality, it seems impossible to prevent that most of the portorage imposed upon the cutter would be delegated to his wife. We cannot ask the company to refuse the fruits that would be brought by a woman. What we can ask is for HCB to bring the buying stations as close as possible from the harvest zones. [Women have] to gather the fruits in the forest, to decorticate them, to bring them in the morning at the reception centre, to wait there sometimes for long before the *pointeur* agrees to begin the operations, then comes home tired...to start the ordinary household tasks. One should not be surprised if the woman, especially the Christian woman, hesitates to bind her life to a cutter husband; it is one of the causes that turn young Christians away from the profession.⁶¹

On the one hand, Ryckmans invoked what constitutes a central element in the defence of women's participation to palm oil labour: the alleged importance of "customs" and "traditions" in the gendered repartition of tasks, in which the burden of agriculture and portorage supposedly rested on female shoulders. It was also a central topic in a bitter conflict pitting the general director of Leverville Charles Dupont against his predecessor, Elso Dusseljé, in 1930. Dupont invoked women's portorage to substantiate his accusations of mismanagement against Dusseljé:

Amongst the abuses which I noticed at that time, the portorage completely retained my first attention. I observed that it was, in actual fact, affected almost exclusively by the women folk, sometimes by mothers carrying their nurlings with them, over incomprehensible distances, going up to 36 or 40 km per day, going and returning.⁶²

Dusseljé defended himself by describing female portorage as an age-old custom that could hardly be discouraged:

It is perfectly well known to all who profess any knowledge of the native mentality and customs of primitive races, that the male is assisted in his work (be it fishing, hunting, wood-cutting for his own account or work for a third party) by his women folk and that he always leaves the work of portorage to the women. That can never be put a stop to [...] as the products of the forest [...] are always carried by the women from the forest to the village [...] Not in a single instance has a woman been engaged by the Company for work of any description while I was in charge [...]. No-one can, therefore, talk about portorage by women, although, for the reasons already given, there are number of them who do assist their men-folk. [...] As I have witnessed in all the other Areas, it is solely because the women were assisting their

61 AAB, AIMO 1652, Situation de la main d'oeuvre dans le cercle de Lusanga des HCB, 1931.

62 Dupont to Dusseljé, 21 August 1930, in Vanderlinden (ed.), *Main d'Oeuvre*, 13.

husbands and—I cannot emphasize it too strongly—because long-established native custom requires them to undertake portage and similar heavy manual work for their men-folk.⁶³

Dusseljé's justification interestingly pointed towards a disengagement of the company's responsibilities in abiding by the colonial moral agenda if its workers simply followed their "traditions." Dusseljé refused to qualify female participation to palm fruit extraction as portage, but rather as a customary form of conjugal collaboration. The management could not forbid it, for those women were not officially included in the *Huileries'* workforce. Authorities' tolerance of female labour when it was deemed as customary became even more visible regarding the tasks performed by pregnant women. In spite of the colony's demographic crisis in the interwar (see chapter 5) and the apparent discomfort of colonial field actors at the sight of expecting mothers carrying fruit baskets approximately weighing 25 kilos, little was done to discourage it. Dusseljé once again deemed these habits as unchangeable in a 1930 letter to *Huileries'* administrative board:

I have, personally, time and time again when camping in native villages, seen pregnant women, coming from the forest towards evening, carrying their baskets supplies of food, water, manioc, and even palm-fruits when they were the wives of cutters. The loads were enough to make one shudder, especially having regard to their condition, but when (as I have done on scores of time) I drew the attention of the men on the injustice of this situation, they merely shrugged their shoulders and the women themselves laughed broadly. [...] As natives and especially such natives are incapable of following our reasoning in these and allied matters, these women (whom we had prevented from being employed on carrying fruit) were and always are employed on sundry tasks connected with their daily life – often of a far more strenuous nature – until the day of their confinement.⁶⁴

As Terence Ranger famously suggested, the invention and codification of "customs," "traditions" and "uses" played a significant part in colonial governance. Imperial powers imported and adapted their own social, cultural and political practices in Africa while attempting to refashion those encountered on the spot to ease the subversion of indigenous communities. For instance, chieftaincy was codified and profoundly redesigned to match European interpretation of executive power (see chapter 3). According to Ranger, these "invented traditions," however, "were marked by their inflexibility," which "totally misunderstood the

⁶³ Dusseljé to the HCB's administrative board, 30 September 1930, in Vanderlinden (ed.), *Main d'Oeuvre*, 39–41.

⁶⁴ Dusseljé to the HCB's administrative board, 30 September 1930, in Vanderlinden (ed.), *Main d'Oeuvre*, 39–40.

realities of pre-colonial Africa,” where “custom was loosely defined and infinitely flexible.”⁶⁵

Female portage in Leverville exemplified the petrification of traditions once they were deemed compatible with colonialism. Women carried heavy loads and participated in various forms of physical labour before the concession’s inception. However, colonial cash cropping profoundly transformed the pre-existing gendered distributions of tasks.⁶⁶ Without being formally employed by HCB, fruit cutters’ wives and female relatives were also drawn into the monetized economy, actively participating in the *Huileries*’ extractive practices. The function they occupied within the concession’s economic structure might have been related to their previous duties, yet carrying baskets of fruits from the palm groves to buying stations manned by *capita-ngashi* had little to do with non-capitalist forms of labour prevailing in the region before the colonial conquest, such as artisanal palm oil production for one or several households. Rather, these new forms of labour testified to the plasticity of gender roles, taking on new guises in ever-shifting power dynamics. In return, these new forms of labour, although outlawed, were providentially coined as unmovable traditions when they benefitted colonial agendas.⁶⁷

In the Leverville area, there was another social group, which was sheltered in principle from participating to wage labour but found itself at the heart of tensions between morality and *mise en valeur*. This group was comprised of the pre-pubescent children in the concession. Two kinds of labour were demanded from children in the concession. First, so-called “boys” – teenagers, some young adults and a few women – assisted cutters in the groves. Second, underage children were hired in the company’s industrial posts and on its fluvial fleet. As for female portage, child labour was not introduced in the Kwango-Kwilu through colonial capitalism. Throughout sub-Saharan Africa, children formed a major component of a household’s workforce, and often acquired skills by accompanying and helping older members of their community in their daily tasks.⁶⁸ However, the enrolment of prepubescent or adolescent Congolese in colonial labour rested on different premises than apprenticeship or participation to communal

⁶⁵ Ranger, “The Invention,” 247.

⁶⁶ Jean Allman, Victoria Tashjian, “*I Will Not Eat Stone*”: *A Women’s History of Colonial Asante* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2000), 5–6.

⁶⁷ Amandine Lauro, “Une Oeuvre,” 165–6.

⁶⁸ Saheed Aderinto, Paul Osifodunrin, “500 Children Missing in Lagos’: Child Kidnapping and Public Anxiety in Colonial Nigeria,” in *Children and Childhood in Colonial Nigerian Histories*, edited by Saheed Aderinto (New-York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2015), 98.

tasks. It seems instead to have been motivated by the scarcity of available adult male workers, whether coerced or not.

In and around the HCB's oil mills, as well as on the company's boats navigating up and down the Kwilu and its tributaries,⁶⁹ children and adolescents were sometimes formally integrated into the company's payroll, although the tasks they had to perform did not always coincide with those for which they were officially recruited. In principle, according to the *Huileries'* rules and the colony's laws:

It is strictly forbidden [...] to employ small children for ordinary work; no child under 10 years old must be hired, except for the special work of kernels picking and coarsening, and fruit picking in the decorticating shed at the agricultural posts, for which boys of 8 to 10-year old may be engaged and employed, but not younger and only for this work. [...] Those employed solely on kernel picking in the station and fruit picking in the decorticating sheds at the posts, are to be engaged at lower rates.

When small boys are considered to be adults by the State and liable for head tax, their wages must be increased to the minimum amount paid to adult ordinary labourers.⁷⁰

Because child labour was partially legal and markedly cheaper, HCB managers employed underage workers for tasks they could not legally perform yet which did not require the labour force of adult males.⁷¹ For instance, Dr. Raingeard noted,

Traders requisition children as young as 4 or 5 and send them to the oil mill. If the manager is remotely scrupulous, he uses them for light works, yet, too often, they are entailed to both heavy and light work; which allows the use of all adults for fruit cutting and to keep some pocket money, the child being marked as an adult on the post's register but earning only half of the adult's salary. [...] In principle, according to the companies' rules, the employment of women and children under 12 years old is forbidden, in principle only, for these rules are only made to be shown during inspections, and only verbal instructions matter.⁷²

HCB's local staff might have benefitted from the benevolence and the bounds of solidarity that united them to territorial agents and administrators in perpetuat-

⁶⁹ "HCB boats servicing the Kwilu for the collection of fruits have always been manned by kids (*par des gamins*).” AAB, AIMO 1654, Dr Lejeune: Note pour M. Le gouverneur concernant les protestations des HCB suite à mes inspections à Leveville, au Kwilu et à Basongo, March 1924.

⁷⁰ AAB, AIMO 1652, Wages and rations for the Brabanta Area, undated.

⁷¹ Hamilton Sipho Simelane, "Landlords, the State and Child Labor in Colonial Swaziland, 1914–1947," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 31:3 (1998): 572.

⁷² Raingeard, "La Main d'Œuvre," 31–2.

ing what was considered as abusive employment of children. In May 1923, Niadi's territorial administrator wrote to the Kwango district commissioner that eight months before he witnessed "at Tango, children work[ing] from 7AM to 10PM without interruption [...] I knew it for I resided in Tango in September, but I did not wish to signal it back then, for it would have constituted from my behalf a breach to the rules of hospitality that had been offered to me."⁷³

In 1924, HCB's delegate-administrator justified the resort to children in the company's oil mills by insisting on the lightness of the tasks demanded from them, as well as on the *force majeure* nature of this labour, generated by the lack of available able-bodied adults:

Pushing Decauville wagons does not require much force. Our young workers treat it as a game. Regarding the loading of steamers by teenagers, we are convinced that [it] was only occasional. We have prescribed [...] to our district chief to make sure that our recruitments target as few as possible the non-adult workforce. [...] Yet it is evident that we could not entirely forbid the employment of non-adults.⁷⁴

Child labour went against both the law and the moral agenda shared by the company and the administration, and levered more criticism outside of the Kwango district than portage by women. It made HCB's underage workers more translucent than their female counterparts, even less susceptible to have left archival traces. It is, therefore, impossible to retrace the individual trajectories of the children toiling in HCB oil mills and ships, to understand how they ultimately ended up in there. However, in spite of the illegality of using child labor, along with the controversial nature of this trend, the *Huileries* still managed to resort to pre-pubescent workers throughout the interwar. The imperatives of *mise en valeur*, the suspension of the colony's laws and the company's ethos during a nebulous "state of exception," certainly contributed to this apparent tolerance.

Conclusion

Leverville's "virtuous" ambition appeared inextricably bound to the protean exercise of violence. Brutality marred interpersonal contacts, when sentries, *capi-tas*, messengers, territorial agents or recruiters came into contact with indigenous communities. It was also present in the concession's very structures.

⁷³ AAB, MOI 3602, Lettre de l'administrateur territorial de Niadi au commissaire de district du Kwango, 31 May 1923.

⁷⁴ AAB, AIMO 1654, Lettre de l'administrateur-délégué des HCB au gouverneur du Congo-Kasaï, 8 April 1924.

Violence was embedded in HCB's economic model, which could not function without the forced mobilisation of fruit cutters, and of resorting to women and children for tasks they were not supposed to perform.

This chapter tackled the elusive traces in archives and memories left by this ever-present violence. Forced recruitment was euphemised in official despatches, justified as a fleeting necessity and bound to disappear in a more "civilised" future. Although structural, the concession's violence nested in the interstices and blind spots of Leverage's utopianism. It was exerted by intermediaries with loosely defined duties; ordered and reported with a characteristic vagueness; and cloaked under the veil of unshakable "traditions." The concession's violence testified to the makeshift, improvised strategies of control and coercion that colonial institutions put in place to safeguard their interests, even at the disregard of laws, ethics and regulations.⁷⁵ Like the practice of *prix-état* outlined in chapter two, abuses performed by intermediaries further highlighted how individuals to whom parcels of "legitimate" power were allotted could use them at their own benefit, even at the behest of their employer.

Leverage's "ugly" violence did not emerge spontaneously, but could be directly linked to the traumatic inception of European rule in the region. The virtuous concession looked somehow similar to the rubber regions of the Congo Free State. As Nancy Rose Hunt suggested, Leopoldian traumas still "bled" into the Belgian Congo, surviving in enclaves which relied on similar practices of extraction, mushrooming at the crossroads of public and private interests.

Violence offered another insight into the multiple incarnations of Leverage. The concession began as a utopian fantasy of tropical paternalism. It materialised as an impotent machine, unable to fulfil the objectives it was assigned to achieve. It was also a conglomerate of violent encounters and structures; maybe not "indescribable," but nevertheless difficult to accurately map. Furthermore, Leverage was also a series of paternalistic interventions. For HCB workers and their families, it existed in the form of food rations; of clothing that could only be worn for specific occasions; and in vaccination campaigns and compulsory screening for tropical diseases. These "moral" guises of the Leverage project and their embodied consequences are the focus of the next chapter.

⁷⁵ Romain Tiquet, "Maintien de l'Ordre Colonial et Administration du Quotidien En Afrique," *Vingtième Siècle*, 140:4 (2018), 4.